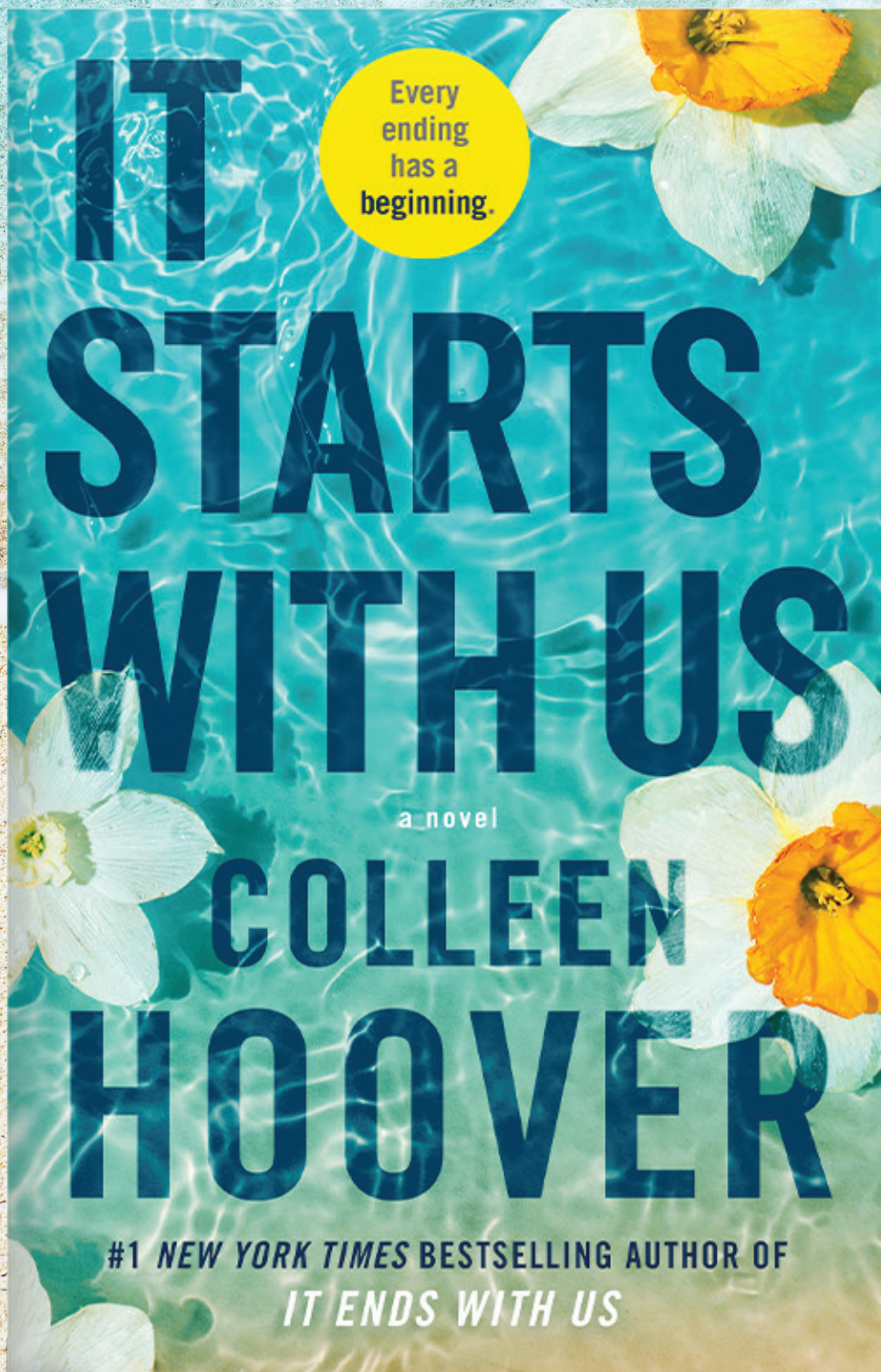




EXCLUSIVE EXCERPT

Chapter Eleven

Atlas

I wanted the day to go by faster, so I decided to help out in the kitchen at Bib's even though I prepared for the night with a full staff. Now I smell like garlic. This is the third time I've tried scrubbing the smell off, to no avail. But if I don't leave now, I'll be late meeting her.

We're taking it slow, so I'm picking her up at her work rather than her apartment. I have no idea where she lives now, or if she still lives in the apartment building I showed up at almost two years ago when she needed help. For whatever reason, where we live is something that hasn't come up in our conversations. She probably doesn't even know I sold my house and moved into the city earlier this year. I'm curious how far apart we live from each other now.

"I smell cologne," Darin says after he passes me. He stops walking toward the freezer and turns to give me a once-over. "Why are you wearing cologne? Why are you dressed up?"

I sniff my hands. "I don't smell like garlic?"

"No, you smell like you're going out. Are you leaving?"

"I *am* leaving. I'll be back around closing time, though. I think I might stay the night here and see if I can catch whoever is vandalizing the restaurants." There were several days of a quiet stretch between incidents, but we got hit for a

fourth time last night. It wasn't too costly, though. This time they just scattered the trash everywhere again. That's a lot easier to clean up than repainting has been. That may be because Brad keeps bringing Theo to help. I should probably give Theo a heads-up that the more he complains about a chore, the more likely he's going to be made to do that chore.

I plan to confront whoever is doing the damage tonight and see if I can't figure out their motive and talk them down before I get the police involved. I'm confident most things can be handled with a simple, honest conversation rather than a dramatic intervention, but I have no idea who I'm dealing with.

Darin leans in and quietly says, "Who you going out with? Lily?"

I dry my hands on a towel and nod once.

Darin smiles and walks away. I like that my friends like Lily. They brought her up a couple of times after our poker night, but I think they could tell it bothered me. I didn't like discussing Lily when she wasn't a part of my life.

But now it looks like there's a possibility she's back in the picture. Maybe. This might be why I'm so nervous: because I know what a huge risk Lily is taking by going out with me tonight. If things progress with us, that could impact her life in negative ways. Which might be why I started to feel the immense pressure two hours ago of making sure this date is worth it for her.

But I smell like I'm terrified of vampires, so it's already not going my way.

I pull into the parking lot at five minutes to six. Lily must have been waiting for me, because she exits her store and locks the door behind her before I'm even out of my car.

As soon as I lay eyes on her, I get even more nervous. She looks incredible. She's wearing a black jumpsuit and heels. She pulls on her jacket and meets me in the middle of the parking lot.

I lean in and greet her with a quick kiss on her cheek. "You look stunning." I swear she reddens a little after I say that.

"Do I? I didn't sleep last night. I feel like I look ninety."

"Why didn't you sleep?"

"Emmy ran a fever all night. She's better now, but . . ." Lily yawns. "I'm sorry. I just drank coffee. It'll hit in a minute."

"It's okay. I'm not tired, but I do smell like garlic."

"I like garlic."

"Good thing."

Lily leans back on her heels and looks down at her outfit. "I wasn't sure what to wear since I've never been to this restaurant."

"I've never been there, either, so I have no idea. But I have a feeling you'll be fine." I chose a new restaurant I've been wanting to try. It's about a forty-five-minute drive, but I figured that would give us time to catch up on the way over.

"I have a present for you," she says. "It's in my car. Let me grab it."

I follow her to her car and watch her retrieve something from the console. When she hands it to me, I can't hold back a smile. "Is this your journal?" She read another quick passage to me last night, but she was so embarrassed reading it out loud, she refused to give me more.

“That’s one of them. We’ll see how tonight goes before I give you the other one.”

“No pressure or anything.” I walk her to my car and open the passenger door for her. She starts to yawn again as I’m closing her door.

I feel bad, like maybe she’s too exhausted for this date. I have no idea what it’s like to raise a child. I feel kind of selfish that I’m not offering to reschedule, so before I back out of the parking lot, I speak up. “If you’d rather go home and sleep, we can do this next weekend.”

“There’s nothing else I’d rather do than this, Atlas. I’ll sleep when I’m dead.” She clicks her seat belt. “You actually do smell like garlic.”

I think she’s kidding. Lily used to joke all the time when we were younger. It’s one of the things I loved most about her—that she always seemed to be in a good mood despite all the bad things surrounding her. It’s that same strength I admired in her in the days I was with her after she found out she was pregnant in the emergency room. I know that was one of the lowest points of her life, but she was able to smile through it all, and even spent an entire evening impressing my friends with her humor during a poker night.

Everyone handles stress differently, and none of those ways are necessarily wrong, but Lily handles it with grace. And grace just happens to be the quality I find the most attractive in people.

“How’d you manage to get away on a Saturday night?” Lily asks.

I hate that I’m driving because I want to look at her while I respond. I’ve never seen her look this . . . womanly?

Is that a compliment? I don't even know. I probably shouldn't say it out loud in case it isn't, but when Lily and I fell in love, neither of us were what we would now consider adults. But it's different tonight. We're grown-ups with careers, and she's a mother and a boss and independent. *It's sexy as hell.*

The only other time I've spent with her as adults was when she was technically still with Ryle, so it felt wrong thinking of her the way I am now. *Like I want her.*

I keep my focus on the road and try not to create a lull in our conversation, but I think I might be a little flustered. That surprises me.

"How did I manage getting away?" I say, pretending like I'm mulling over the question rather than obsessing about how much I want to stare at her. "I hire dependable people."

Lily smiles at that. "Do you always work on weekends?"

I nod. "I usually only take off Sundays, when we're closed. The occasional Monday."

"What do you enjoy the most about your job?"

She's full of questions tonight. I give her a sidelong glance and smile. "Reading the reviews."

She makes a noise like she's shocked. "I'm sorry," she says, "Did you say *reviews*? You read your restaurant reviews?"

"Every single one."

"*What?* Oh my God, you must not have a single insecurity. I make Serena run our social media so I can *avoid* reviews."

"Your reviews are great."

She practically turns her entire body toward me in the seat. "You read *my* reviews?"

“I read reviews for anyone I know who owns a business. Is that weird?”

“It’s not *not* weird.”

I flip on my blinker. “I like reading reviews. I feel like business reviews are a reflection of the owner, and I want to know what people think of my restaurants. The constructive criticism helps. I haven’t had the kitchen experience a lot of chefs have, and critics are some of the best teachers.”

“What do you get out of reading reviews about *other* people’s businesses?”

“Nothing, really. I just find it entertaining.”

“Do I have any bad ones?” Lily looks away from me, half turning so that she’s facing forward again. “Never mind, don’t answer that. I’m just going to pretend they’re all good and that everyone loves my flowers.”

“Everyone *does* love your flowers.”

She presses her lips together in an attempt to suppress her smile. “What’s your *least*-favorite part of your job?”

I love that she’s asking me such random questions. It reminds me of all the nights we would stay up late, and she would pepper me with questions about myself. “Up until last week, it was health inspections,” I admit. “They’re extremely stressful.”

“Why up until last week? What changed?”

“The vandalism.”

“Did it happen again?”

“Yeah, twice this week.”

“And you still have no idea who it is?”

I shake my head. “No clue.”

“Do you have any angry ex-girlfriends?”

“Nah, I doubt it. They don’t seem the type.”

Lily kicks off her heels and pulls one of her legs into her seat, making herself more comfortable. “How many serious relationships have you had?”

She’s going there. Okay. “Define ‘serious.’”

“I don’t know. More than two months?”

“One,” I say.

“How long were you together?”

“A little more than a year. I met her while I was in the military.”

“Why’d you break up?”

“We moved in together.”

“That’s why you broke up?”

“I think living together escalated the realization that we were incompatible. Or maybe we were just at different points in our lives. I was focused on my career, and her focus was on which outfits to wear to the clubs I was too tired to go to with her. When I got out of the military and moved back to Boston, she stayed behind and moved into a loft with two of her friends.”

Lily laughs. “I cannot picture you in a club.”

“Yeah. That’s why I’m single, I guess.” My phone rings with an incoming call from Corrigan’s, interrupting us before I’m able to throw her own question back at her. “I have to take this,” I say.

“Go ahead.”

I answer the call over Bluetooth. It ends up being a freezer issue that requires me to make two more phone calls before I’ve got it sorted out and a repair technician on the way there. When I’m finally able to give my attention back to

Lily, I glance over at her and find her asleep, her head limp against her shoulder. I hear a dainty snore coming from her.

The coffee never kicked in, I guess.

I let her sleep all the way to the restaurant. We pull in about ten minutes to seven. It's dark, and the restaurant looks crowded, but we have a few minutes before I have to check in for our reservation, so I let her rest.

Her snore is as endearing as she is. It's delicate, almost too light to hear. I take a quick video I can use to tease her with later, and then I reach into the backseat and grab her journal. I know she said not to read it in front of her, but technically I'm not. She's asleep.

I open it to the first page and begin reading.

I read the first entry, completely captivated. I feel like I'm breaking a rule reading this, but she's the one who brought it.

I read the second entry. Then the third. Then I log into my reservation app and cancel our reservation because unless I wake her up this very second, we're going to be late. I'd rather our table go to someone else, because Lily looks like she's been needing this sleep for a while.

And I want to read another entry. I'll take her somewhere else for dinner once she wakes up.

Every word she wrote is taking me right back to when we were teenagers. There are so many times I want to laugh at the things she says and how she says them, but I stifle my laughter so that I don't startle her.

I eventually read a passage that I'm almost positive is leading up to our first kiss. I look at the clock and we've already been sitting here for half an hour, but Lily is still sound

asleep, and I can't stop in the middle of this entry. I keep reading, hoping she stays asleep long enough for me to get to the end of this one.

"I need to tell you something," he said.

I held my breath, not knowing what he was going to say.

"I got in touch with my uncle today. My mom and I used to live with him in Boston. He told me once he gets back from his work trip I can stay with him."

I should have been so happy for him in that moment. I should have smiled and told him congratulations. But I felt all of the immaturity of my age when I closed my eyes and felt sorry for myself.

"Are you going?" I asked.

He shrugged. "I don't know. I wanted to talk to you about it first."

He was so close to me on the bed, I could feel the warmth of his breath. I also noticed he smelled like mint, and it made me wonder if he uses bottled water to brush his teeth before he comes over here. I always send him home every day with lots of water.

I brought my hand up to the pillow and started pulling at a feather sticking out of it. When I got it all the way out, I twisted it between my fingers. "I don't know what to say, Atlas. I'm happy you have a place to stay. But what about school?"

"I could finish down there," he said.

I nodded. It sounded like he had already made up his mind. "When are you leaving?"

I wondered how far away Boston is. It's probably a few hours, but that's a whole world away when you don't own a car.

"I don't know for sure that I am."

I dropped the feather back onto the pillow and brought my hand to my side. "What's stopping you? Your uncle is offering you a place to stay. That's good, right?"

He tightened his lips together and nodded. Then he picked up the feather I'd been playing with and he started twisting it between his fingers. He laid it back down on the pillow and then he did something I wasn't expecting. He moved his fingers to my lips and he touched them.

God, Ellen. I thought I was gonna die right then and there. It was the most I'd ever felt inside my body at one time. He kept his fingers there for a few seconds, and he said, "Thank you, Lily. For everything." He moved his fingers up and through my hair, and then he leaned forward and planted a kiss on my forehead. I was breathing so hard, I had to open my mouth to catch more air. I could see his chest moving just as hard as mine was. He looked down at me and I watched as his eyes went right to my mouth. "Have you ever been kissed, Lily?"

I shook my head no and tilted my face up to his because I needed him to change that right then and there or I wasn't gonna be able to breathe.

Then—almost as if I were made of eggshells—he lowered his mouth to mine and just rested it there. I didn't know what to do next, but I didn't care. I didn't care if we just stayed like that all night and never even moved our mouths, it was everything.

His lips closed over mine and I could kind of feel his hand shaking. I did what he was doing and started to move my lips like he was. I felt the tip of his tongue brush across my lips once and I thought my eyes were about to roll back in my head. He did it again, and then a third time, so I finally did it, too. When our tongues touched for the first time, I kind of smiled a little, because I'd thought about my first kiss a lot. Where it would be, who it would be with. Never in a million years did I imagine it would feel like this.

He pushed me on my back and pressed his hand against my cheek and kept kissing me. It just got better and better as I grew more comfortable. My favorite moment was when he pulled back for a second and looked down at me, then came back even harder.

I don't know how long we kissed. A long time. So long, my mouth started to hurt and my eyes couldn't stay open. When we fell asleep, I'm pretty sure his mouth was still touching mine.

We didn't talk about Boston again.

I still don't know if he's leaving.

—Lily

Wow.

Wow.

I close the journal and look over at Lily. She wrote our first kiss with so much detail, it makes me feel inferior to my teenage self.

Did it actually happen that way?

I remember that night, but I was a hell of a lot more

nervous than Lily described me to be. It's funny how, when you're a teenager, you think you're the only inexperienced, nervous human on the planet. You think almost every other teenager has life figured out way better than you do, but it isn't that way at all. We were both scared. And infatuated. And in love.

I had fallen in love with her long before our first kiss, though. I loved her more than I had ever loved anyone before that moment. I think I loved her more than I've ever loved anyone *after* that moment.

I think I still might.

There's so much Lily doesn't know about that part of my life. So much I want to tell her now that I've read her version of some of our time together. It's obvious she has no clue how instrumental she was in my life back then. At a time when everyone was turning their backs to me, Lily was the only one who stepped up.

She's still sound asleep, so I pull out my phone and open a blank note. I start typing, detailing what my life was like before she entered it. I don't mean to write as much as I do, but I guess I have a lot I want to say to her.

It's another twenty minutes before I finally finish typing everything, and another five minutes before Lily finally begins to rouse.

I set my phone in the cupholder, unsure if I'm going to allow her to read what I just wrote. I might wait a few days. A few weeks. She wants to take things slow, and I'm not sure what I said toward the end of that letter matches her idea of "slow."

Her hand goes up, and she scratches her head. She's fac-

ing the window, so I don't see it when her eyes open, but I can tell when she's awake because she sits straight up. She stares out her window for a beat, then swings her head in my direction. A few strands of hair are stuck to her cheek.

I'm leaning against my door, watching her casually, as if this is completely normal first-date behavior.

"Atlas." She says my name like it's an apology and a question at the same time.

"It's okay. You were tired."

She grabs her phone and looks at the time. "Oh my *God*." She leans forward, pressing her elbows into her thighs and her face into her palms. "I can't believe this."

"Lily, it's fine. Really." I hold up the journal. "You kept me company."

She eyes the journal and then groans. "This is *mortifying*."

I toss the journal into the backseat. "I personally found it enlightening."

Lily hits me playfully on my shoulder. "Stop laughing. I feel too bad for it to be funny."

"Don't feel bad, you're exhausted. And probably hungry. We could grab a burger on the drive back."

Lily falls dramatically against her seat. "Let the fancy chef take the girl for fast food since she slept through her date. Why not?" She flips the visor down and notices the hair stuck to her cheek. "Wow, I am such a *mom*. Is this our last date? It is. Did I ruin this already? I wouldn't blame you."

I put the car in reverse. "Not even close after everything I just read. Not sure anything could top this date."

"You have very low standards, Atlas."

I find her self-deprecation adorably attractive. “I have a question about your journal.”

“What?” She’s wiping away a smear of mascara. Everything about her seems so defeated now that she thinks she ruined our date. I can’t stop smiling, though.

“The night of our first kiss . . . did you put the blankets in the washer on purpose? Was that a trick to get me to sleep in your bed?”

She scrunches up her nose. “You read that far?”

“You were asleep for a long time.”

She contemplates my question, and then nods an admission. “I wanted you to be my first kiss back then, and that wouldn’t have happened if you kept sleeping on the floor.”

She’s probably right about that. And it worked.

It’s *still* working, because reading her description of our first kiss brought back every feeling she pulled out of me that night. She could sleep the entire way back home, and I’d still think this was the best date I’ve ever been on.

ATRIA
BOOKS

Chapter Twelve

Lily

“I can’t believe you let me sleep for that long.” It’s been ten minutes, and my stomach is still rolling from embarrassment. “Did you finish reading the whole journal?”

“I stopped after I read about our first kiss.”

That’s good. That’s not too embarrassing. But if he would have read about the first time we had sex while I was sleeping in the seat next to him, I’m not sure I could have recovered.

“This is so not fair,” I mutter. “You have to do something mortifying so the scales even out, because right now I feel like I’ve completely ruined our night.”

Atlas laughs. “You think me doing something to mortify myself will make you feel better about tonight?”

I nod. “Yes, that’s the law of the universe. Eye for an eye, humiliation for humiliation.”

Atlas taps his thumb on his steering wheel as he massages his jaw with his free hand. Then he nudges his head toward his phone, which is sitting in the cupholder. “Open the Notes app on my phone. Read the first one.”

Oh, wow. I was kidding, but I snatch up his phone so fast. “What’s your password?”

“Nine five nine five.”

I enter the numbers and then glance over his home screen while I have it open. Every app is tucked neatly into a folder. He has zero unread texts and one unread email. “You’re a neat freak. Who has *one* unread email?”

“I don’t like clutter,” he says. “Side effect of the military. How many unread emails do you have?”

“Thousands.” I open the Notes app and click on the most recent one. As soon as I see the two words at the top, I drop the phone, pressing it facedown on my thigh. “*Atlas*.”

“Lily.”

I can feel my embarrassment being swallowed up by a warm wave of anticipation falling over me. “You wrote me a *Dear Lily* letter?”

He nods slowly. “You were asleep for quite a while.” When he glances at me, his smile falters, like he’s worried about whatever it is he wrote. He faces forward again, and I can see the roll of his throat.

I lean my head against the passenger window and begin to read silently.

Dear Lily,

You’re going to be mortified when you wake up and realize you fell asleep on our first date. I’m a little too excited for your reaction. But you seemed so tired when I picked you up, it actually makes me happy to see you getting some rest.

This past week has been surreal, hasn’t it? I was beginning to think I may never be a part of your life in any significant way, and then poof, you show up.

I could go on and on about what that run-in meant to me, but I promised my therapist I'd stop saying cheesy shit to you. Don't worry, I plan on breaking that promise many times, but you asked if we could take things slow, so I'll give it a few more dates.

Instead, I think I'm going to steal a page from your playbook and talk about our past. It's only fair. You let me read some of your most intimate thoughts at such a vulnerable point in your life, I figure it's the least I can do to give you some insight into my life at that time.

My version is a little grittier, though. I'll try to spare you the worst of the details, but I'm not sure you can fully know what your friendship meant to me without knowing what I went through before you came along.

I told you some of it—about how I ended up in the position I was in, living in that abandoned house. But I had felt homeless a lot longer than that. My whole life, really, even though I had a house and a mother and, occasionally, a stepfather.

I don't remember what things were like when I was young. I have this fantasy that maybe she was a good mother once upon a time. I do remember a day trip we took to Cape Cod where we tried coconut shrimp for the first time, but if she was a decent mother outside of that one day, that one meal, that part of her never became a core memory for me.

My core memories were stretches of time spent alone, or just trying to stay out of her way. She was quick to anger and quick to respond. For the first ten or so years of my life, she was stronger and faster than me, so I had spent

the better part of a decade hiding from her hand, from her cigarettes, from the lash of her tongue.

I know she was stressed. She was a single mother working nights to try and provide for me, but as many excuses as I made for her back then, I've seen my fair share of single mothers navigate life just fine without resorting to the things my mother did.

You've seen my scars. I won't go into the details, but as bad as it was, it got even worse when she was on her third marriage. I was twelve when they met.

Little did I know, the age of twelve would be my only peaceful year. She was always gone because she was with him, and when she was home, she was actually in a decent mood because she was falling in love. Funny how love for a partner can make or break how some people treat their own children.

But twelve turned into thirteen turned into Tim moving in with us, and the next four years of my life were hell on earth. When I wasn't making my mother angry, I was making Tim angry. When I was home, I was being yelled at. When I was at school, the house was being destroyed by their fights, and I'd be expected to clean up after them when I got home.

Life with them was a nightmare, and by the time I was finally strong enough to take up for myself, that's when Tim decided he didn't want to live with me anymore.

My mother chose him. I was forced to leave. They didn't have to ask twice; I was more than ready to go, but that's because I had somewhere to go.

Until I didn't. I was gone three months before the

friend I was staying with moved with his family to Colorado.

At that point, I had no one and nowhere else to go, and no money to get there if I did, so I was forced to go back to my mother and ask if I could come back home.

I still remember the day I showed back up to that house. I had barely been gone three months, and the place was already falling apart. The yard hadn't been mowed since the last time I'd done it before being kicked out. All the window screens were missing, and there was a gaping hole where the doorknob used to be. By the looks of the place, you would think I'd been gone for years.

My mother's car was in the driveway, but Tim's wasn't. It looked like her car had been there for a while. The hood was propped open, and there were tools scattered near it, along with at least thirty beer cans someone had shaped in the form of a pyramid against the garage door.

Even the newspapers had piled up on the cracked concrete walkway. I remember picking them up and setting them on one of the old iron chairs to dry out before I knocked on the door.

It felt weird knocking on the door of a house I had lived in for years, but on the off chance Tim was home, I wasn't about to open the door without permission. I had a house key still, but Tim had made it very clear that he'd turn me in for trespassing if I ever tried to use it.

I couldn't have used it even if I wanted to. There was no doorknob.

I could hear someone making their way across the living room. The curtain on the small window at the top half

of the front door moved, and I saw my mother peek outside. She stared for a few seconds, unmoving.

She eventually opened the door a few inches. Far enough that I could see she was still in her pajamas at two o'clock in the afternoon, which was an oversized Weezer T-shirt one of her exes had left behind. I hated that shirt because I liked that band. Every time she wore it, she ruined them a little more for me.

She asked what I was doing there, and I didn't immediately want to give her my reasons. Instead, I asked her if Tim was home.

She opened the door a bit more and folded her arms so tightly together, it made one of the band members on her shirt look decapitated. She told me Tim was at work and asked what I wanted.

I asked her if I could come inside. She contemplated my question and then looked over my shoulder, her eyes scanning the street. I don't know what she was checking for. Maybe she was afraid a neighbor would witness her allowing her own son to visit.

She left the door open for me while she went to her bedroom to change. The house was eerily dark, I remember. All the curtains were drawn, creating a sense of confusion on what time of day it was. It didn't help that the clock on the stove was blinking, and time was off by over eight hours. If I still lived there, that's something else I would have fixed.

If I still lived there, the curtains would have been open. The kitchen counters wouldn't have been covered with dirty dishes. There wouldn't have been a missing doorknob, or an unkempt yard, or days' worth of soggy newspapers pil-

ing up. I realized in that moment that I was the one who had been keeping that house together all the years I was growing up.

It gave me hope. Hope that maybe they realized I was an asset rather than an inconvenience, and they would allow me to return home until I finished high school.

I saw a doorknob kit on the kitchen table, so I picked it up and inspected it. The receipt was beneath it. I looked at the date on the receipt, and it was purchased over two weeks prior.

The doorknob was the right fit for the front door. I didn't know why Tim hadn't installed it if he'd had it for two weeks, so I found the tools in a kitchen drawer and opened the package. It was several minutes before my mother came out of her room, but by the time she did, I already had the new doorknob in place on the front door.

She asked what I was doing, so I twisted the knob and opened the door a little to show her it worked.

I'll never forget her reaction. She sighed and said, "Why do you do shit like this? It's like you want him to hate you." She snatched the screwdriver out of my hand and said, "Maybe you should go before he realizes you were here."

Part of the reason I could never get along with anyone in that house was because their reactions always seemed misplaced. When I would help out around the house without being asked, Tim would say it was because I was antagonizing him. When I wouldn't help with something, he'd say it was because I was lazy and ungrateful.

"I'm not trying to upset Tim," I said. "I fixed your doorknob. I was just trying to help."

“He was going to do it as soon as he had the time.”

Part of Tim’s problem was that he always had the time. He never kept a job more than six months and spent more time gambling than he did with my mother.

“Did he get a job?” I remember asking her.

“He’s looking.”

“Is that where he is right now?”

I could see in her expression that Tim wasn’t out job hunting. Wherever he was, I was sure it was putting my mother even more in debt than she already was. Her debt was probably the straw that broke the camel’s back and got me kicked out in the first place. When I found a stash of maxed-out, past-due credit card bills in her name, I confronted Tim about them.

He didn’t like being confronted. He preferred the pre-teen version of me he met to the near adult I grew into. He liked the version of me he could push around without being pushed back. The version of me he could manipulate without me calling him out.

That version of me left between the ages of fifteen and sixteen. Once Tim realized he couldn’t threaten me physically anymore, he tried ruining my life in other ways. One of those ways was leaving me without a place to live.

I eventually swallowed my pride and came right out with it. I told my mother I had nowhere to go.

My mother’s expression wasn’t just void of empathy, it was full of annoyance. “I hope you aren’t asking to move back in after everything you did.”

“Everything I did? You mean when I called him out because his gambling addiction put you in debt?”

That's when she called me an asshole. Or ass whole, rather. She always said that word wrong.

I attempted to plead with her, but she quickly resorted to the person I was used to. She hurled the screwdriver at me. It was so sudden and unexpected because we weren't even arguing at that point, so I wasn't able to duck in time. It hit me right above my left eye, in the center of my eyebrow.

I rubbed my fingers across it, and they came away smeared with blood.

All I did was ask to move home. I didn't disrespect her. I didn't curse at her. I simply showed up and fixed her front door and tried to reason with her, and I ended up with a bloody gash.

I remember staring at my fingers, thinking, "Tim didn't do this. My mother did this."

For so long, I had blamed Tim for everything that went wrong in that household, but everything wrong with that household started with her. Tim simply amplified what was already an awful environment.

I remember thinking that I would rather be dead than back with her. Up until that moment, there was a part of me that still held something for her. I don't know if it was a sliver of respect, but I was somehow able to appreciate that she had kept me alive when I was younger. But isn't that the most basic thing a parent should do when they decide to bring a child into the world?

I realized at that point I had been giving her too much credit. I always blamed our lack of a bond on her being a single mother, but there were a lot of busy single mothers

out there who somehow still bonded with their children. Mothers who took up for their children when they were being mistreated. Mothers who wouldn't look the other way when their thirteen-year-old came away from a punishment with a black eye and a busted lip. Mothers who didn't allow their husbands to force their school-aged child into homelessness. Mothers who didn't throw screwdrivers at their children's heads.

Despite realizing what an uncaring human she truly was, I made one last attempt to pull humanity out of her. "Can I at least get some of my stuff before I leave?"

"You don't have anything," she said. "We needed the space."

I couldn't look at her after that. It was as if she wanted nothing more than to erase me from her life, so I vowed in that moment to help her do just that.

The blood was dripping into my eye when I was walking away from the house.

I can't tell you what the rest of that day was like. To feel so incredibly unwanted, unloved, alone. I had no one. Nothing. No money, no belongings, no family.

Just a wound.

We're impressionable when we're younger, and when you're told you are nothing for years on end by everyone you should mean something to, you start to believe it. And you slowly start to become nothing.

But then I met you, Lily. And even though I was nothing, when you looked at me, you somehow saw something. Something I couldn't see. You were the first person in my life to show an interest in who I was as a human. No one

had ever asked me questions about myself the way you did. After those few months I spent getting to know you, I stopped feeling like I was nothing. You made me feel interesting and unique. Your friendship gave me worth.

Thank you for that. Even if this date leads nowhere and we never speak again, I will always be grateful to you for somehow seeing something in me that my own mother was blind to.

You're my favorite person, Lily. And now you know why.

Atlas

My throat is so thick with burgeoning tears, I can't even verbally respond to what I just read. I set the phone on my leg and wipe at my eyes. I hate that he's driving right now, because if we were parked, I'd throw my arms around him and hug him tighter than he's ever been hugged. I'd probably kiss him, too, and pull him into the backseat, because no one has ever said such heartbreakingly sad things in such a sweet way to me before.

Atlas reaches across the seat and grabs his phone. He drops it back into the cupholder, but then he reaches for my hand. He threads his fingers through mine and squeezes my hand while staring straight ahead. That move causes a commotion in my chest. I wrap my other hand over the top of his, and holding hands like this reminds me of all the bus rides when we'd just sit in silence, sad and cold, holding on to each other.

I stare out the window, and he stares straight ahead, and neither of us says a word on our drive back to the city.

We stop and grab to-go burgers just two miles from my flower shop. Atlas knows I don't want Emerson to be up too far past her bedtime, so we eat in the parking lot of Lily Bloom's. Our conversation since getting back into the city and ordering burgers has been much lighter. It isn't lost on me that I'm not mortified anymore. Him being vulnerable with me seemed to be the reset button I needed for our date to get back on track.

We've been discussing all the places we've traveled. He has me beat by a long shot, considering the time he spent in the Marines. He's been to five different countries, and the only place I've been outside of the country is Canada.

"You've never even been to Mexico?" Atlas asks.

I wipe my mouth with a napkin. "Never."

"Did you and Ryle not have a honeymoon?"

Ugh. I hate the sound of his name in the middle of this date. "No, we eloped in Vegas. Didn't have time for a honeymoon."

Atlas takes a sip of his drink. When he looks at me, his eyes are piercing, like he's hoping to unpack the thoughts I'm not saying. "Did you want a wedding?"

I shrug. "I don't know. I knew Ryle never wanted to get married, so when he said we should go to Vegas and get married, I saw it as a window of opportunity that might close. I guess I felt like eloping was better than not marrying him at all."

"What if you get married again? You think you'll do it differently?"

I laugh at that question, and nod immediately. “Absolutely. I want it all. Flowers and bridesmaids and shit.” I pop a fry into my mouth. “And romantic vows, and an even more romantic honeymoon.”

“Where would you go?”

“Paris. Rome. London. I have no desire to sit on a hot beach somewhere. I want to see all the romantic places in Europe and make love in every city and take pictures kissing in front of the Eiffel Tower. I want to eat croissants and hold hands on trains.” I drop my empty container of fries into the sack. “What about you?”

Atlas reaches for my free hand, and he holds it. He doesn’t answer me. He just smiles at me and squeezes my hand, like what he wants is a secret that’s too soon to spill.

Holding his hand feels like such a natural thing. Maybe because we used to do this so much as teenagers, but sitting in this car with him and *not* holding his hand feels more out of place than holding hands does.

Even with the hitch I put into our date by falling asleep, the entire night has felt easy and comfortable. Being near him is second nature. I trace a finger over the top of his wrist. “I need to go.”

“I know,” he says, rubbing his thumb over mine. Atlas’s phone pings, so he reaches for it with his free hand and reads the incoming text. He sighs quietly, and the way he drops his phone back into the cupholder makes me think he’s irritated with whoever just texted him.

“Everything okay?”

Atlas forces a smile, but it’s a pathetic attempt. I see right through it, and he knows it. He breaks eye contact and looks

down at our hands. He flips mine over until it's faceup, and he begins to trace the lines in my palm. His finger feels like a lightning rod, zapping electricity from my hand throughout the rest of my body. "My mother called me last week."

That confession takes me aback. "What did she want?"

"I don't know, I ended the call before she could tell me, but I'm pretty sure she needs money."

I thread our hands together again. I don't know what to say to him. That has to be hard, not hearing from your mother for almost fifteen years, and then she finally reaches out when she needs something. It makes me so grateful that my mother is a huge part of my life.

"I didn't mean to drop that on you when you're in a hurry. We should save some conversation for our second date." He smiles at me, and it instantly flips the mood. It's remarkable how his smile can dictate the feelings occurring inside my own chest. "Come on, I'll walk you to your car."

I laugh because my car is literally two feet away. But Atlas rushes around the front of his car and opens my door, then helps me out. And then, with one step each, we're at my car.

"Fun walk," I tease.

He flashes a brief smile, and I don't know if he means for it to be seductive, but I'm suddenly warm all over, despite the cold weather. Atlas peeks over my shoulder, nudging his head toward my car. "Do you have more journals in there?"

"Just had the one on me."

"Shame," he says. He leans a shoulder against my car, so I do the same, facing him.

I have no idea if we're about to kiss. I wouldn't object,

but I also just ate onions after sleeping for over an hour, so I doubt my mouth is at its most appealing right now.

“Do I get a redo?” I ask.

“A redo of what?”

“This date. I’d like to be awake for the next one.”

Atlas laughs, but then his laugh dissipates. He stares at me for a beat. “I forgot how fun it is being around you.”

His words confuse me because *fun* is not what I would call our time together back then. It was sad, at best. “You think those times were fun?”

He lifts a shoulder in a half shrug. “I mean, it was the lowest point of my life, sure. But my memories with you from back then are still some of my favorites.”

His compliment makes me blush. I’m glad it’s dark.

But he’s right. It was a low point in both of our lives, but being with him was still somehow the highlight of my teenage years. I guess *fun* is the perfect way to describe what we made of it. And if we somehow had fun together at such a low point in both of our lives, it makes me wonder what we could be like at our highest.

It’s the exact opposite of the thoughts I had about Ryle last week. I’ve experienced the lowest of lows with Atlas, and he has never been anything but incredible and respectful to me. Yet, the man I chose to be my husband somehow disrespected me in ways no one deserves . . . all while we were at such a high point in our lives.

I’m grateful for Atlas because I know he’s the standard I now hold people to. He’s the standard I should have held Ryle to from the very beginning.

There’s a convenient gust of cold air that sweeps between

us. It would be the perfect excuse for Atlas to pull me to him, but he doesn't. Instead, the quietness builds between us until there's only one thing left to do. Either kiss or say goodnight.

Atlas brushes a strand of my hair from my forehead. "I'm not going to kiss you yet."

I hope my disappointment isn't obvious, but I know it is. I practically deflate in front of him. "Is it my punishment for falling asleep?"

"Of course not. I'm just feeling inferior after reading about our first kiss."

I sputter laughter. "Inferior to *who*? Yourself?"

He nods. "Teenage Atlas through your eyes was quite the charmer."

"So is adult Atlas."

He groans a little, like he already wants to change his mind about the kiss. The groan makes things feel a little more serious. He moves fluidly away from the car until he's standing right in front of me. I press my back against my car door and look up at him, hoping he's about to kiss the hell out of me.

"Also, you asked me to take things slow, so . . ."

Dammit. I did do that. I said very slow, if I remember correctly. I hate myself.

Atlas leans forward, and I close my eyes. I feel his breath scattering across my cheek right before he presses a quick kiss against the side of my head. "Goodnight, Lily."

"Okay."

Okay? Why did I say "okay"? I'm so flustered.

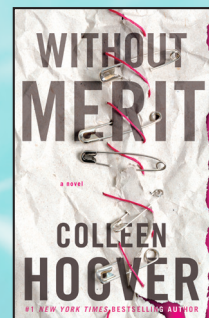
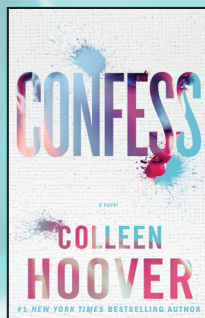
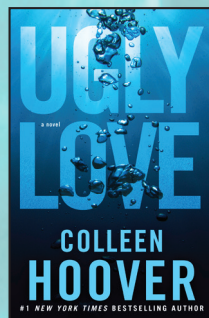
Atlas laughs softly. When I open my eyes, he's backing away from me, heading to the driver's side of his car. Before

he leaves, he rests his arm on the roof of the car and says, “I hope you get some sleep tonight.”

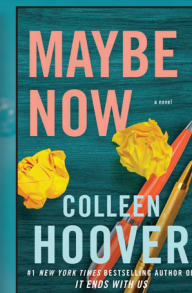
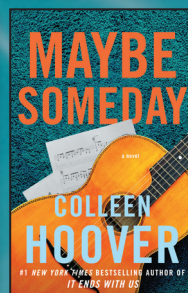
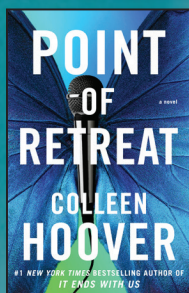
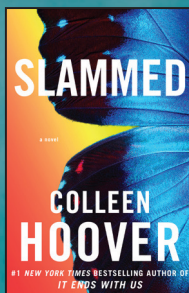
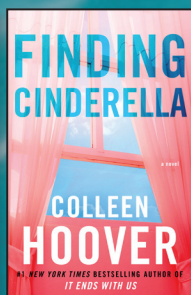
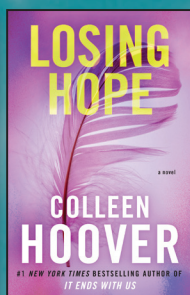
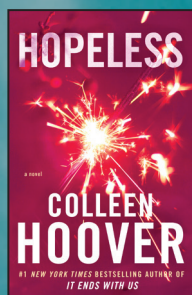
I nod, but I don’t know if that’s going to be possible. I feel like every bit of caffeine I’ve consumed today has just kicked in all at once. I won’t be able to sleep after this date. I’m going to be thinking about the letter he let me read. And when I’m not thinking about that, I’m going to be replaying our first kiss in my head all night long, wondering what part two is going to feel like.

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