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WOMAN DOWN

A novel

COLLEEN
HOOVER

 Montlake

story. I've changed the title and some character names and locations, added scenes, added and changed characters, and even written in new little twists here and there that had no room in the short version. I wanted those of you who have already read it to get what felt like an entirely new and different book with the same underlying story and tones as the short story. I genuinely enjoyed every single second of bringing it to life in this new, complete form.

Just please keep in mind that while writers do take from their own lives, and some of the themes may mirror those of my own life in ways, this is in no way a replica of my journey or my morals, nor is it a reflection of how I feel about my peers or this industry. This is simply a fun journey the characters took me on and nothing more. Please, I beg of you, do not try to make ties between my personal life and this story, as there are none. I'm just a writer writing about a writer—I am in no way advocating for or defending the character's behavior or thoughts.

It was a joy to put a new spin on "Saint." I hope you're ready to get dizzy and enjoy this fun, sexy, sometimes creepy thrill of a ride!

With so much love,
Colleen Hoover

CHAPTER ONE

"Hey, hey! Kellie here. Your fiction therapist with a minor in messy behavior. Welcome back to *And What Now, Readers?* The podcast where your favorite book drama gets lovingly dissected and lightly roasted."

"And I'm Micah, your literary, and sometimes television, gossip sommelier."

"*Sommelier?*" Kellie laughs. "You don't even drink wine."

"Who needs alcohol when you can get drunk on shit like we have for you today?"

"Oh, I love how spicy this is," Kellie adds.

"It's more than spicy. It's full-on scorched earth. We're talking about Petra Rose today, darling of book clubs and Tumblr mood boards, whose reputation has erupted into literary flames."

"And if you somehow missed it while scrolling your feed, or, I don't know, *breathing*, the internet has *completely* turned on the formerly adored author. And not gently," Kellie says.

"Nope. The international bestselling author of *A Terrible Thing*—"

"That's probably the worst book title of all time," Kellie interrupts.

"Truly," Micah says. "It's like she was asking for this backlash. *Begging* for it. Anyway, the novel basically launched a thousand

#TeamAsh-versus-#TeamCaleb debates. It was at the center of total fandom fallout in the best way. Until it wasn't. Kellie, want to do the short-recap honors before we announce our surprise guest?"

"Well, it won't be short, but my pleasure. Let's rewind for those of you new to the alphabet. *A Terrible Thing* is, by readers' standards, not such a terrible book. It is a deeply emotional and beautifully crafted novel about Elise and her journey through love, trauma, identity, along with a pinch of fun. You get a little bit of everything in this realistic romance, so it's honestly shocking how huge the book got without it having a single dragon or wizard. But it's because it wasn't just sexy, cheap romance. It was character development, moral complexity, fan fiction GOLD."

"We get it. You liked it. Get to the good stuff," Micah says.

"It used to be my favorite book," Kellie says defensively.

"It can still be your favorite book."

"Not after this," Kellie says. "Okay, so the love triangle. Elise, Ash, and Caleb. You'd truly have to have been on a five-year trek in the jungle not to have at least seen an Ash-and-Caleb meme. Whole subreddits were devoted to that emotional tug-of-war. But then? Then the movie adaptation happened."

Micah groans. "Calling that an adaptation is a stretch."

Kellie says, "But this adaptation had promise and a high budget. It was a majorly hyped-up movie that the studio and author were being very oddly hush hush about. We weren't even getting cast updates, outside of two of the main characters. There was zero mention of our beloved character Caleb. He was nowhere to be found when the trailer dropped. Just—*poof*. And that was enough to almost start a war when the trailer dropped without a single clip of him in it. But people still showed up for the movie despite the early concerns spreading throughout TikTok."

"And the concerns expressed on this podcast," Micah says. "You talked about it every day."

"Fine, I was team Caleb. Anyway. They CUT him. Cut the entire triangle. Restructured the story to make it all about Ash and his connection with Elise. And fans were not happy. Not even team Ash fans, because what the hell were they supposed to do with all the merch the author sold them? Team Ash wasn't even a thing that made sense after that monstrosity of a movie. It made it seem like wearing a #TeamAsh shirt meant you were not team Elise, but we were *all* team Elise. We were betrayed, Micah. BETRAYED."

"Yes, like screaming-in-the-rain-while-covered-in-red-wine-stains levels of betrayed," he says.

"Let's not discuss that night. I was upset."

They both laugh.

"Okay, okay," Kellie says. "We all know how Hollywood works and how most authors don't get a say in how their adaptations turn out. There are a lucky few who do, but for the majority, it's not up to them. And Petra initially took that classic 'don't blame me' route. She posted to Insta with something like '*Hey, besties, I had no creative control. I was just as shocked as you all were.*'"

"And honestly, we were so ready to believe her," Micah says. "For about five seconds. Until—*cue dramatic music*—an old text exchange leaked between Petra and one of the producers. Not only did she know about the change, she *liked* it."

"Yes, what was it she said in that conversation?" Kellie asks.

"I have it here. I shall read it," Micah says. "*You're right, there's a lot out there about him being unrealistic. I'm fine with that character being cut. Might make it a stronger film with Caleb and the love triangle out.*"

"That '*stronger film with Caleb out*' line sent people into orbit," Kellie says. "Like, *stronger?* STRONGER? You don't just erase half an entire fandom and call it a decluttering session!"

"The backlash was immediate," Micah says. "TikTok, Reddit, X—*formerly Twitter but let's be real, still just Twitter*—all blew up with hashtags like #CancelPetra and #ATerribleAdaptation and

#ATerribleAuthor. Which is why I stand behind *A Terrible Thing* being the worst novel title ever. Too easy to roast.”

“So easy,” Kellie says. “And now there are fans literally burning their copies of *A Terrible Thing*. We are in a full literary rebellion. They feel personally betrayed, *as do I*. She lied to us. She chose the industry over the intimacy that made her book matter, and the fandom that made her a star. She erased everything that made us love this book in the first place. And then blamed it on a few critiques she received, despite hundreds of thousands of readers who praised it.”

“Oof. That hit like a Caleb monologue in chapter twenty-eight.”

“Don’t talk about that monologue, Micah. I’ll cry literal tears.”

“My bad. But it was such a good monologue. Would have been great to SEE ON THE BIG SCREEN, HOLLYWOOD PEOPLE WHO ARE LISTENING TO THIS!”

“There aren’t any Hollywood people listening to us, Micah. We have two thousand subscribers.”

“Two thousand loyal listeners who we would never betray like Petra did her readers.”

“And look at how it turned out for her. She focused on the few who didn’t matter and now has even the most loyal supporters turning their backs. She flipped on us all. It makes me wonder if Petra Rose even believes in her characters or if she’s embarrassed by her own writing.”

“Well, she has been quiet,” Micah says. “Not a single social media post in almost a year, outside her own fan club.”

“Which I hear is dwindling. I wouldn’t know, I left that fan club six months ago,” Kellie says.

“Hopefully the silence is a sign that she’s studying how to write a storyline that she actually *believes* in. Which is wild, considering this is the same author whose lines people literally tattooed onto their bodies.”

“Speaking of, I’ve seen a few videos of people having her quotes removed,” Kellie says.

“Sad. We used to quote her and now we just . . . *hate* her.”

“*Hate* is a strong word,” Kellie says.

“This is an honest podcast.”

“True. We hate her. So much so, we’ve pulled a million strings and rescheduled three other bookings to bring you this special guest today. Not sure why he agreed to our little podcast, but we couldn’t be more appreciative. We might even climb to two thousand and one subscribers after this.”

“Yes, dream big,” Micah says. “Ladies and gentleman, we welcome you to join us in conversation with none other than Allister Jones, the producer of *A Terrible Thing*.”

“He’s not quite off the hook for that adaptation, but at least he’s brave enough to talk about it. Welcome, Allister!”

“Thank you so much for having me,” Allister says. “That was quite the recap.”

Fuck.

That.

Guy.

I turn off the podcast as soon as I hear his voice. My heart is pounding so hard and my stomach is churning.

I have to pull my car over to the side of the road because I feel very close to puking.

“Oh, God.” My fingers are trembling on the steering wheel. I move my hand to the door in search of the button to roll down the window. As soon as it’s far enough down for my head to stick out, I breathe in the fresh, pine-scented air and close my eyes, repeating slow breaths until my stomach begins to ease.

I can’t believe I actually thought exposure therapy would help me heal.

Listening to that podcast just now was the worst few minutes I’ve lived through since my texts with Allister leaked.

I open my eyes and lean my head back against the headrest. I inhale a few slow breaths, attempting not to focus on the fact that Allister is probably out there doing a tour of podcasts and interviews, and I’m

being forced to shut myself away in a grimy cabin and write a book I've been attempting to write since this whole movie fiasco started, just so I don't lose my house now that my sales have taken a nosedive.

"You did nothing wrong," I say to myself as I pull slowly back onto the highway. "You did nothing wrong. What the world thinks of you isn't who you are."

I've repeated this mantra since Nora made me promise to say it at least five times a day. But I just feel like I'm repeating a lie out loud, and that feeling doesn't leave me refreshed and ready to skip along and tackle my day.

I've been unable to function since all this started. I feel like a fraud. I feel like everything I've built has crashed down around me and I'm buried in rubble that no one even cares to dig through because they aren't even curious if I'm suffocating to death. They only want to know who will show up at my funeral after I *do* suffocate to death.

I wonder who would show up at my funeral. I have friends and family who would be there, but I realize now that all the "friends" I've made in my years of being in the book world weren't friends at all. Other than Nora, everyone has ghosted me. And I don't blame them. They can see that my reputation has tanked my sales, so any sort of public support my way might fuel TikToks that would tank *their* sales. This is a career, and as much as I've always hoped the friends I've made in this career would also be my friends outside this career, I'm beginning to realize we're all just unhappy coworkers trying to survive until we retire.

I've been driving for two hours now, the white lines of the highway blurring into an endless ribbon beneath my tires. I'm still not entirely sure if I'm running toward the sanctuary of the cabin or fleeing from the chaos of everything else. It's always a little of both, I suppose, a blend of aspiration and desperation. But I've never felt such an urgent need to escape my real life, to shed its skin and step into something new, as I do right now. My deepest desire is to dive headfirst into writing this

book, to immerse myself so completely that not a single person or event from the outside world can penetrate the walls of my fictional creation.

My anxiety is at an all-time high, and writing is truly the only thing that eases it.

I just hope it works this time. This feeling of urgency, this desperate hope that I can redeem myself, won't go away unless I reach that cabin and commit myself entirely.

Writer's block clamped down on me like a suffocating trap that arrived precisely when my name started appearing in articles beyond the literary sphere.

It's a cruel irony, isn't it? One person's dream of widespread recognition can so easily become another's nightmare.

My phone vibrates in the cup holder, its screen flashing with yet another notification that induces my anxiety. I turned off notifications for social media after the vitriol began. The digital world, once a platform for connection, has become a relentless antagonist, and the only way to silence it is to cut myself off from it.

At least it means when I do get a notification, it's actually from someone who wants to talk *to* me and not *about* me.

I'm relieved to see Nora's name as the one flashing across the phone screen. I swipe it with my finger, and the call picks up over the car speakers.

"I hope you're calling to tell me you have extra Adderall and you're mailing me some," I blurt out.

"First of all," Nora says, "you don't have ADHD. *I* do. And second, you don't need drugs. You need intense therapy and a good fuck." She pauses. "From someone who isn't me. That was a suggestion, not an offer."

"Darn and darn," I sigh. "Well, you called at a good time."

"Why? Another panic attack?"

"I was listening to *And What Now, Readers?*"

"Petra! Goddammit."

I groan. "I *know*."

"That's why I was calling. I wanted you to avoid today's episode."

"But you told me exposure therapy would be good. I was exposing."

"I just meant exposure to going back on social media. Making a post. I didn't mean you should dig up everyone talking shit about you and listen to it all. *Good God*. I'm your friend, not Satan."

"So you listened?"

"I had to turn it off when Allister McFuckity Fuckface came on."

"Yeah, me too. I pulled over for a bit when I heard he was the guest. Felt like I was about to puke."

"I'm sorry. You almost to the rental?"

"Ten minutes away."

"Are you sure this is a good idea?" Nora's voice crackles through the speaker.

"Is what a good idea? Me, alone in the woods, trying to recover after being digitally flayed by the entire internet?" I keep my eyes on the road. Pines blur past, getting larger and more condensed until they begin to feel like they're threatening to swallow my car.

"It's not the *whole* internet," Nora says. "Just the vocal fringe with a financial agenda."

"Oh, right. The people making death threats were vetted and just deemed money hungry. I forgot." I smile despite myself.

"These people don't know you. They threatened to boil your dog, Petra. You don't even *have* a dog."

"Exactly. They'll probably buy me a new puppy and have it delivered to me with a cute bow and let me fall in love with it and *then* boil it."

The signal fades for a second and her voice becomes robotic, then cuts out altogether. "Goddammit." I pick my phone up and move it to the dash like that's somehow going to make for a better signal.

". . . serious," she says, her voice returning mid-sentence. "You've got a career, still. Sort of. You could write a groveling apology post in

your notes app and post it to Instagram with those cute little heart hands and like one or two crying emojis."

"I'm not writing an apology to people who don't know the whole story but choose to take sides regardless."

She sighs. "Well, you have to get back online if you want to save your career. Maybe say your piece on a podcast."

"I can climb my way out of this hole without stooping to Allister's level. That's why I'm going to the cabin to write. I'll get revenge with my pen."

There's a long pause. "But . . . you use a laptop. Not a pen."

"*Pen* sounded more threatening."

"You're right. Revenge with your pen. Write the whole story and publish it as a work of fiction. It'll be a good outlet. Call me later when you're settled. I have an idea."

"No, I hate your ideas," I say.

"But it's actually a good one this time. I promise."

"Fine."

"Don't turn on another podcast. Listen to some Brudi Brothers or something. I love you."

"Love you too."

When I end the call, the podcast automatically cues back up. "She wasn't the easiest to work with," Allister says.

The words wash over me like boiling water over ice. I turn off the podcast again and focus on the road curving ahead of me. "Neither were you, Allister McFuckity Fuckface."

I don't hate a lot of people, but Allister is at the top of my list. And the bottom. And the middle.

He's my entire list, actually.

I slow down when my GPS tells me my turn is coming up. Somewhere down this road a cabin is waiting for me, along with a blank screen, a lot of silence, and hopefully whatever is still salvageable of my creativity.

CHAPTER TWO

I don't know that any part of my creativity will be salvageable if there are neighbors. I avoid booking places with neighbors, but there's a house on the same road as the cabin I'm staying in.

I looked up the satellite images for this place before I booked it just to make sure it's not near another cabin. I don't want to have to listen to someone else's loud children screaming at all hours of the day and night. The place where I'm staying looked to be secluded on this road, so I didn't notice the other cabin. It was probably swallowed up in trees when Google took the image.

The cabin I booked is tucked away at the end of the mile-long road I'm on, so I'm relieved to see they aren't right next door to each other. There's at least a quarter of a mile that separates the driveways.

I prefer no traffic and no neighbors. I get distracted easily. The fewer people I see and the fewer conversations I'm forced to have, the more focused I can be. I once booked a writing retreat and met the neighbors before I even made it in the front door. It was a group of women on a girls' weekend, and I ended up getting drunk with them every night and not getting a bit of work done.

It's not always a bad distraction, but any distraction would feel like a negative one this time around, considering I have so much riding on meeting this deadline.

Which is why I audibly groan as I reach the end of the driveway and see a human. A living, breathing human on the front porch of the property I'm pulling into.

With all the advancements in technology, there is absolutely zero reason the rental host for this cabin should be meeting me in person, but here he is. I don't even know him, and I already find him the most irritating thing in the world.

I take that back.

The shape of corgis is pretty damn irritating. There's something about a corgi that's just . . . *unfinished*. It's as if God started making the dog breed and walked away from them when he was only halfway into the design, leaving them in this weird limbo. Their bodies are too long for their stumpy legs, their heads too big for the rest of their bodies, like they might face-plant with every step. Anytime I see one, I can't help but feel like it's a cosmic mistake walking around on four legs.

If there were a corgi at this guy's feet, I'd question whether I had died and gone to hell.

The man's grin stretches, and I half expect his face to split open as if it can't quite contain all his teeth. There's a bounce in his step that reminds me of someone who's far too eager to please, as if he's trying to sell me on this booking that I paid for months ago.

Why am I in such a bad mood?

Oh yeah. The podcast.

I wipe the frown away as I put my car in park and grab my phone. I also bring my key chain with me—the one with the Mace on it. I've never had to use it, but I'm also rarely in situations where I'm alone with strangers.