

He Can't Break You

I sat in the corner of the coffee shop, compulsively picking at my cuticles. I ran through possible reasons he asked me for coffee—maybe he grew, he's coming clean with all the times he cheated on me, he's apologizing for three-years' worth of lies. The door chimed. I froze. *Why did I agree to this? Why, after a year, am I meeting him?* I looked up. It wasn't him. I resorted to the affirmations my friends gave me. *He can't break you. He doesn't have that power anymore. You have moved on to better things, Brandon treats you like a queen. And my own, show him how good you are.* The door chimed again. I ripped the dangling skin from my cuticle. A bubble of blood swelled up on my thumb. He stood in the doorway and smiled at me. I hid my hand in the sleeve of my sweater.

He walked over to my table. My body felt heavy and light simultaneously. I couldn't manage a deep breath. "Hi."

He pulled the chair out, draping his jacket over the seat-back. The familiar scent of his cologne wafted over to me. Every muscle clenched. I fidgeted with my fingers, searching for more dead skin to pick at. "Hey."

"How have you been?"

I mechanically told him about all the different ways I was doing really well. He probably saw the stiffness in my posture. I asked about him, and he told me the ways he was also doing well. I saw the bags under his eyes. We huddled under the umbrella that small talk provided us, uneasy in our dryness amid the hate and heaviness that rained around us. We walked through tired topics—gossip about our mutual friends, life updates fit for family get-togethers. I feigned interest as he swiped through the Zillow pictures of his new rental. He pretended to be surprised when I said I still lived in my parent's apartment. I avoided bringing up when he cheated on me in my own bed and lied to the girl that my parent's apartment was his own. He avoided mentioning his girlfriend, Lauren, who was that girl in my bed. We talked about his dog until there was nothing easy left to say and we were met with silence. I took a sip of my coffee. He folded his hands on the table.

"I want to talk about what happened at Alex's wedding a couple of months ago."

Nausea came over me. *Not that night.* "I don't really know what happened that night."

His eyes grew wide, "You don't remember?"

I remembered only eating three bites of chicken at dinner because I was wearing a tight dress and didn't want to get bloated. I remembered dancing in a circle with my friends, hearing his laugh behind me and fighting every instinct to turn my head. I remembered taking shots at the open bar with his friends to show them how fun I was. I remembered doing that a couple of times. The next thing I remembered was my best friend screaming at me to throw up as she held my limp neck up by my hair.

His face twisted, he was trying to hide a smirk. “Do you want me to tell you what happened?”

I sensed giddiness in his voice. He had something bad on me. I pinched a loose piece of skin on my ring finger and fiddled with it, loosening it. How could I give him anything to hold over my head? I was the one who holds things over heads. I dug my nail further into the crevice where the loosened skin was attached to my finger. I kept digging, pushing, feeling the sting of unripe flesh being exposed. I dug until the piece of skin was attached only by a thin fiber. Then I yanked, ripped it off my finger. With the dead skin in my hand, I finally responded. “Tell me.”

“Well, you went up to me by the bathrooms and started flirting, saying something about missing my dog. I tried telling you that I was still with Lauren and you said you didn’t care, that you were seeing this guy Brandon too. Then you just grabbed my neck and leaned in. We only kissed for like thirty seconds.”

I was not a cheater. I was not that kind of girl. Even unconscious, I was not a cheater. I hated cheaters. I hated him. I was an unconscious cheater, so I was a cheater. I was a cheater, so I was exactly that kind of girl. I was a cheater and I hated cheaters. I hated myself and I hated him. All this time, I thought I only hated him, but when I hated him, I hated myself. He watched my silence, hands resting on the table. His face started twisting again, but this emerging smirk was too powerful to hide. His teeth shined in the florescent light.

“I really thought you knew. I could tell you were super drunk, but I didn’t think you were that bad. I just wanted to address it in person to clear the air. Lauren knows. She forgives me. She’s waiting outside. We are doing really well. She’s actually helped me grow a lot and realize ... “

“Tell Lauren I’m sorry.”

I had nothing else to say. I had nothing to stand on. I looked down at my bleeding fingers and stained sweater sleeve. I felt his stare, his smile, his power. I stood up and he moved over to my side of the table, extending his arm for a side hug. My body felt brittle as he wrapped around my waist.