

FINDING CINDERELLA

a novella

COLLEEN
HOOVER

#1 *SUNDAY TIMES* BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF
IT ENDS WITH US

“Do us all a favor and go see what Val wants,” Sky says. “If you don’t meet her out there she’ll come back to the table.”

“*Please*,” Breckin mutters.

I’m watching all their reactions and I don’t know if they’ve always reacted this way when it comes to Val or if I’m only recognizing it for the first time because I finally have clarity.

“Why is everyone referring to Tessa Maynard as *Val*?” Six asks, confused.

Breckin points over his shoulder in the direction Val walked off in. “Tessa is Val. Val is Tessa. Daniel can’t seem to call anyone by their actual name, if you haven’t noticed.”

I watch as Six inhales a slow breath, then looks directly at me. She looks really disgusted. “Your girlfriend is Tessa Maynard? You have sex with Tessa Maynard?”

“*Ex*-girlfriend and *bad* sex,” I clarify. “And yes. Probably coincided with the same time you were falling in love with a hairy Italian.”

Six’s eyes narrow, then she quickly looks away. I instantly feel bad for what I said, but I was only kidding. Sort of. We’re *supposed* to be mean to each other. I can’t tell if I really hurt her feelings or if she’s just a really good actress.

I sigh, then stand up and head toward the cafeteria doors in a hurry so I can get back to the table and somehow make sure Six really isn’t pissed at me.

I make it out to the hallway and Val is standing right outside the cafeteria doors. “I’ll take you back under one condition,” she says.

I’m curious what the condition is, but it doesn’t really matter at this point.

“Not interested.”

Her mouth literally drops open. It’s not even that cute a mouth now that I’m looking at it. I don’t know how I fell for it all those other times.

“I’m serious, Daniel,” she says firmly. “If you screw up one more time, I’m done.”

I let my head fall backward until I’m looking up at the ceiling. “Jesus, Tessa,” I say. She’s not really worthy of my nicknames anymore. I look her in the eyes again. “I don’t want you to take me back. I don’t want to date you. I don’t even want to make out with you. You’re mean.”

She scoffs, but stands frozen. “Are you serious?” she says, dumbfounded.

“Serious. Positive. Convinced. Enlightened. Take your pick.”

She throws her hands up in the air and spins around, then walks back into the cafeteria. I walk to the doors and open them. Six is staring at me from our table, so I make a quick glance around at the rest of the group. No one is paying attention, so I motion for her to come out into the hallway. She takes a quick drink of her water, then stands, making up an excuse to the rest of the table. I step out of view while she makes her way to the exit. When the doors open I immediately grab her by the wrist and pull her until we reach the lockers. I push her against them and crash my mouth to hers. Her hands immediately fly up to my hair and we rush our kisses like we might get caught.

And we really might.

After a good solid minute, she pushes lightly against my chest, so I pull away from her.

“Are you mad?” I ask her, almost blurting out the question between heavy breaths.

“No,” she says, shaking her head. “Why would I be mad?”

“Because Val is Tessa and you obviously don’t like Tessa very much and because I had a jealous moment and called Italian men hairy.”

She laughs. “We’re acting, Daniel. I was actually a little impressed. And kind of turned on when you got jealous. But highly *unimpressed* with the fact that Val is Tessa. I can’t believe you had sex with Tessa Maynard.”

“I can’t believe you had sex with pretty much everyone else,” I reply teasingly.

She grins. “You’re a jerk.”

“You’re a slut.”

“Will you be at my dinner tonight?” she asks.

“That’s a really dumb question.”

A smile spreads slowly across her face and it’s so damn sexy I have to kiss her again.

“I should get back,” she whispers when I pull away.

“Yes, you should. So should I.”

“You first. I’m supposed to be in the administration office clearing up an issue with my schedule.”

“Okay,” I say. “I’ll go first, but I’ll miss you until you get back to the table.”

“Don’t make me puke,” she says.

“I bet you’re adorable when you puke. I bet your actual puke is even adorable. It’s probably bubble-gum pink.”

“You’re seriously disgusting.” She laughs and reaches up to kiss me again. She pushes against my chest, then slips out from between me and the locker. She puts both of her hands on my back and pushes me toward the cafeteria doors. “Act natural.”

I turn and wink at her, then walk back through the doors. I casually make my way back to the table and take a seat.

“Where’s Six?” Breckin asks.

I shrug. “How should I know? I was busy making out with Val in the hallway.”

Sky shakes her head and lays her fork down. “I just lost my appetite, Daniel. Thanks.”

“You’ll have your appetite back by dinner tonight,” I say.

Sky shakes her head. “Not with you and Val there. You’ll probably be sucking face next to my food. If you drool on my chocolate cake you aren’t getting any.”

“Sorry, Cheese Tits,” I say. “But Val won’t be at your dinner tonight. I’ll be there, though.”

“I bet you will,” Breckin says under his breath.

I glance over at him and he looks at me challengingly.

“What’d you just mumble, Powder Puff?” He absolutely hates it when I call him Powder Puff, but he should know I only give nicknames to the people I like. I think he does know that, though, because he doesn’t really give me too much shit about it.

“I said I bet you will,” he repeats louder this time. He turns to Sky, who is seated right next to him. “Six, right?”

Sky nods. “Six or six-thirty.”

“I’ll be there at six,” Breckin says. He looks back at me and smirks. “I bet you’ll be there at six, too, right, Daniel? You like six? Is six good for you?”

He’s on to us. Fucker.

“Six is perfect,” I say, holding his stare. “My absolute favorite time of day.”

He smiles knowingly, but I’m not worried. I have a feeling he’s going to have just as much fun with this as I am.

“All cleared up?” Sky asks Six when she returns to the table. Six nods and takes her seat. Her hand brushes across my outer thigh when she adjusts herself. I press my knee against hers and we both pick our forks up at the same time and take a bite of food.

Having her here just inches from me and not being allowed to touch her is complete torture. I’m beginning to think I’d rather just lean over and kiss her and take Holder’s ass beating than have to pretend I don’t want her.

Since the moment she disappeared into her house last night I’ve felt more restless than I’ve ever felt before. I’ve been fidgeting all day. I can’t stop tapping my fingers and shaking my leg. It feels like I want to scratch at my skin when she’s not around, like I’m coming down from a high.

That’s exactly what this feels like. Like she’s a drug I’ve become immediately addicted to, but I have none in supply. The only thing that satiates the craving is her laugh. Or her smile or her kiss or the feel of her pressed against me.

God, it’s so hard not to touch her. So hard.

She begins laughing loudly at something Sky said and the craving becomes almost intolerable because of the intense need I have to catch that sound with my mouth.

I drop my fork onto my plate and lower my head into my hands and groan. “Stop laughing,” I say quietly.

She’s obviously laughing too loud to hear me, so I turn toward her and say it again. “Six. Stop laughing. Please.”

Her jaw clamps shut and she turns to look at me. “Excuse me?”

About that same time, Holder kicks the shit out of my knee. I scoot back and immediately pull my leg up and rub the spot he kicked. “What the hell, man?”

Holder looks at me like I’m clueless. “What the hell is wrong with you? I told you not to be mean to her.”

Ha. He thinks I’m being mean? If he only knew how nice I want to be to her right now.

“You don’t like my laugh?” Six says. I can tell in her voice she knows how much I like her laugh, but she’s enjoying the fact that Holder is clueless to what her laugh does to me.

“No,” I grumble, scooting back toward the table.

She laughs again and the sound of it causes me to wince.

“Are you always this grumpy?” she asks. “Do you want me to go get your girlfriend and bring her back to the table so she can put you in a better mood?”

“No!” Sky and Breckin yell in unison.

I look at Six. “You think my girlfriend could put me in a better mood?”

She grins. “I think your *girlfriend* is a pathetic idiot for agreeing to date you.”

I shake my head. “My girlfriend makes incredibly wise decisions. I can’t wait until tonight when I get to show her just how smart she was when she decided to lay claim to me.”

“I thought you said she wasn’t coming to dinner,” Sky says, disappointed.

Six’s hand slips under the table and she begins to gently rub at the spot on my knee that Holder just finished kicking.

“Jesus Christ,” I mutter, leaning forward. I put my elbows on the table and run my hands up and down my face, attempting to appear unaffected by the fact that it feels like Six just crawled her way inside my chest and is wrapping herself around my heart.

“Is lunch over yet?” I say to no one in particular. “I need to get out of here.”

Holder looks at his phone. “Five more minutes.” He looks back up at me. “Are you sick, Daniel? You’re not being yourself today. It’s starting to freak me out a little bit.”

Six’s hand is still on my knee. I casually lower my hand and slide it under the table, then place it over hers. She flips her hand over and I lace our fingers together and squeeze her hand.

“I know,” I say to Holder. “I’m just having a weird day. Girlfriends. They have that effect on you.”

He’s still looking at me suspiciously. “You seriously need to make up your mind when it comes to her. It’s past the point that any of us feel sorry for you, because now it’s just irritating.”

“Doesn’t help that she used to be a slut,” Six says.

“Six!” Sky says with a laugh. “That was so mean.”

Six shrugs. “It’s true. Daniel’s girlfriend used to be a big, fat slut. I heard she had sex with six different guys in just over a year.”

“Don’t talk about my girlfriend that way,” I say. “Who gives a shit what she did in the past? I sure as hell don’t.”

Six squeezes my hand, then pulls hers away and brings her hand back up to the table. “Sorry,” she says. “That wasn’t nice. If it helps, I heard she’s a good kisser.”

I grin. “*Phenomenal* kisser.”

The bell rings and everyone picks up their trays. I notice Six isn’t in any hurry, so I take my time as well. Sky kisses Holder on the cheek, then walks off with Breckin toward the exit. Holder picks up both their trays and lifts his eyes to mine. “I’ll see you tonight,” he says. “And I hope to hell the real Daniel shows up, because you aren’t making a whole lot of sense today.”

“I know,” I say, pointing briefly at my head. “She’s got me all screwed up in here, man. All screwed up. I’m losing my mind.”

Holder shakes his head. "That right there is exactly what I'm talking about. You seem more affected by Val today than you ever have. It's just weird." He walks off, still looking confused. I feel sort of bad for lying to him, but it's his own fault. He shouldn't try to tell me who I can date, then I wouldn't have to hide it from him.

"That was fun," Six says quietly. She begins to pick up her tray, but I intercept it. I take a step toward her and look her hard in the eyes.

"Don't you ever insult my girlfriend again. You hear me?"

She tightens her lips to hide her smile. "Noted."

"I want to walk you to your locker. Wait for me."

Her smile becomes harder for her to hide as she nods her head. I take both of our trays and place them on the tray pile, then walk back to the table. I glance around us and don't really see anyone paying attention, so I quickly lean in and kiss her briefly on the lips, then pull away.

"Daniel Wesley, you're gonna get caught," she says with a grin. She turns and begins walking toward the exit, so I discreetly place a hand on her lower back and walk next to her.

"God, I hope so," I say. "If I have to sit through another lunch like that, I'll lose my shit and you'll end up on your back on top of the table."

She laughs. "What a way with words you have."

We exit the cafeteria and I walk her to her locker. It's on the opposite hall from mine, which couldn't be more inconvenient. We don't have a single class together and I won't even see her in the hallway while we're at school. I know I haven't even been dating her for an entire day, but I already miss her.

"Can I come over before dinner?" I ask her.

She shakes her head. "No, I'll be helping Karen and Sky prep. I'm going over there right after school."

"What about after dinner?"

She shakes her head again while she switches her books. "Sky crawls through my window every night. You can't be in my room."

"I thought your window was out of commission."

"Only to people with penises."

I laugh. "What if I told you I didn't have a penis?"

She glances at me. "I would probably rejoice. My experiences with people who have penises never end well."

I shake my head. "That's not something my penis wants to hear you say. He has a very sensitive ego."

She smiles and shuts her locker, then leans against it. "Well, maybe you should go home after school and stroke his ego a little bit until he feels better."

I cock an eyebrow. "You just made a masturbation joke."

She nods. "So I did."

"I have the coolest girlfriend in the world."