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UNBOUND

finding
CINDERELLA

#1 *New York Times* Bestselling Author

COLLEEN HOOVER

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Finding Cinderella

A Novella

Colleen Hoover

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NEW YORK LONDON TORONTO SYDNEY NEW DELHI

For Stephanie and Craig.
Fist bump.

Note to the Reader

For fans of *Hopeless* and *Losing Hope* who fell in love with Six and Daniel, a free novella about the search for happily ever after. And for those who have yet to read the *Hopeless* series, this novella can be read as a standalone.

Acknowledgments

I can't count how many times I've been told I was insane for giving this novella away for free. Maybe so, but I've never been more excited about a release as I have been for this one. I'm so thankful to be able to show my gratitude to all the readers who have supported me over the past two crazy years. This novella is for you, for completely changing my life.

Prologue

“You got a tattoo?”

It’s the third time I’ve asked Holder the same question, but I just don’t believe it. It’s out of character for him. Especially since I’m not the one who encouraged it.

“Jesus, Daniel,” he groans on the other end of the line. “Stop. And stop asking me why.”

“It’s just a weird thing to tattoo on yourself. *Hopeless*. It’s a very depressing term. But still, I’m impressed.”

“I gotta go. I’ll call you later this week.”

I sigh into the phone. “God, this sucks, man. The only good thing about this entire school since you moved is fifth period.”

“What’s fifth period?” Holder asks.

“Nothing. They forgot to assign me a class, so I hide out in this maintenance closet every day for an hour.”

Holder laughs. I realize as I’m listening to it that it’s the first time I’ve heard him laugh since Les died two months ago. Maybe moving to Austin will actually be good for him.

The bell rings and I hold the phone with my shoulder and fold up my jacket, then drop it to the floor of the maintenance closet. I flip off the light. “I’ll talk to you later. Nap time.”

“Later,” Holder says.

I end the call and set my alarm for fifty minutes later, then place my phone on the counter. I lower myself to the floor and lie down. I close my eyes and think about how much this year sucks. I hate that Holder

is going through what he's having to go through and there isn't a damn thing I can do about it. No one that close to me has ever died, much less someone as close as one of my sisters. A *twin* sister to be exact.

I don't even try to offer him advice, but I think he likes that. I think he needs me to just continue being myself, because God knows everyone else in this whole damn school has no clue how to act around him. If they weren't all such stupid assholes he'd probably still be here and school wouldn't suck half as bad as it does.

But it does suck. Everyone in this place sucks and I hate them all. I hate everybody but Holder and they're the reason he isn't here anymore.

I stretch my legs out in front of me and cross my ankles, then fold my arm over my eyes. At least I have fifth period.

Fifth period is nice.

• • •

My eyes flick open and I groan when something lands on me. I hear the sound of the door slam shut.

What the hell?

I place my hands on whatever just fell on me and begin to roll it off me when my hands graze a head full of soft hair.

It's a human?

A girl?

A chick just fell on me. In the maintenance closet. And she's crying.

"Who the hell are you?" I ask cautiously. Whoever she is, she tries to push off me but we both seem to be taking turns moving in the same direction. I lift up and try to roll her to my side but our heads crash together.

"Shit," she says.

I fall back onto my makeshift pillow and grab my forehead. “Sorry,” I mumble.

Neither one of us moves this time. I can hear her sniffing, trying not to cry. I can’t see two inches in front of me because the light is still out but I suddenly don’t mind that she’s still on top of me because she smells incredible.

“I think I’m lost,” she says. “I thought I was walking into the bathroom.”

I shake my head, even though I know she can’t see it. “Not a bathroom,” I say. “But why are you crying? Did you hurt yourself when you fell?”

I feel her whole body sigh on top of me and even though I have no idea who she is or what she looks like, I can feel the sadness in her and it makes me a little sad in return. I’m not sure how it happens, but my arms go around her and her cheek falls against my chest. In the course of five seconds we go from extremely awkward to kind of comfortable, like we do this all the time.

It’s weird and normal and hot and sad and strange and I don’t really want to let go. It feels sort of euphoric, like we’re in some sort of fairytale. Like she’s Tinkerbell and I’m Peter Pan.

No, wait. I don’t want to be Peter Pan.

Maybe she can be like Cinderella and I’ll be her Prince Charming.

Yeah, I like that fantasy better. Cinderella’s hot when she’s all poor and sweaty and slaving over the stove. She also looks good in her ball gown. It also doesn’t hurt that we’re meeting in a broom closet. Very fitting.

I feel her pull a hand up to her face, more than likely wiping away a tear. “I hate them,” she says softly.

“Who?”

“Everybody,” she says. “I hate everybody.”

I close my eyes and lift my hand, then run it down her hair, doing my best to comfort her. *Finally, someone who actually gets it.* I'm not sure why she hates everybody but I have a feeling she's got a pretty valid reason.

"I hate everybody too, Cinderella."

She laughs softly, probably confused as to why I just referred to her as Cinderella. Whatever just made her laugh, at least it's not more tears. Her laugh is intoxicating and I try to think of how I can get her to do it again. I'm trying to think of something funny to say when she lifts her face off my chest and I feel her scoot forward. Before I know it, I feel lips on mine and I'm not sure if I should shove her away or roll on top of her. I begin to lift my hands to her face, but she pulls back just as quick as she kissed me.

"Sorry," she says. "I should go." She places her palms beside me on the floor and starts to lift up, but I grab her face and pull her back down on top of me.

"No," I say. I bring her mouth back to mine and I kiss her. I keep our lips pressed firmly together as I lower her to my side and pull her against me so that her head is resting on my jacket. Her breath tastes like starburst and it makes me want to keep kissing her until I can identify every single flavor.

Her hand touches my arm and she gives it a tight squeeze just as my tongue slips inside her mouth. That would be strawberry on the tip of her tongue.

She keeps her hand on my arm, periodically moving it to the back of my head, then returning it to my arm. I keep my hand on her waist, never once moving it to touch any other part of her. The only thing we explore is each other's mouths. We kiss without making another sound. We kiss until the alarm sounds off on my phone. Despite the noise, neither of us stops kissing. We don't even hesitate. We kiss for another solid minute until the bell rings in the hallway outside and

suddenly lockers are slamming shut and people are talking and everything about our moment is stolen from us by all the inconvenient external factors of school.

I still my lips against hers, then slowly pull back.

“I have to get to class,” she whispers.

I nod, even though she can’t see me. “Me, too,” I reply.

She begins to scoot out from beneath me. When I roll onto my back, I feel her move closer to me. Her mouth briefly meets mine one more time, then she pulls away and stands up. The second she opens the door, the light from the hallway pours in and I squeeze my eyes shut, throwing my arm over my face.

I hear the door shut behind her and by the time I adjust to the brightness, the light is gone again.

I sigh heavily. I also remain on the floor until my physical reaction to her subsides. I don’t know who the hell she was or why the hell she ended up here, but I hope to God she comes back. I need a whole hell of a lot more of that.

• • •

She didn’t come back the next day. Or the day after that. In fact, today marks exactly a week since she literally fell into my arms, and I’ve convinced myself that maybe that whole day was a dream. I did stay up most of the night before watching zombie movies with Chunk, but even though I was going on two hours of sleep, I don’t know that I would have been able to imagine that. My fantasies aren’t that fun.

Whether she comes back or not, I still don’t have a fifth period and until someone calls me out on it, I’ll keep hiding out in here. I actually slept way too much last night, so I’m not tired. I pull my phone out to text Holder when the door to the closet begins to open.

“Are you in here, kid?” I hear her whisper.

My heart immediately picks up pace and I can't tell if it's that she came back or if it's because the light is on and I'm not really sure I want to see what she looks like when she opens this door.

"I'm here," I say.

The door is still barely cracked. She slips a hand inside and slides it around the wall until she finds the light, then she flicks it off. The door opens and she slips into the room, then quickly shuts it behind her.

"Can I hide with you?" she asks. Her voice sounds a little different than last time. It sounds happier.

"You're not crying today," I say.

I feel her make her way over to me. She grazes my leg and can feel that I'm seated on a countertop, so she feels around me until she finds a clear spot. She pushes herself up beside me and takes a seat next to me.

"I'm not sad today," she says, her voice much closer this time.

"Good." It's quiet for several seconds, but it's nice. I'm not sure why she came back or why it took her a week, but I'm glad she's here.

"Why were you in here last week?" she asks. "And why are you in here now?"

"Schedule mishap. I was never assigned a fifth period, so I hide out and hope administration doesn't notice."

She laughs. "Smart."

"Yep."

It's quiet again for a minute or so. Our hands are gripping the edge of the counter and every time she swings her legs, her fingers barely touch mine. I eventually just move my hand on top of hers and pull it onto my lap. It seems odd to just grab her hand like this, but we pretty much made out for fifteen minutes straight last week so holding hands is actually reversing a base.

She slides her fingers between mine and our palms meet, then I fold my fingers over hers. "This is nice," she says. "I've never held anyone's

hand before.”

I freeze.

How the hell old is she?

“You’re not in junior high, are you?”

She laughs. “*God* no. I’ve just never held anyone’s hand before. The guys I’ve been with seem to forget this part. But it’s nice. I like it.”

“Yeah,” I agree. “It is nice.”

“Wait,” she says. “*You* aren’t in junior high, are you?”

“No. Not yet,” I say.

She swings her leg out to the side and kicks me, then we both laugh.

“This is kind of weird, isn’t it?” she asks.

“Elaborate. Lots of things could be considered weird, so I’m not sure what you’re referring to.”

I feel her shoulders shrug. “I don’t know. This. Us. Kissing and talking and holding hands and we don’t even know what each other looks like.”

“I’m really good looking,” I say.

She laughs.

“I’m serious. If you could see me right now, you’d be on your knees begging me to be your boyfriend so you could flaunt me around the school.”

“Highly unlikely,” she says. “I don’t do boyfriends. Overrated.”

“If you don’t hold hands and you don’t do boyfriends, then what *do* you do?”

She sighs. “Pretty much everything else. I’ve got quite a reputation, you know. In fact, it’s possible the two of us may have had sex before and we don’t even realize it.”

“Not possible. You’d remember me.”

She laughs again and as much as I’m having fun talking to her, that laugh makes me want to drag her to the floor with me and do nothing

but kiss her again.

“Are you actually good looking?” she asks skeptically.

“Terribly good looking,” I reply.

“Let me guess. Dark hair, brown eyes, great abs, white teeth, Abercrombie & Fitch.”

“Close,” I say. “*Light* brown hair, correct on the eyes, abs, and teeth, but American Eagle Outfitters all the way.”

“Impressive,” she says.

“My turn,” I say. “Thick blonde hair, big blue eyes, an adorable little white dress with a matching hat, royal blue skin, and you’re about two feet tall.”

She laughs loudly. “You have a thing for Smurfette?”

“A guy can dream.”

She’s still laughing and the sound of her laughter actually makes my heart hurt. It hurts because I really want to know who this chick is but I know once I find out, I more than likely won’t want her like I want her right now.

She inhales a breath after her laughter subsides and then the room becomes quiet. So quiet, it’s almost uncomfortable.

“I’m not coming back in here after today,” she says softly.

I squeeze her hand, surprised by the sadness I felt at that confession.

“I’m moving. Not right away, but soon. This summer. I just think it’d be silly if I came back here, because eventually we’ll have to turn on the light or we’ll slip up and say our names and I just don’t think I want to know who you are.”

I graze my thumb over her hand. “Why’d you come back today, then?”

She exhales a delicate breath. “I wanted to thank you.”

I laugh softly. “For what? Kissing you? That’s all I did.”

“Yeah,” she says, matter-of-fact. “Exactly. For kissing me. For *just* kissing me. Do you know how long it’s been since a guy has actually *just* kissed me? After I left last week I tried to remember, but I couldn’t. Every time a guy has ever kissed me, he’s always been in such a hurry to move on to what comes after the kisses that I don’t think anyone has ever taken the time to give me an honest to God, genuine kiss before.”

I shake my head. “That’s really depressing,” I say. “But don’t give me too much credit. I’ve been known to want to rush past that part in the past. I just didn’t really care to rush past it last week because you’re a pretty phenomenal kisser.”

“Yeah,” she says confidently. “I know. Imagine what making love to me could feel like.”

I swallow the sudden lump in my throat. “Believe me, I have. For about seven days straight now.”

Her legs stop swinging next to me. I don’t know if I just made her uncomfortable with that comment.

“You know what else is sad?” she asks. “No one’s ever made love to me before.”

This conversation is headed in a weird direction. I can already tell.

“You’re young. Plenty of time for that. Virginity is actually a turn-on, so you have nothing to worry about.”

She laughs, but it’s a sad laugh this time.

Weird how I can already differentiate her laughs.

“I am *so* not a virgin,” she says. “That’s why it’s sad. I’m pretty skilled in the sex department, but looking back . . . I’ve never loved any of them. None of them have ever loved me, either. Sometimes I wonder if sex with someone who actually loves you is different. Better.”

I think about her question and realize that I don’t have an answer. I’ve never loved anyone, either. “Good question,” I say. “It’s kind of sad that we’ve both had sex, multiple times it sounds like, but neither

of us has ever loved anyone we've done it with. Says a lot about our characters, don't you think?"

"Yeah," she says quietly. "Sure does. A lot of sad truth."

It's quiet for a while and I still have hold of her hand. I can't stop thinking about the fact that no one's ever held her hand before. It makes me wonder if I've ever held the hands of any of the girls I've had sex with. Not that there have been a ton, but enough that I should be able to recall holding one of their hands.

"I might be one of those guys," I ashamedly admit. "I don't know if I've ever held a girl's hand before."

"You're holding mine," she says.

I nod slowly. "So I am."

A few more beats of silence pass before she speaks again.

"What if I leave here in forty-five minutes and never hold another guy's hand again? What if I go through life like I am right now? What if guys continue to take me for granted and I do nothing to change it and I'll have lots of sex, but never know what it's like to make love?"

"So don't do that. Find you a good guy and tie him down and make love to him every night."

She groans. "That terrifies me. As curious as I am about the difference between making love and having sex . . . my stance on relationships makes it impossible to find out."

I think about her comment for a while. It's weird, because she sounds a little like the female version of me. I'm not sure I'm as opposed to relationships as she is, but I've definitely never told a girl I loved her and I really hope that doesn't happen for a hell of a long time.

"You're really never coming back?" I ask.

"I'm really not coming back," she says.

I let go of her hand and press my palms onto the cabinet, then jump down. I move and stand in front of her, then place my hands on either

side of her. "Let's solve our dilemma right now."

She leans back. "Which dilemma?"

I move my hands and place them on her hips, then pull her to me. "We have a good forty-five minutes to work with. I'm pretty sure I could make love to you in forty-five minutes. We can see what it's like and if it's even worth going through relationships in the future. That way when you leave here, you won't worry about never knowing what it's like."

She laughs nervously, then leans toward me again. "How do you make love to someone you aren't in love with?"

I lean forward until my mouth is next to her ear. "We pretend."

I can hear the breath catch in her lungs. She turns her face slightly toward mine and I feel her lips graze my cheek. "What if we're bad actors?" she whispers.

I close my eyes, because the possibility that I might actually be making love to this chick in a matter of minutes is almost too much to take in.

"You should audition for me," she says. "If you're convincing then I just might agree to this absurd idea of yours."

"Deal," I say.

I take a step back and remove my shirt, then lay it on the floor. I grab my jacket off the counter and unfold it, then lay it on the floor as well. I turn back to the counter, then scoop her up. She locks herself around me, burying her head in my neck.

"Where's your shirt?" she asks, running her hands across my shoulder. I lower her to the floor, onto her back. I ease myself to her side and pull her against me.

"You're lying on it," I respond.

"Oh," she says. "That was considerate of you."

I bring my hand up to her cheek. "That's what people do when they're this in love."

I feel her smile. “How in love are we?”

“All the way,” I say.

“Why? What is it about me you love so much?”

“Your laugh,” I say immediately, not sure how much of that is actually made up. “I love your humor. I also love the way you tuck your hair behind your ears when you’re reading. And I love how you hate to talk on the phone almost as much as I do. I really love that you leave me those little notes all the time in your adorable handwriting. And I love that you love my dog so much, because he really likes you. I also love taking showers with you. Those are always fun.”

I slide my hand from her cheek to the nape of her neck. I ease my mouth forward and rest my lips against hers.

“Wow,” she says against my mouth. “You’re really convincing.”

I smile and pull away. “Stop breaking character,” I tease. “Now it’s your turn. What do you love about me?”

“I do love your dog,” she says. “He’s a great dog. I also love how you open doors for me even though I’m supposed to want to open doors for myself. I love that you don’t try to pretend you like old black and white movies like everyone else does, because they bore the hell out of me. I also love it when I’m at your house and every time your parents turn the other way, you steal little kisses from me. My favorite part about you though is when I catch you staring at me. I love that you don’t look away and you stare unapologetically, like you aren’t ashamed that you can’t stop watching me. It’s all you want to do because you think I’m the most amazing thing you’ve ever laid eyes on. I love how much you love me.”

“You’re absolutely right,” I whisper. “I love staring at you.”

I kiss her mouth, then trail kisses across her cheek and up her jawline. I press my lips against her ear and even though I know we’re pretending, my mouth runs dry at the thought of the words about to pass my lips. I hesitate, almost deciding against it. But an even bigger

part of me wants to say it. A huge part of me wishes I could mean it and a small part of me thinks I probably could.

I run my hands up and through her hair. “I love you,” I whisper.

The next breath she draws in is a deep one. My heart is hammering against my chest and I’m quiet, waiting on her next move. I have no idea what comes next. Then again, neither does she.

Her hands move from my shoulders and slowly make their way up to my neck. She tilts her head until her mouth is flush against my ear. “I love you more,” she whispers. I can feel the smile on her lips and I wonder if it matches the smile on my face. I don’t know why I’m suddenly enjoying this so much, but I am.

“You’re so beautiful,” I whisper, moving my lips closer to her mouth. “So damn beautiful. And every single one of those guys who somehow passed this up is a complete fool.”

She closes the gap between our lips and I kiss her, but this time the kiss seems so much more intimate. For a brief moment, I actually feel like I really do love all those things about her and she really does love all those things about me. We’re kissing and touching and pulling the rest of our clothes off in such a hurry, it feels as if we’re on a timer.

I guess we technically are.

I pull my wallet out of the pocket of my jeans and grab a condom, then ease myself back against her.

“You can change your mind,” I whisper, hoping to hell she doesn’t.

“So can you,” she says.

I laugh.

She laughs.

Then we both shut the hell up and spend the rest of the hour proving exactly how much we love each other.

• • •

I'm on my knees now, quietly gathering our clothes. After I slip my shirt over my head, I pull her up and help her with her own shirt. I stand up and pull on my jeans, then help her to her feet. I rest my chin on top of her head and pull her against me, recognizing the perfect fit.

"I could turn on the light before you leave," I say. "Aren't you a little curious to see the face of the guy you're madly in love with?"

She shakes her head against my chest with her laugh. "It'll ruin everything," she says. Her words are muffled by my shirt, so she lifts her head away from my chest and tilts her face up to mine. "Let's not ruin it. Once we find out who each other is, we'll find something we don't like. Maybe *lots* of things we don't like. Right now it's perfect. We can always have this perfect memory of that one time we loved somebody."

I kiss her again, but it doesn't last long because the bell rings. She doesn't release her hold from around my waist. She just presses her head against my chest again and squeezes me tighter. "I need to go," she says.

I close my eyes and nod. "I know."

I'm surprised by just how much I don't want her to go, knowing I'll never see her again. I almost beg her to stay, but I also know she's right. It only feels perfect because we're *pretending* it's perfect.

She begins to pull away from me, so I lift my hands to her cheeks one last time. "I love you, babe. Wait for me after school, okay? In our usual spot."

"You know I'll be there," she says. "And I love you, too." She stands on her tiptoes and presses her lips to mine; hard and desperate and sad. She pulls away and makes her way to the door. As soon as she begins to open it, I walk swiftly to her and push the door shut with my hand. I press my chest against her back and I lower my mouth to her ear.