

WITHOUT MERIT

ALSO BY COLLEEN HOOVER

Slammed

Point of Retreat

This Girl

Hopeless

Losing Hope

Finding Cinderella

Maybe Someday

Ugly Love

Maybe Not

Confess

November 9

It Ends with Us

WITHOUT MERIT

a novel

COLLEEN HOOVER

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This book is for Cale Hoover.

Because I'm your mother and I love you, I sometimes have an overwhelming urge to wrap you in a bubble and protect you from the world. But I also have an overwhelming urge to wrap the world in a bubble and protect it from you. Because you're going to turn it on its head someday.

I can't freaking wait.

WITHOUT MERIT

Chapter One

I have an impressive collection of trophies that I did not win. Most of them I purchased from thrift stores or garage sales. Two of them I got from my father for my seventeenth birthday. Only one of them I stole.

My stolen trophy is probably my least favorite one. I took it from Drew Waldrup's bedroom right after he broke up with me. We had been dating two months and it was the first time I allowed him to put his hand all the way up my shirt. I was thinking about how nice it felt, when he looked down at me and said, "I don't think I want to date you anymore, Merit."

There I was, enjoying his hand on my boob, and all the

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while he was thinking of how he never wanted his hand on my boob again. I stoically slid out from under him and stood up. After straightening out my shirt, I walked over to his bookshelf and snatched the biggest trophy he had. He never said a word. I figured if he dumped me with his hand up my shirt, I should at least get a trophy for it.

That district championship football trophy was actually the start of my collection. From there, I'd pick up random trophies from garage sales or thrift shops any time something shitty happened.

Fail my driving test? First place in shot put.

Don't get asked to junior prom? All-star cast in one-act play.

My father proposes to his mistress? Little league team champions.

It's been two years since I stole that first trophy. I have twelve trophies now, although far more than twelve shitty things have happened to me since Drew Waldrup broke up with me. But it's surprisingly difficult to find unwanted trophies. Which is why I'm here at a local antiques shop, eyeing the seventh place pageant trophy I've been wanting since I first saw it six months ago. It's about a foot and a half tall and it's from a 1972 Dallas pageant called Boots and Beauties.

I like it because of the ridiculous pageant title, but I love it because of the gold-plated woman on top of the trophy. She's wearing a ball gown, a tiara, and a pair of boots with spurs. Everything about it is absurd. Especially the eighty-five-dollar

price tag. But I've been saving up for it since I first laid eyes on it and I finally have enough money to purchase it.

I grab the trophy and turn to walk toward the register when I notice a guy on the second floor of the antiques store. He's leaning over the railing, staring at me. His chin is resting casually in one of his hands like he's been in that position for a while. He smiles as soon as we make eye contact.

I smile back, which is a bit out of character for me. I'm not the type to flirt and I'm definitely not the type to know how to reciprocate when someone flirts with me. But his smile is pleasant and he isn't even on the same floor as me, so I don't feel threatened by potential embarrassment.

"What are you doing?" he calls out.

Naturally, I look over my shoulder to see if he's directing his comment at me. Maybe the guy isn't looking at me and he's talking to someone behind me. But other than a mother who braved the antiques store with her little boy, there isn't anyone else in my vicinity. And the woman and her child are both facing the opposite direction, so he must be referring to me.

I look back up at him and he's still looking down at me with that same smile. "I'm buying a trophy!"

I think I might like his smile, but he's a little too far away for me to tell if I'd be attracted to him. His confidence is attractive in itself. He has dark hair and it's a bit choppy and spastic but I'm not judging because I don't think I've brushed my own hair since yesterday morning. He's wearing a gray hoodie with the sleeves shoved above his elbows. Tattoos cover the arm his chin is resting on, but I can't make them out from down here.

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From here, he looks a little too young and a little too tattooed to be browsing for antiques on a random weekday morning, but who am I to judge? I should be in school right now.

I turn around and pretend to shop, but I'm aware that he's watching me. I try to ignore it, but every now and then I'll glance back up at him to make sure he's still there. He is.

Maybe he works here and that's why he's lingering, but it wouldn't explain why he won't stop staring at me. If this is his idea of flirting, it's a strange way to flirt. But sadly, I'm attracted to unconventional and strange. So the entire time I browse the store I force myself to seem unaffected, when in reality, I'm very affected. I can feel his stare with every step I take. Stares shouldn't have weight, but knowing his eyes are on me makes my steps feel heavier. It even makes my stomach feel heavier.

I've already looked at everything in the store, but I don't want to check out yet and leave because I'm enjoying this game too much.

I attend a very small public school in a very small town. And when I say small, I'm being generous. There is an average of twenty kids in each grade. Not class. *Grade*.

My entire senior class consists of twenty-two students. Twelve girls and ten guys. Eight of those ten guys have been in class with me since I was five. That narrows the dating field quite a bit. It's hard to find someone attractive that you've spent almost every day of your life with since you were five years old.

But I have no idea who this guy is that's made me the center of his attention. Which means I'm already more attracted

to him than any person in my entire school, simply because I don't know him.

I pause on an aisle that's clearly visible from where he's standing and I pretend to be interested in one of the signs displayed on the shelf. It's an old white sign with the word SHAFT written on it and an arrow pointing to the right. It makes me laugh. Next to it is an old sign that looks to be from a gas station. It says LUBRICANT. It makes me wonder if someone placed the sexually suggestive signs together or if it was random. If I had enough money, I'd buy them and start a sexually suggestive sign collection for my bedroom. But my trophy habit is expensive enough.

The little boy who has been browsing the store with his mother is standing a couple of feet away from me now. He looks to be about four or five years old. The same age as my little brother, Moby. His mother has told him no less than ten times not to touch anything, but he picks up the glass pig sitting on the shelf in front of us. Why are kids so drawn to fragile things? His eyes are bright as he inspects it. I appreciate that his curiosity is more important to him than following his mother's orders. "Mom, can I have this?"

His mother is an aisle over digging through a rack of old magazines. She doesn't even turn around to look at what he's holding. She just says, "No."

The boy's eyes dim immediately and he frowns as he goes to set the pig back on the shelf. But his little hands fumble when he tries to set it down and the pig slips from his grasp, shattering at his feet.

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“Don’t move,” I say to him, reaching him before his mother does. I bend down and start picking up the pieces.

His mother plucks him up and sets him a few feet away so that he’s out of reach of the glass. “I told you not to touch anything, Nate!”

I glance over at the little boy and he’s staring at the broken glass like he just lost his best friend. His mother presses her hand to her forehead like she’s exhausted and frustrated, and then bends down and starts helping me pick up the pieces.

“He didn’t do it,” I say to her. “I’m the one who broke it.”

The woman looks back at her little boy and her little boy looks at me like he doesn’t know if this is a test. I wink at him before she turns back around and I say, “I didn’t see him standing there. I bumped into him and dropped it.”

She looks surprised, and maybe even a bit guilty for assuming her son did it. “Oh,” she says. She continues to help me pick up the larger shards of glass. The man who was standing at the register when I walked in appears out of nowhere with a broom and a dustpan.

“I’ll take it from here,” he says. But then he points to a sign on the wall that reads YOU BREAK IT, YOU BUY IT.

The woman takes her little boy’s hand and walks away. The little boy glances over his shoulder and smiles at me and it makes taking the blame so worth it. I return my attention to the man with the broom. “How much was it?”

“Forty-nine dollars. I’ll only charge you thirty, though.”

I sigh. I’m not so sure that little boy’s smile is worth thirty dollars. I walk my pageant trophy back to its home and pluck

a much cheaper, much less appealing trophy from the shelf. I take it to the register and pay for the shattered pig and my first place bowling trophy. When the man hands me the sack and my change, I head toward the door. Right when I go to push it open, I remember the guy who was watching me from the second-floor railing. I glance up before I walk out the door but he's no longer there. Somehow this makes me feel even heavier.

I walk out of the store and cross the street, heading for one of the tables near the fountain. I've lived in this county my whole life, but I rarely make it down to the square. I don't know why, because my love for it was solidified when they put up the strange crosswalk signs. The signs display a picture of a man crossing the street, but his leg is lifted high in the air and it's exaggerated to the point that it could pass as a silly walk out of a Monty Python show.

There are also two bathrooms the city had installed a few years back. They're two glass structures that look like a tall cube of mirrors from the outside, but when you're inside the bathrooms you can see out. It's disturbing that a person can be sitting on the toilet doing their business while watching cars drive by. But I'm drawn to unusual things, so I'm one of the few who probably take pride in the strange bathrooms.

"Who's the trophy?"

Speaking of being drawn to unusual things.

The guy from the antiques store is standing next to me now and I can say with complete certainty that he is most definitely attractive. His eyes are a unique shade of light blue,

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so they're the first thing to stand out. They seem out of sync with his olive skin and severely dark hair. I stare at his hair a moment. I'm not sure I've ever seen hair that color of black on someone with eyes that color of blue. It's a bit jarring. For me, anyway.

He's still smiling at me just like he was from the railing in the antiques store. It makes me wonder if he smiles all the time. I hope not. I like the thought that maybe he's smiling at me because he can't help it. He nudges his head toward the sack in my hand and I suddenly remember he asked me a question about the trophy.

"Oh. It's for me."

He tilts his head in amusement or wonder. I don't really know which one he's feeling, but I'm fine with either. "You collect trophies you didn't win?"

I nod and it makes him laugh a little, but it's a silent laugh. Almost like he wants to keep it to himself. He slides his hands in his back pockets. "Why aren't you in school right now?"

I didn't realize it was that obvious that I'm still in high school. I drop my sack on the table next to us and slip off my sandals. "It's a nice day. I didn't want to be locked in a classroom." I walk over to the concrete fountain that really isn't a fountain at all. It's a section of concrete, flat on the ground in the shape of a star. The water comes out of holes around the star and spits toward the center. I press my foot over one of the holes and wait for the water to reach me.

It's the last week of October, so it's too cold for kids to be playing in the water like they usually are in the summer. But

it isn't too cold to get my feet a little wet. I like it when the water hits the bottom of my feet. And since I can't afford to get a pedicure, it's the next best thing.

The guy watches me for a moment but honestly, I'm getting used to it. He's starting to feel like my own personal, slightly more attractive shadow. I don't look directly at him as he casually slips off his shoes. He stands next to me and presses one of his feet over the holes.

I glance at his arm now to get a closer look at the tattoos. I was right—they're only on his left arm. His right arm doesn't have a single visible tattoo on it. But the tattoos on his left arm aren't what I expected. They're random and unrelated and none of them connect. One of them is a tiny toaster with one slice of bread sticking out of it. It's on the outside of his wrist. I can see a small star near his elbow. The words, "Your turn, Doctor," are sprawled across his forearm. I drag my eyes up his arm and he's looking down at his feet now. I'm about to ask him his name when the water hits my foot unexpectedly. I laugh and step back and we both watch the spout of water shoot toward the center.

The water hits his foot next but he doesn't react to it. He just stares down at his feet until the water stops and moves on to the hole next to him. He lifts his eyes but when he looks at me this time, he isn't smiling. Something about the seriousness in his expression makes everything tighten inside my chest. When he opens his mouth to speak, I hang on to every word.

"Out of all the places we could be, we're right here. At the

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same time." His voice is laced with amusement, but his expression verges on bewildered. He shakes his head and steps closer to me. He reaches his tattooed arm up and slides his fingers down a strand of my hair that's come loose. The gesture is intimate and unexpected, kind of like this whole moment, but I'm more than okay with it. I want him to do it again, but his arm falls back to his side.

I can't think of a single instance where I've ever been looked at like he's looking at me right now. Like I fascinate him. I know we don't know each other at all and whatever this connection is between us will probably be ruined the moment we have our first real conversation. He'll probably be a douchebag or he'll think I'm weird and then it'll get awkward and we'll be more than happy to go our separate ways. That's how my interactions with guys usually go. But right now in this moment, knowing nothing about him other than the intensity in his expression, it allows me to imagine he's perfect. I pretend he's smart and respectful and funny and artistic. Because he would be all those things if he were the perfect guy. I'm content with imagining he possesses these qualities for as long as he's going to stand here in front of me.

He takes a step closer to me and it suddenly feels like I've swallowed his heart because I have all these extra beats in my chest. His eyes drop to my mouth and I'm certain he's about to kiss me. I hope he is. Which is odd because I've literally only spoken a couple of sentences to him but I want him to kiss me while I'm imagining him to be perfect, because that means his kiss would probably be perfect, too.

His fingers feather up my wrist but it feels more like he has both fists clasped tightly around my lungs. My chills chase his fingers up my arm until his hand is resting against my neck.

I don't know how I'm still standing with the unreliable legs I seem to have right now. My head is tilted back and his mouth is inches from mine, as if he's hesitating. He smiles and whispers, "You bury me."

I have no idea what those words mean, but I like them. And I like how his lips connect softly with mine right after he finishes saying whatever it was he just said. And I was right. It's perfect. So perfect, it feels like the old days in the movies when the male lead would press his hand against the woman's back and she would curve her body backward against the pressure of his kiss like the letter *C* while he pulls her against him. It's just like that.

He's pulling me to him when his tongue slides across my lips. And just like in the movies, my arms are dangling at my sides until I realize how much I want to be in this with him and finally begin to kiss him back. He tastes like mint ice cream and it's perfect because this moment ranks high on my scale of favorites, right up there with dessert. This is almost comical—this stranger, kissing me as if it were the last thing left on his bucket list. It makes me wonder what compelled him to do this.

Both of his hands move to hold my face now, like we have nowhere else to be today. He's not in a hurry with his kiss and he definitely doesn't care who sees this because we're in

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the middle of the town square and two people have already honked at us.

I wrap one of my arms around his neck and decide I'll just let him continue for as long as he wants because I don't have anywhere to be right now. Even if I did, I'd cancel my plans in exchange for this.

Right when one of his hands slides through my hair, the water splashes beneath my feet. I squeal a little because it's unexpected. He laughs, but he doesn't stop kissing me. Now we're being soaked because my foot isn't covering the spout all the way, but neither of us cares. It just adds to the ridiculousness of this kiss.

The ringtone on his phone adds even more ridiculousness to the moment because of course we'd be interrupted right now. Of course. It was way too perfect.

He pulls back and the look in his eye is somehow satiated and starving at the same time. He pulls his phone out of his pocket and looks down at it. "Did you lose your phone or is this a joke?"

I shrug because I have no idea which part of this he thinks might be a joke. Me allowing him to kiss me? Someone calling him in the middle of said kiss? He laughs a little as he presses the phone against his ear. "Hello?"

The smile leaves his expression and now he just looks confused. "Who is this?" He waits a couple of seconds and then pulls the phone away from his ear and looks down at it. Then he looks up at me. "Seriously. Is this a prank?"

I don't know if he's talking to me or the person on the

phone, so I shrug again. He puts the phone to his ear and takes a step away from me. “Who is this?” he repeats. He laughs nervously and grips the back of his neck. “But . . . you’re standing right in front of me.”

I can feel the color drain from my face at that sentence. All the color in my body—in this ridiculous moment with this random guy—pools at my feet, leaving me feeling like the second-rate carbon copy of Honor Voss. My twin sister. The girl who is obviously on the other end of that phone call.

I cover my face with my hand and turn around, grabbing my shoes and my sack. I hope I can put as much distance between us as possible before he figures out that the girl he just kissed isn’t Honor.

I can’t believe this is happening. I just kissed my sister’s boyfriend.

I didn’t do it on purpose, obviously. I had a feeling she had just recently started seeing someone because she’s been gone a lot, but out of all the guys in the world, how was I supposed to know this particular guy was him? I continue to rush away but I can’t get far enough before I hear him running after me. “Hey!” he calls out.

This is why he was watching me in the store. He thought I was her. It’s why he asked why I wasn’t in school, because if he knows Honor well enough to kiss her, he knows Honor would never skip school.

It all makes sense now. This wasn’t some random connection between two strangers. This was him mistaking me for

his girlfriend and me being a complete fool for not immediately realizing what was happening.

I feel his hand grip my elbow. I have no choice but to turn and face him because I need to make it clear that Honor can never find out about this. When our eyes meet, he's no longer looking at me like I fascinate him. He's staring at his phone and then me and then his phone and then, "I am so sorry," he says. "I thought you were . . ."

"You thought wrong," I snap, even though it was an honest mistake.

Honor and I are identical but if he knew my twin sister at all, he should know she would never be caught dead in public looking like I look right now. I'm not wearing makeup, my hair is a mess, and my clothes are left over from yesterday.

He slides his phone back in his pocket but it begins to ring again. When he pulls it out, I can see Honor's name flashing across the screen. I grab his phone and swipe my finger across the screen. "Hey."

"Merit?" Honor laughs. "What's going on? Why are you with Sagan?"

Sagan? Even his name is perfect.

"I'm not. I just . . . bumped into him. He thought I was you but then you called and . . . let's just say he was confused." I say all this while staring directly at Sagan. He keeps his eyes locked on mine and doesn't even try to take the phone away from me.

Honor laughs again. "That's funny. I wish I could have seen his face."

“It was priceless,” I deadpan. “But you should know to warn your boyfriend that you have an identical twin.” I hand the phone back to Sagan. I back away a few steps and he’s holding the phone in his hand, unable to take his eyes off me. “Do not repeat what just happened to her,” I whisper. “To anyone. Ever.”

He nods, albeit hesitantly. As soon as I have confirmation that he won’t repeat this to Honor, I turn and walk away. Nothing could ever top this level of embarrassment. Nothing.