**An excerpt from *A Novel Obsession* by Caitlin Barasch:**

Chapter One

My boyfriend’s ex-girlfriend, Rosemary, has the same thickness to her eyebrows as I do. The same wavy auburn hair and pear‑shaped hips.

I’m standing across the street from her office in a chunky maroon sweater and sunglasses, watching her leave. I want to know if she’s the type who heads out at five for a gym class or a happy hour, or the type to send emails until eight, adrift in a sea of empty desks.

Watching her exit the building at 6:35 p.m., I’ve now discovered she’s neither.

I note the *New Yorker* tote bag she carries, which to me suggests unoriginality, conformity. She crosses the four‑lane street with only two seconds left on the crosswalk’s countdown. Cars honk, she pops a breath mint.

I know it’s a mint because I stand close to her on the Fulton subway platform and breathe it in. I resist the urge to touch her. To see if she dissolves.

Up close, Rosemary looks different from her Instagram photos. She must use a variety of filters, excessive shadow and saturation. She has a flatter stomach than I do, but much smaller breasts. Smooth and glowing skin, but a square and masculine jaw. In the pictures I’ve seen, she presses her lips together rather than flashing all her teeth, as I do.

But now, finally, I have a rare glimpse of her teeth. The canines are jagged, protruding like fangs. This might mean I’m prettier than Rosemary, but who knows? Maybe her vampiric teeth appealed to Caleb.

On the train, when she shoves tiny white AirPods into her ears, I mimic her with my bulky noise‑canceling headphones. Even though seats are available, Rosemary leans against the door and closes her eyes and taps her feet. I prefer to stand, too, but only ever with my eyes open. Hidden behind dark oversized sunglasses—similar to the kind celebrities wear when evading paparazzi—I’m able to hold prolonged and one‑sided eye contact with strangers. Successful surveillance relies on anonymity.

A platoon of bodies in two‑piece business suits shoves into the train at Wall Street, and those huddled near the door squeeze closer together. Despite October’s cold snap, the subway cars aren’t heated yet. I manage, in the scuffle, to stand next to Rosemary. When the sleeve of my sweater grazes her denim‑jacketed elbow, I wonder if we’ll look at each other. But her gaze never rises. Being two inches taller proves advantageous—I’m able to peer at her screen as she scrolls through artists, albums, finally settling on Hiatus Kaiyote’s “Breathing Underwater.” With a twinge of discomfort, I realize Caleb—my boyfriend, her ex—has blasted this song every time we’ve cooked together the past few weeks, chopping onions to the smash of a cymbal.

Next, I observe Rosemary tweet about a novel she edited, which was apparently reviewed in the *New York Times*. She deletes and rephrases so many times that I’m tempted to rip the phone from her hands. *I know you’re aiming for pride and humility*, I’ll say. *Let me.*

I study her face until she exits at Atlantic Avenue near Brooklyn’s Fort Greene neighborhood. I follow her. She walks down the street, takes a left, a right, then punches in a code to enter a modern, industrial‑chic building with floor‑to‑ceiling glass windows. It’s an eyesore among the quaint brownstones.

I can’t follow anymore. I go, instead, to a biergarten a few blocks away. Order a pretzel the size of my face, drink seasonal beer that tastes of banana bread. Then I call Caleb and ask if he wants to meet me here.

“Where?” he asks.

I cover the mouthpiece and ask the bartender to tell me where I am. He whispers the name of the bar and winks conspiratorially. I repeat it for Caleb.

There’s a decided pause. “Why are you in Fort Greene?”

“I’m writing a scene that takes place here. Research.”

His voice softens. “Be there soon.”

Once our call ends, I scribble down some details—the cross‑walk, the tweet, the tote bag, her denim‑jacketed elbow brushing against the sleeve of my sweater. The beginnings of a book—my book. I’ve found, I think, a story worth telling. Until now I’ve written only short fiction, twenty pages or less; I haven’t been intrigued enough about anything to sustain an edifice of words. But life has finally begun to interest me. To prove the believers right and the nonbelievers wrong—I fall into both categories, depending on the day—I will write a novel.

When Caleb arrives thirty minutes later, he gazes around the bar uneasily, as if expecting a ghost. I call him over.

“How’s that scene?” He settles onto the stool beside me. “Trying to describe a slant of light hitting a fancy brownstone?”

I force a laugh, unsure if I’m being mocked. “Exactly.”

“Work was mental, I’ve been eyeing the bar across the street practically since the day started. This was a more ambitious trek than I was anticipating, though.”

Caleb lives in Washington Heights, while I reside two hundred blocks south in Greenwich Village, conveniently nearer to his office in the Financial District. Would he want to see me as often if I lived elsewhere?

“You must really like me,” I say.

“Obviously.” Caleb brushes a strand of hair off my forehead. It’s movie stuff but feels nice. “I’ve actually been here before.”

I choose to look surprised. “Have you?”

“Well—my ex lives in this neighborhood.” His hand is still on my forehead, still playing with my hair. “We came here a few times.”

“Oh, shit. I didn’t realize—you think she might randomly walk in?”

“God, I hope not.” His hand moves from my head to wrap around the beer glass the bartender has brought. “There are a zillion other bars around here.”

“It won’t happen,” I say, more confidently than I feel, and touch his arm. Anchoring him here, with me.

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Two days later, on my day off, I return to the corner where Rosemary works and locate a bench where I can read. I’m carrying a book she edited called *One of the Herd*, an essay collection by a woman who grew up on a Wyoming cattle farm*.* I took it from a box of forthcoming releases in the storage room at the bookstore where I work. The publication date is still a few weeks away, but I’ve promised myself I’ll skim quickly and carefully, without damaging the pages or the spine, and then slide it back into the box before it goes on sale. I want to claim this physical manifestation of her, if only for a short while.

Between surveillance of the building’s revolving doors, I manage to digest thirty‑two pages before Rosemary emerges, rummaging in her *New Yorker* tote for her Ray‑Bans.

She turns west at the corner. I slip the book into my own tote—its illustration a bespectacled woman carrying a teetering stack of Jane Austen novels—just in time to watch the back of Rosemary’s royal‑blue cotton dress disappear inside a café. I’m thirsty, too, I realize, and in need of caffeine. So I follow her inside.

Rosemary ponders the chalkboard menu. Does she read every item but then order the usual? I peg her as a nonfat latte kind of woman.

“I’ll have an iced dirty chai, please,” she tells the barista.

“That’s what I always get,” I murmur, more audibly than intended.

Rosemary turns.

I’m mortified but also electric. Words bubble up. “I rarely see anyone order it,” I blurt out, as if to explain. “But I know people like it, that’s how I found out it existed.” I can’t seem to stop. “Espresso in chai.”

Furious at the brutal mundanity of what is now officially our first encounter, I blush a deep crimson. Then Rosemary says, “Yeah, it’s pretty good.” Her gaze sweeps over me. “Cute tote, by the way.”

Her voice is raspy, lower than I expected. Alluring.

I glance down. “Thank you so much.”

I want to hear her again, but she ducks her head to check her phone, signaling the end of our conversation. The espresso machine gurgles. The barista hands her the chai—Rosemary’s fingernails are violet—and then her mouth encircles the straw. I order the same, still vibrating with nervous energy, and step into the bright October sunlight.

Rosemary is gone.

I was prepared to wait all day for her emergence. Now I don’t know what to do with all this extra time. I walk a few avenues over and sit alongside the Hudson, zipping my floral‑print bomber jacket up to my chin. The seasons are changing, ushering in peak foliage. Golden leaves litter the sidewalk. The wind is biting when it blows. I no longer apply deodorant to the insides of my thighs to prevent them from chafing.

In my iPhone Notes app, I document a few details—the blue cotton dress, the raspy voice, our dirty chai, her violet fingernails. Later, I’ll sculpt a scene.

It’s only a few minutes before eleven; apparently, Rosemary takes early coffee breaks. Maybe she brewed her first cup around dawn and drank it slowly in her kitchen, savoring the steam. Maybe her routine involves grabbing another coffee before boarding the subway and then attempting to drink it jostled against the other commuters. And finally, when pre‑lunch fatigue sets in, she ventures out for her third cup. I drink coffee all day, too, hoping it will successfully jolt me into action. Perhaps we also have dehydration in common.

Or it’s possible Rosemary enjoyed a late night with friends yesterday, maybe even a date. She might have been naked in another man’s bed this morning. But I can’t imagine why a woman in love with someone else would send her ex‑boyfriend—Caleb—an email asking if he was well, asking to see him again. What could require they meet face‑to‑face, other than a desire to repair and rekindle?

That’s partly why I’m here. To find out. A narrative is beginning to form, one in which I am braver, bolder, more reckless. Observations are useless without accompanying actions. Maybe I should have spilled coffee on her tote, cried uncontrollably about a pretend breakup to elicit her concern, stolen a bag of coffee grounds and made a run for it. Motivated by a commitment to my craft, I’m free now to make strange decisions emancipated from social convention. Welcome to my intellectual experiment, welcome to my ambition. Who would dare fault me for my ambition?