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IT STARTS WITH US

a novel

COLLEEN
HOOVER

#1 *NEW YORK TIMES* BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF
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It Starts with Us

Colleen Hoover



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This book is for the brave and bold Maria Blalock

Dear reader,

This book is a sequel to *It Ends with Us* and begins right where the first book concluded. For the best reading experience, *It Starts with Us* should be read second in the two-book series.

After releasing *It Ends with Us*, I never imagined I would one day be writing a sequel. I also never imagined that the book would be received as it has been by so many. I am so grateful to all of you who found Lily's story to be as empowering as I find my own mother's.

After *It Ends with Us* gained momentum on TikTok, I was inundated with requests for more Lily and Atlas. And how could I possibly deny a community that has changed my life? This novel was written as a thank-you for the tremendous support, and because of that, I wanted to deliver a much lighter experience.

Lily and Atlas deserve it.

I hope you enjoy their journey.

All my love,
Colleen Hoover

Chapter One

Atlas

The way *ass whole* is misspelled in red spray paint across the back door of Bib's makes me think of my mother.

She would always insert a brief pause between syllables, making it sound like two separate words. I wanted to laugh every time I heard it, but it was hard to find the humor in it as a child when I was always the recipient of the hurled insult.

"Ass... whole," Darin mutters. "Had to be a kid. Most adults know how to spell that word."

"You'd be surprised." I touch the paint, but it doesn't stick to my fingers. Whoever did this must have done it right after we closed last night.

"Do you think the misspelling was intentional?" he asks. "Are they suggesting you're so much of an asshole that you're a whole *entire* ass?"

"Why do you assume they were targeting *me*? They could have been targeting you or Brad."

"It's your restaurant." Darin takes off his jacket and uses it to pry a large shard of exposed broken glass out of the window. "Maybe it was a disgruntled employee."

"Do I have disgruntled employees?" I can't think of a single person on payroll who would do something like this. The last person I'd had quit was five months ago, and she left on good terms after getting a college degree.

"There was that guy who did the dishes before you hired Brad. What was his name? He was named after some kind of mineral or something—it was super weird."

“Quartz,” I say. “It was a nickname.” I haven’t thought about that guy in so long. I doubt he’s holding a grudge against me after all this time. I fired him right after we opened because I found out he wasn’t washing the dishes unless he could actually see food on them. Glasses, plates, silverware—anything that came back to the kitchen from a table looking fairly clean, he’d just put it straight on the drying rack.

If I wouldn’t have fired him, he would have gotten us shut down by the health department.

“You should call the police,” Darin says. “We’ll have to file a report for insurance.”

Before I object, Brad appears at the back door, his shoes crunching the broken glass beneath his feet. Brad has been inside taking inventory in order to see if anything was stolen.

He scratches the stubble on his jaw. “They took the croutons.”

There’s a confused pause.

“Did you say ‘croutons?’” Darin asks.

“Yeah. They took the whole thing of croutons that were prepared last night. Nothing else seems to be missing, though.”

That wasn’t at all what I was expecting him to say. If someone broke into a restaurant and didn’t take appliances or anything else of value, they probably broke in because they were hungry. I know that kind of desperation firsthand. “I’m not reporting this.”

Darin turns to me. “Why not?”

“They might catch whoever did it.”

“That’s the point.”

I grab an empty box out of the dumpster and start picking up shards of glass. “I broke into a restaurant once. Stole a turkey sandwich.”

Brad and Darin are both staring at me now. “Were you drunk?” Darin asks.

“No. I was hungry. I don’t want anyone arrested for stealing croutons.”

“Okay, but maybe food was only the beginning. What if they come back for appliances next time?” Darin says. “Is the security camera still broken?”

He's been on me to get that repaired for months now. "I've been busy."

Darin takes the box of glass from me and starts to pick up the remaining pieces. "You should go work on that before they come back. Heck, they might even try to hit up Corrigan's tonight since Bib's was such an easy target."

"Corrigan's has working security. And I doubt whoever it was will vandalize my new restaurant. It was a matter of convenience, not a targeted break-in."

"You *hope*," Darin says.

I open my mouth to respond, but I'm interrupted by an incoming text message. I don't think I've ever reached for my phone faster. When I see the text isn't from Lily, I deflate a little.

I ran into her this morning while I was running errands. It was the first time we've seen each other in a year and a half, but she was late for work and I had just received the text from Darin informing me we had a break-in. We parted somewhat awkwardly on the promise that she would text me once she got to work.

It's been an hour and a half since then, and I still haven't heard from her. An hour and a half is nothing, but I can't ignore the nagging in my chest that's trying to convince me she's having doubts about everything that was said between us in that five-minute exchange on the sidewalk.

I'm definitely not having doubts about what *I* said. I might have gotten caught up in the moment—in seeing how happy she looked and finding out she's no longer married. But I meant every word I said to her.

I'm ready for this. *More* than ready.

I pull up her contact info in my phone. I've wanted to text her so many times over the last year and a half, but the last time I spoke to her, I left the ball in her court. She had so much going on, I didn't want to complicate her life even more.

She's single now, though, and she made it sound like she was finally ready to give whatever could be between us a chance. However, she's had an hour and a half to think about our conversation, and an hour and a half is plenty

of time to form regrets. Every minute that passes without a text is going to feel like a whole damn day.

She's still listed as Lily Kincaid in my phone, so I edit her contact info and change her last name back to Bloom.

I feel Darin hovering, looking over my shoulder at my phone screen. "Is that *our* Lily?"

Brad perks up. "He's texting Lily?"

"*Our* Lily?" I ask, confused. "You guys met her once."

"Is she still married?" Darin asks.

I shake my head.

"Good for her," he says. "She was pregnant, right? What did she end up having? A boy or a girl?"

I don't want to discuss Lily because there's nothing to discuss yet. I don't want to make it more than what it might be. "A girl, and that's the last question I'm answering." I focus on Brad. "Theo coming in today?"

"It's Thursday. He'll be here."

I head inside the restaurant. If I'm going to discuss Lily with anyone, it'll be Theo.

Chapter Two

Lily

My hands are still shaking, even though it's been almost two hours since I ran into Atlas. I can't tell if I'm shaking because I'm flustered or because I've been too busy to eat since I walked in the door. I've barely had five seconds of peace to process what happened this morning, much less eat the breakfast I brought with me.

Did that actually just happen? Did I really ask Atlas a series of questions so awkward, I'll be mortified well into next year?

He didn't seem awkward, though. He seemed very happy to see me, and then when he hugged me, it felt like a part of me that had been dormant suddenly sprang to life.

But this is the first moment I've had to even take a bathroom break, and after looking at myself in the mirror just now, I kind of want to cry. I'm splotchy, I have carrots smeared across my shirt, my nail polish has been chipped since, like, January.

Not that Atlas expects or wants perfection. It's just that I've imagined running into him so many times, but not one of those fantasies starred me bumping into him in the middle of a hectic morning, half an hour after being the target of an eleven-month-old with a handful of baby food.

He looked so good. He smelled so good.

I probably smell like breast milk.

I'm so rattled by what our chance encounter might mean, it took me twice as long to organize everything for the delivery driver this morning. I haven't even checked our website for new orders today. I give myself one last look in the mirror, but all I see is an exhausted, overworked single mom.

I make my way out of the bathroom and back to the register. I pull an order from the printer and begin making out the card. My mind has never been more in need of a distraction, so I'm glad it's been a busy morning.

The order is for a bouquet of roses for someone named Greta from someone named Jonathan. The message reads, *I'm sorry about last night. Forgive me?*

I groan. Apology flowers are my least-favorite kind of bouquets to assemble. I always end up obsessing over what they're apologizing for. Did he miss their date? Did he come home late? Did they fight?

Did he hit her?

Sometimes I want to write the number for the local domestic violence shelter on the cards, but I have to remind myself that not every apology is attached to something as awful as the things that were attached to the apologies I used to receive. Maybe Jonathan is Greta's friend and he's trying to cheer her up. Maybe he's her husband and he took a prank a little too far.

Whatever the reason for the flowers, I hope they mean something good. I tuck the card into the envelope and stick it into the bouquet of roses. I set them on the delivery shelf and am pulling up the next order when I receive a text.

I lunge for my phone as if the text is about to self-destruct and I only have three seconds to read it. I shrink when I look at the screen. It's not from Atlas, but rather from Ryle.

Can she eat French fries?

I shoot a quick response. Soft ones.

I drop my phone onto the counter with a thud. I don't like for her to have French fries too often, but Ryle only has her one to two days a week, so I try to make sure she gets more nutritious foods when she's with me.

It was nice not thinking about Ryle for a few minutes, but his text has reminded me that he exists. And as long as he exists, I fear that any type of relationship, or even a friendship between me and Atlas, *can't* exist. How will Ryle take it if I start seeing Atlas? How would he act if they ever had to be around each other?

Maybe I'm getting ahead of myself.

I stare at my phone, wondering what I should say to Atlas. I told him I would text him after I opened the store, but customers were waiting before I even unlocked the door. And now that Ryle has texted, I've gone and remembered Ryle exists in this scenario, too, which makes me hesitant to text Atlas at all.

The front door opens, and my employee Lucy finally walks in. She always seems so put-together, even when I can tell she's in a bad mood.

"Good morning, Lucy."

She flicks hair out of her eyes and sets her purse on the counter with a sigh. "Is it?"

Lucy isn't at her friendliest in the morning. It's why my other employee Serena or I usually work the register until at least eleven, while Lucy puts arrangements together in the back. She's much better with customers after a cup or five of coffee.

"I just found out our place cards never arrived because they were discontinued, and it's too late to order more. The wedding is in less than a *month*."

So much has gone wrong leading up to this wedding, I have half a mind to tell her not to go through with it. But I'm not superstitious. Hopefully she isn't, either.

"Homemade place cards are in style," I offer.

Lucy rolls her eyes. "I hate crafting," she mutters. "I don't even want a wedding now. It feels like we've been planning it for longer than we even dated." *That's accurate*. "Maybe we'll just call it off and go to Vegas. You eloped, right? Do you regret it?"

I don't know which part of all that to address first. "How can you hate crafting? You work at a flower shop. And I'm divorced; of course I regret eloping." I hand her a small stack of orders I haven't gotten to yet. "But it *was* fun," I admit.

Lucy goes to the back and starts on the rest of the orders, and I go back to thinking about Atlas. *And Ryle*. And Armageddon, which is what the two of

them in my brain at the same time feels like.

I have no idea how this is expected to work. When Atlas and I ran into each other, it was as if everything else faded away, including Ryle. But now Ryle is beginning to seep back into my thoughts. Not in the way thoughts of Ryle *used* to occupy my mind, but more in a way that feels like a roadblock. My love life has finally been on a straight path with no bumps or curves, basically because it's been nonexistent for well over a year and a half, but now it feels like there's nothing but rough terrain and obstacles and cliffs ahead.

Is it worth it? Of course *Atlas* is worth it.

But are *we* worth it? Is us potentially becoming a thing worth the stress it would inevitably bring to all the other areas of my life?

I haven't felt this conflicted in so long. Part of me wants to call Allysya and tell her about seeing Atlas, but I can't. She knows how Ryle still feels about me. She knows how he'd feel if I brought Atlas into the picture.

I can't talk to my mother because she's my mother. As close as we've become lately, I'd still never freely discuss my dating life with her.

There's really only one woman I feel comfortable talking to about Atlas.

"Lucy?"

She appears from the back, pulling an earbud out of her ear. "Did you need me?"

"Can you cover me for a while? I need to go run an errand. I'll be back in an hour."

She makes her way behind the counter, and I grab my purse. I don't get a lot of alone time now that I have Emerson, so I occasionally steal an hour here and there during the workweek when I have someone to back up my absence at the shop.

Sometimes I like to sit in my thoughts, and it's impossible to do that in the presence of a child because even when she's asleep I'm in mom mode. And with the constant flow of traffic at work, it's rare that I can find a stretch of peace without being interrupted.

I've found that being alone in my car with my music on, and occasionally a slice of dessert from the Cheesecake Factory, is sometimes all it takes to sort through the knots in my brain.

Once I'm parked with a clear view of Boston Harbor, I lean my seat back and grab the notepad and pen I brought with me. I don't know if this will help as much as dessert sometimes does, but I need to release my thoughts in the same way I've done in the past. This method has helped before when I need things to fall neatly into place. Although this time, I'm just hoping it helps things not to fall completely apart.

Dear Ellen,

Guess who's back?

Me.

And Atlas.

Both of us.

I ran into him on my way to meet Ryle with Emmy this morning. It was so good to see him. But as reaffirming as it was to see him and to know where we both stand at this point in our lives, it ended a bit awkwardly. He was having a minor emergency with his restaurant and was in a hurry; I was late opening the store. We parted on the promise that I would text him.

I want to text him. I do. Especially because seeing him reminded me of how much I miss the feeling I get when I'm around him.

I didn't realize how lonely I'd been feeling until those few minutes with him this morning. But since Ryle and I divorced... oh, wait.

Wow. I haven't told you about the divorce.

It's been way too long since I've written to you. Let me back up.

I decided my separation from Ryle should be permanent after giving birth to Emmy. I asked him for a divorce right after she was born. I wasn't attempting to be cruel in my timing, I just didn't know which choice I was going to make until I held her in my arms and

knew with every fiber of my being that I would do whatever it took to break the cycle of abuse.

Yes, asking for a divorce hurt. Yes, I was heartbroken. But no, I don't regret it. My choice helped me realize that sometimes the hardest decisions a person can make will most likely lead to the best outcomes.

I can't lie and say I don't miss him, because I do. I miss what we sometimes were. I miss the family we could have been for Emerson. But I know I made the right decision, even though I sometimes get overwhelmed by the weight of it. It's difficult because I still have to interact with Ryle. He still possesses all the good qualities I fell in love with, and now that I'm no longer in a relationship with him, it's rare I see the negative side that ultimately ended our marriage. I think that has to do with the fact that he's on his best behavior. He had to be agreeable and not put up too much of a fight because he knew I could have reported him for all the incidents of domestic violence I experienced at his hands. He could have lost a lot more than his wife, so when it came to the custody arrangement, things were more amiable than I expected them to be.

That may have been more because I put up less of a fight than he did. My lawyer was very straightforward when I said I wanted sole custody. Unless I was willing to drag the dirtiest parts of our rock bottom into a courtroom, there wasn't much I could do to prevent Ryle from getting visits with Emerson. And even if I were to bring up the domestic violence, my lawyer said it's very rare that a willing, successful father without a record, who provides financial support, would have any sort of rights removed.

I was looking at two options. I could choose to press charges and drag this through the courts, only to be met with a very possible joint custody arrangement. Or I could attempt to work an agreement out with Ryle that would satisfy us both, while preserving our coparenting relationship.

I guess you could say we came to a compromise, even though there isn't an agreement in the world that would make me feel comfortable with sending my daughter off with someone I know possesses a temper. But all I can do is choose the lesser of two evils when it comes to custody and hope that Emmy never sees that side of him.

I want Emmy to bond with her father. I've never wanted to keep her from him. I just want to ensure she's safe, which is why I begged Ryle to agree to day visits for the first couple of years. I never told him outright it's because I don't know that I fully trust him with her. I think I might have blamed it on my breastfeeding situation and the fact that he's on call all the time, but deep down I'm sure he knows why I've never wanted her to stay with him overnight.

The past abuse is something we don't talk about. We talk about Emmy, we talk about work, we plaster on smiles when we're in the presence of our daughter. Sometimes it feels forced and fake, at least on my end, but it's better than what this could have been had I taken him to court and lost. I'll fake a smile until she's eighteen if it means I don't have to share custody and potentially expose my daughter to the worst parts of her father on a more regular basis.

It's been working out okay so far, if you don't count the occasional gaslighting and unwanted flirtation from him. As clear as I've made my feelings during this divorce, he still has hope for us. He says things sometimes that indicate he hasn't fully let go of the idea of us. I fear that a huge part of Ryle's cooperation rests on the notion that he'll eventually win me back if he's good enough for long enough. He has it in his head that I'll soften over time.

But life isn't going to happen his way, Ellen. I'm ultimately going to move on, and if I'm being honest, I hope I end up moving on in Atlas's direction. It's too soon to know if that's a possibility, but I know for a fact I'll never move back in Ryle's direction, no matter how much time passes.

It's been almost a year since I asked Ryle for the divorce, but it's been almost nineteen months since the fight that ultimately caused our separation. Which means I've been single for over a year and a half.

A year and a half of separation between potential relationships seems like plenty of time, and maybe it would be if it were anyone other than Atlas. But how can I possibly make this work? What if I text Atlas and he invites me to lunch? And then lunch goes wonderful, which I'm sure it would, and lunch leads to dinner? And dinner leads to us falling right back into step with where we left off when we were younger? And then we're both happy and we fall back in love and he becomes a permanent part of my life?

I know it sounds like I'm getting ahead of myself, but it's Atlas we're talking about here. Unless he had a personality transplant, I think you and I both know how easy Atlas is for me to love, Ellen. That's why I'm so hesitant, because I'm scared it will work out.

And if it works out, how will Ryle feel about my new relationship? Emerson is almost a year old, and we've gone this whole year without too much drama, but I know that's because we've found a good flow that nothing has interrupted. So why does it feel like any mention of Atlas will cause a tsunami?

Not that Ryle deserves the concern I'm currently feeling over this situation, but he has the potential to make my dating life a living hell. Why does Ryle still occupy an entire wall in my many layers of thoughts? That's what it feels like—as if these wonderful things happen, but as they start to sink in, they eventually reach a part of me that is still making decisions based on Ryle and his potential reactions.

His reactions are what I fear the most. I want to hope that he wouldn't be jealous, but he will be. If I start dating Atlas, he'll make it difficult for everyone. Even though I know divorce was the right choice, there are still consequences to that choice. And one of those

consequences is that Ryle will always look at Atlas like he's the thing that broke up our marriage.

Ryle is the father of my daughter. No matter what man comes and goes in my life from this point forward, Ryle is the one constant that I'll always have to appease if I want the most peaceful experience for my daughter. And if Atlas Corrigan is back in my life—Ryle will never be appeased.

I wish you could tell me what decision to make. Do I sacrifice what I know will make me happy for the sake of avoiding the inevitable disruption Atlas's presence would cause?

Or will I always have an Atlas-shaped hole in my heart unless I allow him to fill it?

He's expecting me to text him, but I think I need more time to process this. I don't even know what to say to him. I don't know what to do.

I'll let you know if I figure it out.

Lily

Chapter Three

Atlas

“‘We finally reached the *shore*?’” Theo says. “You actually *said* that to her? Out loud?”

I shift uncomfortably on the couch. “We bonded over *Finding Nemo* when we were younger.”

“You quoted a *cartoon*.” Theo’s head roll is dramatic. “And it didn’t work. It’s been over eight hours since you ran into her, and she still hasn’t texted you.”

“Maybe she got busy.”

“Or maybe you came on too strong,” Theo says, leaning forward. He clasps his hands between his knees and refocuses. “Okay, so what happened after you said all the cheesy lines?”

He’s brutal. “Nothing. We both had to get to work. I asked if she still had my number, and she said she had it memorized, and then we said good—”

“Hold up,” Theo interrupts. “She has your number *memorized*?”

“Apparently so.”

“Okay.” He looks hopeful. “This means something. No one memorizes numbers anymore.”

I was thinking the same thing, but I also wondered if she memorized my number for other reasons. Back when I wrote it down and put it in her phone case, it was for an emergency. Maybe part of her feared the day she’d need it, so she memorized it for reasons that had nothing to do with me.

“So, what do I do? Text her? Call her? Wait until she reaches out to me?”

“It’s been eight hours, Atlas. Calm down.”