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Finding Cinderella

Colleen Hoover



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you have to do is find what inspires you, which can be something as simple as a song lyric or a child's smile on stage. Then you have to make the long, brave effort, which can be as daunting as sitting down at a computer, facing a blank page, and not giving up until you reach the finish line.

Despite all the great experiences and accomplishments that have come after it, I still consider my proudest moment to be the first time I typed the words *The End*.

For that was my beginning.

Colleen Hoover

Finding Cinderella

Chapter One

ONE YEAR LATER

"Oh, my *God!*" I say, frustrated. "Lighten up." I crank the car just as Val climbs inside and slams her door in a huff, then pushes herself back against the seat.

As soon as she's inside the car, the overwhelming amount of perfume she has on begins to suffocate me. I crack the window, but just enough so that she won't think I'm insulting her. She knows how much perfume bothers me, especially when chicks smell like they bathe in it, but she never seems to care what I think, because she continues to douse it on by the gallon.

"You're so immature, Daniel," she mutters. She flips the visor down and pulls her lipstick from her purse, then begins to reapply it. "I'm beginning to wonder if you'll *ever* change."

Change?

What the hell is *that* supposed to mean?

"Why would I change?" I ask, cocking my head out of curiosity.

She sighs and drops her lipstick back into her purse, smacks her lips together, then turns toward me. "So you're telling me you're happy with the way you act?"

What?

With the way *I* act? Is she really commenting on the way *I* act? The same girl I've seen curse at waitresses for something as simple as too much ice in her glass is seriously commenting on the way *I* act?

I've been seeing her off and on for months now and I haven't had

a single clue that she was hoping I would eventually change. Hoping I'd become someone I'm not.

Come to think of it, I keep getting back together with her, thinking *she'll* be the one to change. To be *nice* for once. In reality, people are who they are and they'll never really change. So why the hell are Val and I even wasting our time on this exhausting relationship if we don't even really like who the other is?

"I didn't think so," she says smugly, incorrectly assuming my silence was admission that I'm not happy with how I act. In actuality, my silence was the moment of clarity I've needed since the day I met her.

I remain silent until we pull into her driveway. I leave the car running, indicating that I have no plans on going inside with her tonight.

"You're leaving?" she asks.

I nod and stare out the driver's side window. I don't want to look at her, because I'm a guy and she's hot and I know if I look at her, then my moment of clarity regarding our relationship will become foggy and I'll end up inside her house, making up with her on her bed like I always do.

"You aren't the one who gets to be mad, Daniel. You acted ridiculous tonight. And in front of my parents, no less! How do you expect them to ever approve of you if you act the way you do?"

I have to exhale a slow, calming breath so that I don't raise my voice like she's doing right now. "How do I act, Val? Because I was myself at dinner tonight, just like I'm myself every other minute of the day."

"Exactly!" she says. "There's a time and a place for your stupid nicknames and immature antics and dinner with my parents isn't the time *or* the place!"

I rub my hands over my face out of frustration, then I turn and

look at her. "This is me," I say, gesturing toward myself. "If you don't like all of me, then we've got serious issues, Val. I'm not changing and honestly, it wouldn't be fair of me to ask you to change, either. I would never ask you to pretend to be something you're not, which is exactly what you're asking of me right now. I'm *not* changing, I'll *never* change and I would really like it if you would get the hell out of my car right now because your perfume is making me fucking nauseous."

Her eyes narrow and she grabs her purse off the console and pulls it toward her. "Oh, that's nice, Daniel. Insult my perfume to get back at me. See what I mean? You're the epitome of immature." She opens the car door and unbuckles her seatbelt.

"Well at least I'm not asking you to *change* your perfume," I say mockingly.

She shakes her head. "I can't do this anymore," she says, getting out of the car. "We're done, Daniel. For good this time."

"Thank *God*," I say loud enough for her to hear me. She slams her door and marches toward her house. I roll down her window to air out the perfume and I back out of the driveway.

Where the hell is Holder? If I don't get to complain to someone about her, I'll fucking scream.

• • •

I climb into Sky's window and she's sitting on the floor, rummaging through pictures. She looks up and smiles as I make my way into her room. "Hey, Daniel," she says.

"Hey, Cheese Tits," I say as I drop down onto her bed. "Where's your hopeless boyfriend?"

She nudges her head toward her bedroom door. "They're in the kitchen making ice cream. You want some?"

"Nah," I say. "I'm too heartbroken to eat anything right now."

"Val having a bad day?"

“Val’s having a bad *life*,” I say. “And after tonight I’ve finally realized I don’t want to be a part of it.”

She raises her eyebrows. “Oh, yeah? Sounds serious this time.”

I shrug. “We broke up an hour ago. And who’s *they*?”

She shoots me a confused look, so I clarify my question. “You said *they* were in the kitchen making ice cream. Who’s *they*?”

Sky opens her mouth to answer me when her bedroom door swings open and Holder walks in with two bowls of ice cream in his hands. A girl is following behind him with her own bowl of ice cream and a spoon hanging out of her mouth. She pulls the spoon from her lips and kicks the bedroom door shut with her foot, then turns toward the bed and stops when she sees me.

She looks vaguely familiar, but I can’t place her. Which is odd because she’s cute as hell and I feel like I should probably know her name or remember where I’ve seen her, but I don’t.

She walks to the bed and sits down on the opposite end of it, eyeing me the whole time. She dips her spoon into her ice cream, then puts the spoon back in her mouth.

I can’t stop staring at that spoon. I think I love that spoon.

“What are you doing here?” Holder asks. I regretfully take my eyes off the Ice Cream Girl and watch as he takes a seat on the floor next to Sky and picks up a few of the pictures.

“I’m done with her, Holder,” I say, stretching my legs out in front of me on the bed. “For good. She’s fucking crazy.”

“But I thought that’s why you loved her,” he says mockingly.

I roll my eyes. “Thanks for the insight, Dr. Shitmittens.”

Sky takes one of the pictures out of Holder’s hands. “I think he’s actually serious this time,” she says to him. “No more Val.” Sky tries to look sad for my sake, but I know she’s relieved. Val never really fit in with the two of them. Now that I think about it, she never really fit in with me, either.

Holder looks up at me curiously. “Done for good? Really?” He sounds oddly impressed.

“Yeah, *really*, really.”

“Who’s Val?” Ice Cream Girl asks. “Or better yet, who are *you*?”

“Oh, my bad,” Sky interrupts. She points back and forth between Ice Cream Girl and me. “Six, this is Dean’s best friend, Daniel. Daniel, this is my best friend, Six.”

I’ll never get used to hearing Sky call him Dean, but her introduction gives me an excuse to look over at that spoon again. Six pulls it out of her mouth and points it at me. “Nice to meet you, Daniel,” she says.

How in the hell can I steal that spoon before she leaves?

“Why does your name sound familiar?” I ask her.

She shrugs. “I dunno. Maybe because six is a fairly common number? Either that or you’ve heard of what a raging whore I am.”

I laugh. I don’t know why, though, because her comment really wasn’t funny. It was actually a little disturbing. “No, that’s not it,” I say, still confused as to why her name sounds so familiar. I don’t think Sky has ever mentioned her in front of me before.

“The party last year,” Holder says, forcing me to look at him again. I’m pretty sure I roll my eyes when I have to look away from her, but I don’t mean to. I’d just much rather stare at her than at Holder. “Remember?” he says. “It was the week I got back from Austin and a few days before I met Sky. The night Grayson pummeled you on the floor for saying you took Sky’s virginity?”

“Oh, you mean the night you pulled me off of him before I even got the chance to kick his ass?” It still irritates me just thinking about it. I could have had him if Holder hadn’t stepped in.

“Yeah,” Holder confirms. “Jaxon mentioned something that night about Sky and Six, but I didn’t know who they were at the time. I think that’s where you heard her name.”

“Wait, wait, wait,” Sky says, waving her hands in the air and looking at me like I’m crazy. “What do you mean Grayson pummeled you because you said you took my *virginity*? What the *hell*, Daniel?”

Holder puts a reassuring hand on Sky’s lower back. “It’s cool, babe. He just said it to piss Grayson off because I was about to kick the idiot’s ass for the way he was talking about you.”

Sky is shaking her head, still confused. “But you didn’t even know me. You just said it was a few days before you met me, so why would you be pissed that Grayson was talking shit about me?”

I stare at Holder, too, waiting for his answer. I never thought about it then, but that is odd that he was pissed over Grayson’s comments when he didn’t even know Sky at the time.

“I didn’t like how he was talking about you,” he says, leaning in to kiss Sky on the side of the head. “It made me think he probably talked about Les the same way and it pissed me off.”

Shit. Of course he would think that. Now I *really* wish he had let me kick Grayson’s ass that night.

“That’s sweet, Holder,” Six says. “You were protecting her before you even knew her.”

Holder laughs. “Oh, you don’t know the half of it, Six.”

Sky looks up at him and they smile at each other, almost like they have some sort of secret, then they both turn their attention back to the pictures on the floor in front of them.

“What are those?” I ask, inquiring about the pictures they’re looking through.

“For the yearbook,” Six says, answering me. She sets the bowl of ice cream on the bed beside her, then pulls her feet up and sits cross-legged. “Apparently we’re supposed to submit pictures of ourselves as kids for the senior page, so Sky is going through the pics Karen gave her.”

“You go to the same school as us?” I ask, referring to the fact that she included herself in the explanation of the assignment. I know we go to a huge school, but I have a feeling I would remember her, especially if she’s Sky’s best friend.

“I haven’t been to that school since junior year,” she says. “But I’ll be there once Monday rolls around.” She says it like she’s not at all looking forward to it.

I can’t help but smile at her reply, though. I wouldn’t mind having to see this girl on a recurring basis. “So does that mean you’ll be joining our lunchroom alliance?” I lean forward and grab the bowl of ice cream she didn’t finish. I pull it to me and take a bite.

She watches me as I close my lips around the spoon and pull it out of my mouth. She scrunches up her nose, staring at the spoon. “I could have herpes, you know,” she says.

I grin at her and wink. “You somehow just made herpes sound appealing.”

She laughs, but her bowl is suddenly ripped from my hands by Holder and he’s pulling me off the bed. My feet hit the floor and he shoves me toward the window. “Go home, Daniel,” he says, releasing his grip on my shirt as he lowers himself back to the floor next to Sky.

“What the *hell*, man?” I yell.

Seriously, though. *What the hell?*

“She’s Sky’s best friend,” he says, waving a hand in Six’s direction. “You’re not allowed to flirt with her. If the two of you mess around it’ll just cause tension and make things weird and I don’t want that. Now leave and don’t come back until you can be around her without having the perverted thoughts I know are going through your head right now.”

For the first time in my life, I think I’m actually speechless. Perhaps I should nod and agree with him, but the idiot just made the biggest mistake he could possibly make.