

BUTTERFLY BLOSSOMS

A NOVEL BY RACHEL BLEU

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Prologue

Sally Renee Grace's muscles were exhausted after a long day of giving therapeutic massages at the Asheville Healing House Day Spa, so much so that she planned to go straight to bed. The thumping in her head warned her of an oncoming headache, so she popped two ibuprofen and took a long swallow of water from the faucet. The growling in her stomach reminded her that she'd failed to eat anything all day.

Oblivious to Sally's desire for a quiet night alone, her friends, Bonifa Santos Padilla and Devon Abraham, were relentless in pressuring her to go with them to a downtown club. Sally knew how fortunate she was to have such caring and loyal friends, so she managed to throw on a pair of skinny jeans and a sparkly shirt before jumping into Bonifa's SUV.

The sea of people standing outside were dancing to the beat of the music as it filtered out the open doorway. The bass was so loud that Sally's heart started beating to the rhythm of the loud thumps ricocheting off the walls of the building. The smell of weed wafted around her as she swallowed deeply and held back the urge to heave at the acrid smell.

On the dance floor, Devon dominated the room with his amazing moves and endless energy. Sally wished she could be so carefree, but she worried that people would make fun of her antiquated moves. Enjoying all the women's advances and allowing them to kiss on him, Sally could already tell that Devon had exceeded his normal limit of alcohol. She frowned at the clueless women and felt sorry for them. They had no

idea that they were barking up the wrong tree because Devon was gay.

Bonifa was a rare beauty with her caramel skin and dark tresses which clearly attracted the attention of both men and women. Sally stared at the group crowded together near the bar and watched as the men ogled Bonifa and the women stared in disdain. Sally was lucky that she was a red-haired woman with a basic body type that rarely caught the attention of men or women. As usual, Bonifa acted aloof and disinterested because she kept a steady line of men in her life and rarely needed any additional suitors.

As a massage therapist, Sally didn't have a lot of free time to date. She also didn't trust too many people, and definitely wasn't into one-night stands. In fact, she wondered if she'd ever have a long-term relationship with anyone. Her strict religious upbringing complicated her personal life because she tried to stay focused on her biblical teachings rather than her non-traditional desires.

Sally wasn't even sure whether she should be searching for a man or a woman. One experience with her best friend in high school had been haunting her every day since she'd moved away. She'd wanted to explore things further, but Tracy had pulled away from her after the incident. However, Sally really wanted the chance to follow her heart instead of her head, and take a chance with whomever attracted her the most.

Growing up in Madison, Tennessee, Sally had been the perfect daughter, doing everything that her parents expected a good and obedient child to do. Although she loved her grandparents, they'd also placed a lot of restrictions on her by constantly quoting the Old Testament of Bible. Early on, she'd discovered the unspoken law that forced her to conform to whatever society dictated. Living her life like a puppet on a string, Sally transformed into a people-pleaser, basing her decisions and actions on what other people wanted or expected her to do.

Sally's life situation had changed when she'd moved to Asheville to become a massage therapist. Being constantly exposed to different perspectives, cultures, and people had really opened her eyes to the all that life had to offer. Her therapeutic clients presented special interactions that taught her how to become an open-minded and accepting person. Although a few of her clients were close-minded and caused her much frustration, she knew that she couldn't afford to turn them away.

Regrettably, Sally felt like she'd been living someone else's life - a fantasy life filled with false expectations perpetuated by society. For once in her life, she truly wished that she could just be; be someone else; be whatever she wanted to be; and be her true, authentic self.

My New Best Friend

When Sally entered Salon de Bonifa, she immediately noticed a strikingly, beautiful, and tanned woman wearing skin-tight leggings, heels, and some big hoop earrings. Her makeup was flawless, except for her eyebrows. There was just something off about her eyebrows. Sally tried not to stare, but she feared that her facial expressions betrayed her. Sally had never mastered her poker face and people could easily read her emotions, even when she'd tried to hide them.

“Honey, did you have an appointment,” the attractive woman said.

“Uh, no. Did I need one? I only decided today to get a manicure and pedicure because I have a date tomorrow.”

The woman smiled. “Well, we usually like to make appointments, but since this is for a special occasion, we’ll fit you in somewhere. My name is Bonifa. Welcome. Are you in any rush?”

“Nothing more than getting home to feed Viper.”

Bonifa looked at Sally with an inquisitive stare. “That’s the strangest name for a dog that I’ve ever heard. Is he a big dog?”

Sally laughed. “Well, he’s a moderately-sized snake.”

Bonifa looked at Sally and crossed herself. “You have got to be joking me.”

“No. I’m not.”

Seemingly confused by Sally’s choice in companions, Bonifa said “What is your name so I can add you to my schedule?”

“Sally Renee Grace, but my friends call me Sally.”

“Nice to meet, you Sally. I’ll be with you as soon as I can. Please make yourself at home.”

Sally sat down in the corner next to a potted plant in the corner of the salon. She could smell the mixture of chlorine and acetone from the competing sides of the salon. The bright lights almost gave her a headache, but she’d only ate a smoothie and some peanuts all day.

She started thinking about Bonifa’s comment about Viper and felt a little angry by her insensitivity. As usual, Sally tended to take things too seriously and guessed that was one of her biggest weaknesses. Her momma constantly reminded Sally to stop wearing her heart on her sleeve. As an introvert, she didn’t enjoy getting a lot of attention or sounding crazy in front of strangers. No one understood Sally’s love of snakes, but she’d been constantly exposed to the world of snake-handling at her Pentecostal church in Nashville, Tennessee.

Her parents, John and Martha Grace, loved the Lord and lived by The Book. Every decision her family made revolved around what Jesus would do or want them to do.

Sally knew that Bonifa probably didn't mean to make Sally feel weird about her pet snake. However, she felt that people should be both relieved and impressed that she didn't have any interest in venomous snakes since that's what she knew from her childhood. But Sally didn't want to pass to the great beyond because of a snake bite. That particular thought sent Sally's mind back to the first sobering experience in her childhood Pentecostal church.

It was a bright sunny day in Nashville, the birds were chirping, and the scent of honeysuckle floated through the open door of the church. As everyone greeted each other with hugs and kisses, the congregation found their seats. Sally's family eagerly took their regular place on the second pew in the front. The oldest Pentecostal pastor of their church was now holding a large water moccasin. Sally could tell by his stature and smile that he wasn't afraid of the snake. However, Sally really thought the man was too old to be messing around with snakes, no matter how faithful he was.

Right after Sally had that thought, the pastor suddenly got bit by the snake, but kept on preaching. The congregation had been prepared for the possibility, but were still surprised

by how quickly the snake struck, landing a bite directly on the pastor's neck.

"No one be alarmed. My God is an awesome God. He will protect me. I have no fear. Only the sinful have fear, and I am a chosen child of God without sin," he said.

Although the congregation was worried about him, the pastor vehemently warned them not to diminish the work of the Lord by intervening in what was happening. About fifteen minutes later, he grabbed his chest and dropped onto the floor. To make things worse, the congregants circled around him and started praying and proclaiming loudly, as if they were trying to get God's divine intervention or at least his attention.

Sally's Aunt Bessie started speaking in tongues and her Uncle Sonny started dancing with the spirit. At first, no one touched the pastor or called an ambulance. But as time went on, it was clear that he was no longer among the world of the living. Sally's sweet memories of childhood and growing up in a Pentecostal church may have jaded her, so perhaps it really was weird to have a pet snake.

Bonifa kept Sally waiting for about thirty minutes before calling her back to the fancy massage chair for her pedicure. Sally thought it really wasn't that long of a wait considering how busy the salon was when she had arrived. Sally wasn't in any rush and didn't have any other plans,

besides feeding Viper, and she knew he could wait to eat for a couple of days if he had to. However, she was hoping that her date with Bobby would go well enough so she could add some dates to her calendar. Her life was pretty mundane: get up, feed Viper, go to work, leave work, go home, feed Viper, and go to bed. After a long day at work, Sally planned to go straight home and stay inside her apartment. Reading books, listening to music, and doing crossword puzzles were her favorite hobbies.

“So, honey, what color do you want for your fingers and toes since I see that you didn’t pick out a color yet,” Bonifa said.

“I’m just plain-Jane, and I don’t want any color. Clear polish will work just fine.”

Bonifa rolled her eyes as she looked at Sally. “Oh, no, no, no, that just won’t do at all. You’re going on a date and first impressions are important. My mama told me that a man can look at your fingers and toes and know immediately whether you’re a well-kept woman or a slob. The only customers that opt for no color are either men or lesbians.”

Sally awkwardly laughed at the lesbian statement. “Well, what color do you think would be appropriate for a first date with a man I just met online and know little to nothing about?”

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