

SMOKE *B*EFORE THE *W*IND

A NOVEL

SMOKE BEFORE THE WIND

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CHAPTER ONE

CARRIE DICKSON BARELY listened to Professor Grant's last-minute instructions on his creative writing assignment due the following Friday, her mind already working on the story. She gathered her book backpack, and as she left the classroom, her friend Tori hurried up to her in the hall.

"Carrie! I'm so glad I caught you. Come with me to the Art of Espresso. Dean's waiting for me and he wants us to meet a friend of his."

"Tori, I have a class in half an hour. If this is another of your blind date ideas, skip it. I'm not interested."

"Look, Carrie, ever since Dave moved across the country to attend Columbia, you've been in a slump. He dumped you and it's time to move on. Don't let him have that kind of power over you. He's history."

"I will, in my own time. Seriously, I just don't want to date right now. Besides, Dave didn't dump me...we just agreed to part ways."

Tori rolled her eyes. "Right. So that's why you sat by the phone and haunted your mailbox?"

"Tori..."

"Okay. I'm sorry. I shouldn't have said it like that. I know it hurts, but you gotta let him go."

The breeze came up and Carrie brushed a wisp of blond hair back from her face. “I’m just not ready to meet anyone right now.”

“Just because Dave was a jerk doesn’t mean all guys are. In any case, I told Dean I’d bring you along. It’ll just take a few minutes. At least say hello. Please?” The last word was stretched out along with a bright smile.

Carrie stopped and glared at her best friend. “Stop begging. All right. I’ll give it ten minutes, and I’m gone. Okay?” She shook her head and began to walk briskly to keep up with Tori’s pace.

“Dean’s friend is Andrew Van Zant. Isn’t that intriguing?”

“Sounds like he has a mustache and a goatee.”

“Stop being negative. Besides being handsome, he’s rich.”

“You know that isn’t the criteria I care about, Tori. Does he go to your church? How old is he anyway?”

“Whoa, girlfriend, I haven’t seen him at church, and as for age, I don’t know. Late twenties, I guess.”

As they entered the café, they saw the two men at a table in the corner. They stood up as the women approached. Carrie had to admit that Andrew was attractive. He wore a tan, suede shirt that showed his broad shoulders—he was not only trim, but tall—at least six feet three.

Dean gave Tori a quick hug. “Hey, babe, glad you made it.” He nodded to Carrie. “Nice to see you.” He glanced at Tori and turned enthusiastically (too enthusiastically in Carrie’s mind) toward his friend. “Carrie, this is Andrew Van Zant, a buddy of mine. Andrew, this is Carrie Dickson, a friend of Tori’s.”

Andrew reached out a hand and smiled at her. She looked up into a pair of twinkling brown eyes and a ruggedly handsome face. His smile revealed dimples on either side of his mouth, and his hair was tousled, giving him a boyish look.

Carrie took his hand briefly. “I’m glad to meet a friend of Dean and Tori’s. Are you visiting in San Diego?”

He chuckled. “No, I live here, out in La Jolla.”

The four of them sat down, and Dean jumped up again, to get them all coffee. Carrie started to object that she couldn’t stay,

but he was already ordering and she didn't want to make a scene. She'd be polite, but in a few minutes she was going to be out of there. *Thank goodness I have the excuse of another class to go to.*

Andrew was looking at her with obvious admiration, which was disconcerting. With a touch of irritation at feeling on display, she decided to ask some pointed questions. "How long ago did you graduate, Andrew?"

He seemed amused, and she wondered if he thought she was asking his age.

"I graduated eight years ago."

Tori chimed in. "Dean told me he used to edit the school newspaper right here at UCSD."

Carrie nodded. "So you went here. Are you in some form of journalism now?"

Dean returned and set the cardboard holder with four cups of coffee on the table and passed them out before he sat down.

Andrew stirred two packets of sugar into the steaming black liquid. "Actually I'm not. I work for my father in an antique, import business."

Tori leaned forward. "You should see some of those pieces, Carrie. Beautiful. I could go for a whole houseful." She grinned broadly at Andrew. "That is, if I could afford any."

Andrew gave her an appreciative smile and turned back to Carrie. "What's your field?"

"I'm going to be a teacher in the fall. I've signed a contract with the San Diego City School District."

He nodded approval. "A worthy occupation, teaching."

She shifted the subject back to him. "So how do you like the import business?"

"Well, it's a family business started by my grandfather 50 years ago. I hadn't planned on going that direction, but my grandfather died my senior year in college and my father convinced me he needed my help, so I didn't have much choice."

"I think each of us should choose our own field."

Andrew leaned back and his eyes held a trace of amusement. "I agree with you, Carrie Dickson. You wouldn't like to duke it out with my father, would you?"

She laughed and shook her head. "I don't think he would be interested in my opinion."

Dean slapped him on the shoulder. "That would be the day, buddy, when your dad asks anyone's opinion."

Tori leaned against Dean. "I'm so glad Dean decided to finish his last year here. We would never have met."

Dean grinned. "That's a bonus."

Carrie took a sip of her coffee. "How did you happen to transfer back here, Dean?"

"After I was discharged from the military, I got accepted to a college in the Midwest. But, my dad passed away last year and Mom was alone. Then she started having heart trouble. My sister and her family are in New York and couldn't make a change with their jobs and all. I didn't have any ties, so I came home to keep an eye on my mom."

Carrie smiled at him. "That was a nice thing to do, Dean. I'm sure your mom is glad to have you here."

Tori tucked her arm in Dean's. "He's going to be a high school physical education teacher. He'll make a great coach." She beamed at him.

Looking at Dean's muscular build, Carrie could easily picture him in a coaching job. She glanced at her watch and realized she had five minutes to make it to class. She'd have to finish her coffee on the run. As she stood up, both men rose also.

"It was nice meeting you, Andrew. I've got to go or I'll be late to my next class. Thanks for the coffee, Dean." He gave her a wave of his hand.

"I enjoyed meeting you too, Carrie..." Andrew began. She cut him off with a bright smile, said goodbye to Tori and Dean, and hurried away.

As soon as she was out of sight of the café, she tossed the coffee in the trash and half-walked, half-ran across the campus. As she neared the art building, she mused on the meeting. Andrew seemed

nice enough, and he was good-looking, but she'd have so much going on to finish her last semester and graduate. She'd be driving home to Northern California to her family. Then, there were things she wanted to do during the summer before she tackled her first teaching job. She just didn't want to get involved with someone right now.

For a moment she allowed thoughts of Dave to cross her mind. Although they had never talked about it, most of their friends assumed they'd get married. They went to the same church off campus and had known each other for two years. Then Dave got the invitation from Columbia University for a special study program in his field, and he could talk of nothing else. She still remembered the last time they went out and how quiet he'd been when he walked her home. Instead of a romantic good night kiss, to her utter surprise, he took her hand, gave her a brotherly kiss on the cheek, and dropped a bombshell.

"Carrie, you know how much you mean to me, but things just aren't going to work out between us. I'll be three thousand miles away. I don't want any obstacles right now. I have my career to think of."

She'd looked at him, tears pooling in her eyes. "You see me as an obstacle?"

He shrugged. "It just isn't the right time. You're a great girl, Carrie. I wish you the best." Then, he turned and walked quickly away without a backward glance.

She'd stood there a long moment trying to comprehend what had just happened, and as the sobs rose in her throat, she hurried into her apartment before someone could see her and went to the rocking chair by the window. For a long time, she just sat there in the dark, letting the tears flow.

Now, as the scene faded in her mind, Carrie lifted her chin with determination. "I'm not interested. I don't care how handsome he is!" And she hurried into the art building.



When the phone rang that evening, she expected it to be Tori wanting to know her impression of Dean's friend.

The voice on the other end of the line was not Tori's.

"Hello, Carrie?"

"Yes?"

"Andrew Van Zant. We met today at the café."

Tori. You gave him my phone number. You're pushing the envelope, girlfriend!

"Yes?"

"I enjoyed meeting you. I was wondering if you'd let me take you to dinner one evening this week. I assure you I'm perfectly trustworthy."

She could imagine him grinning on the other end of the phone.

"I appreciate the invitation, Andrew, but I've got a project to complete for my creative writing class, and two tests coming up."

"I know a little Italian place in the Gas Lamp District. Do you like spaghetti?"

"Yes, but..."

"There's also a group that does folk dances in Balboa Park on Sundays. Have you ever seen them?"

Had Tori told him she'd done some folk dancing in high school? Just what else had Tori shared with him?

"No, I haven't."

"They're pretty good. I think you'd enjoy watching them. Why don't you let me pick you up after church on Sunday. After the folk dancing, we could have a simple dinner. What do you say?"

Carrie sighed. He was hard to resist. Tori must have told him that she went to church, but he didn't say anything about going himself. Andrew didn't strike her as the church-going type, but she'd soon find out.

He was waiting patiently for her answer. She rubbed the back of her neck with one hand. It had been seven months since Dave left. There couldn't be any harm in one Sunday dinner.

"That's nice of you, Andrew. I guess that would be all right."

“Wonderful. I’ll pick you up Sunday afternoon.”

They agreed on a time and she gave him directions to her apartment. After she hung up, she looked in the mirror. *So what do you think you’re doing, Carrie? You don’t know anything about this guy except he’s a friend of Tori’s boyfriend and he works in his father’s import business.* She shook her head and picked up a legal pad to work on her story for class. After a while she laid the pad down. The creative muse had taken a break. She stared out the window and considered Andrew. In her mind’s eye she saw a pair of warm brown eyes that crinkled when he smiled. But then, even though she tried not to think of it, the pain of Dave’s broken promises hit her again.