

Between

You and

Us

a novel

Kendra Broekhuis



**SNEAK
PEEK**

SAMPLE ONLY

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and Us

A NOVEL

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WATERBROOK

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For Collin, because I like you.
And for Aliza, because I miss you.

CHAPTER 1

Present Day

“BARTOLOTTA’S, PLEASE,” LEONA SAID AS SHE SETTLED into the back seat of the taxi. Though she was sure she botched the pronunciation.

The driver raised an eyebrow at her in the rearview mirror. “Fancy,” he noted, then returned his face to neutral.

She finished rubbing her eyes and managed a smirk. “For one night, and one night only.”

The French bistro was in the Historic Water Tower neighborhood of Milwaukee where residential properties were meticulously manicured and residents could—without having to stop and think—recommend their favorite interior designer or cleaning company.

The plan was to meet David at Bartolotta’s. They both had to work late, but his commute was longer, so they decided he would drive the only car they owned and she would splurge for a taxi. She did her best to calculate the fees ahead of time and guessed it would cost her close to twenty-six precious dollars to get there and tip her driver. She may have reneged and taken the bus, but the

summer school and aftercare programs she worked at went later than she anticipated, and the closest bus stop was still an eleven-minute walk from her destination.

This occasion was too important to be late for.

The taxi pulled away from the curb, and Leona took her journal—the one she kept with her at all times per Grandma Vera’s advice—out of her purse. Besides taking naps, writing was Leona’s favorite hobby. Her mouth exposed her as a bit of a bumbler, but her pen reminded her she had intelligent things to say. She fanned the pages of her journal, catching glimpses of the poems, short stories, and prayers she wrote in the cracks of her day between grading papers, planning lessons, and calling her students’ parents.

The pages from the past year were mostly filled with pain.

She opened the journal to a fresh page and tried to write *Dear David*, but the taxi hit a pothole and her pen bounced across the paper. She turned to the next page to try again, but this time another car passed them on the right in the bike lane at a speed well over the limit. The taxi driver blared the horn, and Leona flinched. To help slow her heart rate, she took a deep breath, reminding herself that the travel would change the farther east they drove down Locust.

Dear David, she began again.

She was hoping to write something in honor of their tenth wedding anniversary. Although it wouldn’t be difficult to inscribe pages of her deep affection for him, she settled for a succinct poem in honor of what their marriage had survived so far. David was more of a skim reader anyway, something she made a point to tell him was a crime against words.

She signed the note the way she always did: *Yours then, now, and forever*.

Leona tried tucking the journal back into her purse, but another pothole jolted the taxi and knocked it off the seat, spilling its

contents onto the floor. Gritting her teeth, she tucked her wavy auburn hair behind her ear and leaned over. She held her glasses to the bridge of her nose as she gathered her keys and wallet, a crinkled pamphlet, and a confetti of gum wrappers. She spotted the other note she planned to share that evening too, a small greeting card with hand-painted flowers on the front. She picked it up, admired its delicate details, and carefully tucked it back into her purse. She'd been holding on to the note for far too long, and she was determined to show it to David at the restaurant. No matter how torn up she was about it.

For the rest of the fifteen-minute commute, Leona wrapped her palm around the back of her neck to knead away the tension sitting there, trying to focus on the entire decade they were celebrating tonight rather than just the past year they'd been through. This extravagant evening out was supposed to symbolize the start of learning how to live again.

The taxi pulled up to the end of a path that led to a majestic set of Corinthian columns. Leona moved her hand to the strap of her purse and began fidgeting. This was an establishment she wasn't bred for, she thought while inspecting the pristine architecture.

She paid the driver, got out of the taxi, and scanned the parking lot for her and David's taupe Toyota Corolla. All she saw was a wave of shiny black, save for one bright yellow Camaro in the middle of the convoy. She rolled her eyes and then chuckled. Whenever David saw one of these metal bumblebees on the road, he'd fawn over it and say, "Maybe in another life, huh, babe?"

She would shoot back, "Yes, another life when you marry an eastside heiress."

Leona was surprised she beat David to the restaurant. Then again, he might have parked farther away to avoid the embarrassment he would feel at pulling up next to vehicles with two hundred thousand fewer miles on them. She turned back toward the entrance and followed the path through the doors so she could

check for him inside.

She crossed the threshold, taking in the walls filled with framed Parisian scenes that stretched out over warm refurbished floors as well as tables glowing with candlelight near windows overlooking Lake Michigan. The stunning ambience of wealth and romance—along with a heavenly aroma—made her stifle a gasp.

Was this restaurant plucked right out of a cheesy chick flick? she marveled, wishing she wasn't impressed. She was suddenly aware of the mulberry cotton thrift-store dress draping her pale body, advertising one who clips coupons and doesn't belong here.

She finished absorbing the grandeur of her surroundings and realized the hostess was watching each of her slow steps through the restaurant's corridor. The polished navy dress hugging her curves did not appear to be from a thrift store. Or made of cotton.

"Welcome to Bartolotta's Lake Park Bistro," she said. "Do you have a reservation?"

Leona cleared her throat and tried to cloak herself with poise. "Thank you. I am meeting my husband here. He might be seated already."

The hostess grabbed two menus. "Follow me," she said, then nodded toward Leona's arm. "By the way, that is a beautiful bag."

Leona looked down and realized the hostess was referring to the same purse she just spilled all over the taxi. It was expensive—her only possession that fit in a place like Bartolotta's. Her mother, having remarried one of Milwaukee's wealthiest silver bachelors, gave it to Leona for her birthday three years ago. Instead of giving it to her in person, Evelyn shipped it to her house without a card. Just a receipt with the price circled.

They crossed the dining room where more pleasing aromas hit Leona in the face. Her stomach growled, which earned her a quick glance from the hostess over her shoulder.

"There he is." Leona pointed at David.

The hostess stutter-stepped, which didn't surprise Leona.

Most people seemed astonished when they learned her husband was David Warlon. She'd always been a bit amazed too and thought that he was out of her league in every way. A nerdy genius with the handsome charisma of a late-night television host who somehow managed to be humble about it.

Ugh. If it wasn't her David she was describing, she might throw up in her mouth at how corny she was about him—like he was some character written for the Hallmark Channel. But her David was all that, and they were happy.

At least they were, until the day everything changed.

"The waitstaff will be with you shortly." The hostess smiled at David, then offered a curt nod to Leona before leaving their table.

Leona turned to David.

It was the look in his eyes that first warned her something wasn't right. There was an unfamiliar glint in them—perhaps a distance or a steel barrier. His eyes were usually so full of light and playfulness and desire. When they'd land on her, for a split second she could almost hear them shouting "I love you."

But the words his eyes spoke now appeared bone dry, no longer drawn from that deep well of affection they'd shared.

His eyes said nothing.

She was caught off guard but not deterred. On the ride here she made a conscious decision that whatever happened, she would try to make their night special. It had been so long since they invested in their relationship like this. Literally, they had saved every extra penny they could for the past three months just so they could each afford a plate of Bartolotta's pan-seared tenderloin.

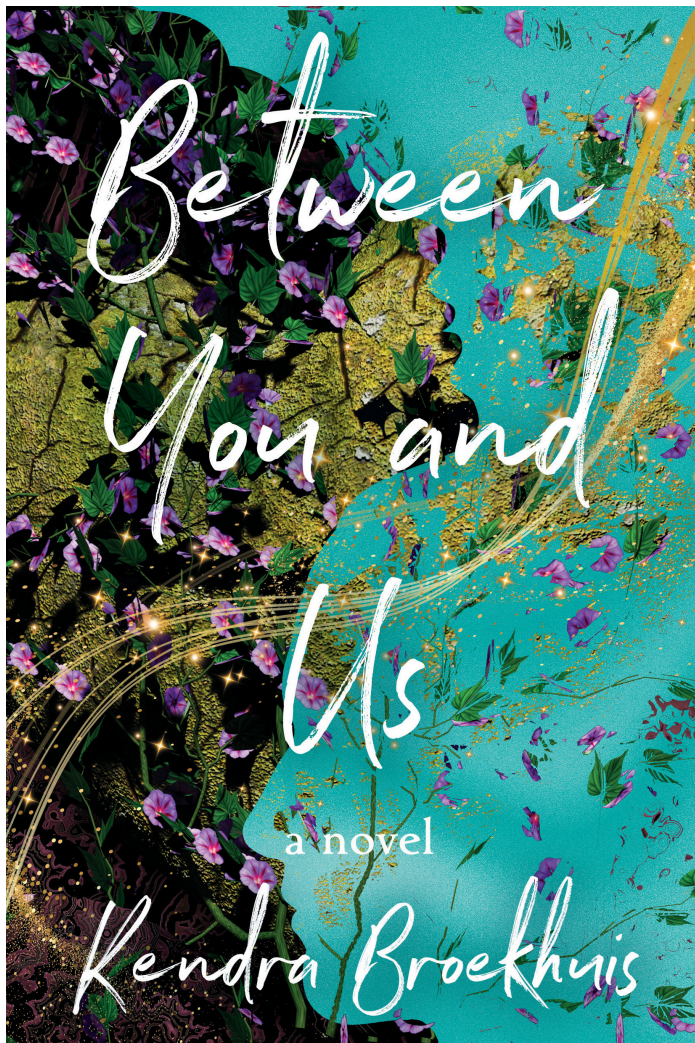
They'd gone back and forth on the practicality of spending all that money on one meal, especially when their home needed so many repairs, the ones their landlord claimed he couldn't address unless he drastically raised the rent. But every time Leona suggested they use the money to fix the plumbing in the bathroom, David pleaded with her about how much they needed this night

out.

Against all her instincts to ask what was wrong, she leaned over, gently placed her hand on the side of his face, and kissed his cheek.

“Happy anniversary, David,” she said.

He bristled at her touch.



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