



Confess: A Novel

By Colleen Hoover

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Winner of the 2015 Goodreads Choice Award for Best Romance

From #1 *New York Times* bestselling author Colleen Hoover, a new novel about risking everything for love—and finding your heart somewhere between the truth and lies.

At age twenty-one, Auburn Reed has already lost everything important to her. In her fight to rebuild her shattered life, she has her goals in sight and there is no room for mistakes. But when she walks into a Dallas art studio in search of a job, she doesn't expect to find a deep attraction to the enigmatic artist who works there, Owen Gentry.

For once, Auburn takes a chance and puts her heart in control, only to discover that Owen is keeping a major secret from coming out. The magnitude of his past threatens to destroy everything important to Auburn, and the only way to get her life back on track is to cut Owen out of it.

To save their relationship, all Owen needs to do is confess. But in this case, the confession could be much more destructive than the actual sin.

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Editorial Review

Review

"I was drawn into it immediately!" (Sarah Pekkanen, Internationally bestselling author of *The Opposite of Me*)

"Hoover will pull heartstrings in this second-chance love story... edgy, sexy." (*Booklist, Online Review*)

"Colleen Hoover has given us another book with which to fall in love. Another book that grips us, surprises us, makes us laugh. Another book brimming with feeling." (*Vilma's Book Blog*)

"You will devour it. You will worship it. You will sigh with joy because you are experiencing the lyrical and spell bounding prose of CoHo again... filled with suspense, unique characters, and of course the brutal gut-wrenching moments that's expected of any CoHo novel...brilliant, fresh and new." (*Rock Stars of Romance*)

"[Colleen Hoover] is a true genius and a gifted storyteller." (*Shh Mom's Reading*)

"If you're a fan of Colleen Hoover's books, Confess is a definite must-read!... Crazy and lovely and everything I expect from Colleen Hoover." (*Shameless Book Club*)

"Perfection. Utter perfection... I loved every gut wrenching part." (*Random Book Muses*)

"Colleen Hoover is a hands-down genius. When she writes, it's like magic flows onto the pages. Her writing style is like no other, and her capabilities of telling a story are incredible. Confess made me laugh, cry, and swoon.... Bravo to Colleen for another amazing must-read!" (*Ana's Attic Book Blog*)

"Colleen wove an absolutely beautiful story.... It had me by the heart until the very last sentence! A breathtaking book that should not be missed." (*Christy's Love of Books*)

"This story is absolutely incredible... simply amazing. It's perfection in written form. There is something for everyone in these pages. So just buy it, read it, love it!! You won't regret it! 5 +++ Stars!" (*Chicks Controlled by Books*)

"PURE Colleen Hoover magic... It has everything we absolutely love from her.... There's just so much meaning AND magic in *life*, and her characters remind me of this each and every time. Some sadness, lots of sweetness, plenty of romantic angst, and best of all? Hope." (*Maryse.net*)

"Compelling, fresh, heart wrenching and entirely unforgettable. Deception and pain, love and loss, secrets and truths, hope and redemption—they all twist and tangle together creating another unforgettable novel from one of the freshest and most trusted voices in romance. This book is not to be missed." (*Vilma's Book Blog,*)

"It is real. It is raw. It is emotional. It is breathtaking. Colleen is always a six star +++++ read for me. Her talent knows no bounds and she never ceases to amaze me. A story of love, lies, truths, confessions that will leave you breathless." (*Schmexy Girl Book Blog*)

"Another slam dunk from Ms. Colleen Hoover! A beautiful story about fate and second chances." (*Owl*)

Always Be Reading)

"Everything she writes is gold. The ideas in Colleen's head are masterpieces. The incorporation of art, confessions and the written word, is sublime." (*Nicely Phrased Book Blog*)

"This book is full of tension, suspense, twists, heartbreak, but also humor and incredibly sweet and swoony moments. Another absolutely fantastic must read by Colleen Hoover!" (*Waves of Fiction*)

"A beautifully written romance [turned] into a genius story line that is quintessential Colleen Hoover." (*Angie and Jessica's Dreamy Reads*)

"I don't know Colleen's recipes for her books but her mad genius shines through." (*Book Boyfriend Reviews*)

"What a beautiful and emotional story! Colleen has a wonderful way of giving feeling to her words... Confess is a work of art with a ton of heart and swoony moments." (*My Book Muse*)

"*Confess* is a gripping page-turner from cover to cover. It's a beautiful, unique, one-of-a-kind, enthralling work of art that I could not and did not want to put down. Instant favorite! I cannot recommend this book highly enough. Absolutely everyone should read it. It joins the rest of her novels on my All-Time Favorites list. My eyes still water and heart still swells when I simply think of this book. Read it and love it." (*Nestled in a Book,*)

"*Confess* is another intense story of love, sacrifice, and yes, confessions. Hoover is a go-to author for me for stories that tear me apart and put me back together again. I savored *Confess*." (*The Reading Date*)

"Colleen Hoover has done it again, she has taken my heart, ripped it open and pieced it back together. Beautiful book that is a must read for me!" (*Blushing Babes Are Up All Night*)

"One of the best books that CoHo has written. There wasn't one moment of reading this that I wanted to put it down." (*Books, Chocolate and Lipgloss*)

"Prepare yourselves for the artistry that is Confess. Confess is a piece of greatness." (*Seeking Book Boyfriends*)

"Words cannot explain how much I absolutely adore this book!...And the idea behind this book? Pure. Genius." (*Addicted to Heroines*)

"Colleen portrays an intensity of emotion that you don't get from just any book. A rare talent in a sea of unique voices, I feel lucky as a reader to be on the receiving end of her efforts. Whether this is your first Colleen Hoover book, or you've read everything she's ever published, Confess will leave you confessing your love for all things CoHo." (*Scarlet Siren*)

"Exquisitely heart-wrenching and absolutely unputdownable, *Confess* is another unique Colleen Hoover masterpiece and one of the must-read books of this year!! The perfect measure of heart-warming depth and heart-wrenching angst...a truly magical reading experience." (*Aestas Book Blog*)

"Confess is another emotionally packed, superbly written book. Colleen Hoover continues to bring readers a genuine story that is distinctive and well delivered." (*Book Crush*)

"I LOVED this book. I don't think it's any secret that Colleen Hoover is a master storyteller... Her pure talent and storytelling ability is second to none." (*Book Drunk Blog*)

"Beautiful and heart-breaking and hopeful. There aren't many authors who can rip me apart and put me back together quite like Colleen can. The characters are multi-dimensional and real. Confess was utterly unputdownable." (*KimberlyFaye Reads*)

"*Confess* is smartly written with twists that flatter this unpredictable love story.... I thoroughly enjoyed every minute. *Confess* is a fantastic, moving, love story with surprises you'll never expect. I confess that I loved it. Hands down a five star read." (*Love Between the Sheets*)

"Colleen Hoover books are simply mesmerizing; transporting the reader to another world as you immerse yourself in her stories and characters. Confess was no different...I will say this about this book...I laughed, I got teary eyed, I was scared and I loved EVERY MOMENT." (*Shh Mom's Reading*)

"Hoover's creativity makes her stories unique and special...a deeply moving story... well-deserving of 5 stars." (*Smut Book Junkie Reviews*)

"This story is absolutely beautiful. Do yourself a favor and Fall in love with Owen and Auburn. You won't regret it." (*The Reading Vixens*)

"The characters and plot were well-constructed, and the writing (as always) was dead-on. I felt like I was actually inside the story; like I was experiencing every single moment of it. I saw things through the characters' eyes and I could even feel their pain. This book was just that gripping. I highly recommend!" (*Itching for Books*)

"If I could give it 20 stars, I would...highly recommended." (*Let's Talk Books*)

"There is no twist or turn that the author misses...she brings the emotion and passion that we all love to read about. Her characters are not only multi-dimensional, but they are real." (*Art Books and Coffee*)

"If you are looking for memorable, magical and beautiful, Colleen Hoover and her captivating words in Confess are just right for you." (*Crazy, Chaotic Book Babes*)

"CONFESS is one of those rare books that will honestly steal your HEART. This book was emotional, breathtaking, touching, beautiful, honest, and raw. The writing is superb and flawless. The storyline is so original and genius. CONFESS will consume and captivate you." (*Four Chicks Flipping Pages*)

"This book was an *actual* masterpiece. For Colleen to write a story about art and have her story be the most beautiful piece of art that I've ever read is just something I can't wrap my head around." (*Book Baristas*)

"This book captivated me from the first page to the last. Owen and Auburn's story unraveled in a unique and beautiful way. This touching story has the all the twists and turns you are used to getting from Colleen's books. Colleen is a master storyteller, and this story came to life infused with artistic brilliance and emotion." (*Kindle Crack Book Reviews*)

"An absolute masterpiece... Colleen vividly and flawlessly captures the emotions and behaviors of all the characters...utterly heartbreaking at times, yet incredibly beautiful. I was captivated by the realistic and complex characters, the multilayered plot and emotionally charged storyline. This book is the epitome of

unputdownable.” (*Confessions of a Book Whore*)

“Colleen Hoover has the mind of a genius. Somehow she manages to take an idea for a story and twist it into this whirlwind of surprise... She connects her characters to one another in ways that just blow my mind.” (*A Book Whore’s Obsession*)

“I was so enraptured by Confess that I did not want to put it down! Once again Colleen Hoover has worked her epic, magic, writing genius and my love for her has grown even more!” (*Lost in Literature*)

“I cannot recommend this book enough. It has so much heart and soul, and the story is beautifully delivered.” (*Reading Is Sexy Book Blog*)

“I confess that Colleen Hoover never ceases to amaze me with her creative genius and powerful words...Colleen provided a memorable experience with the unique pairing of the poignant confessions and the exquisite artwork...Colleen Hoover continues to remind me why I refer to her as my favorite author.” (*A Literary Perusal*)

“It is very rare that I fall in love with a book after reading the prologue, even more rare that only a few pages into that prologue and I already have tears running down my face.” (*My Guilty Obsession*)

“Colleen Hoover has created another unforgettable story exploring the human condition and, in this case, how much of themselves a person is willing to sacrifice for the ones they love. Her trademark sense of humour, her familiar literary techniques, the very recognisable tone of her characters, are all there to pull us in and leave us incapable of putting this story down.” (*Natasha is a Book Junkie*)

About the Author

Colleen Hoover is the #1 *New York Times* bestselling author of *Slammed*, *This Girl*, *Point of Retreat*, *Hopeless*, *Losing Hope*, *Finding Cinderella*, *Maybe Someday*, *Ugly Love*, *Maybe Not*, *November 9*, and *It Ends with Us*. She lives in Texas with her husband and their three boys. Please visit ColleenHoover.com.

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Confess

CHAPTER ONE

Auburn

I squirm in my chair as soon as he tells me his hourly rate. There’s no way I can afford this with my income.

“Do you work on a sliding-scale basis?” I ask him.

The wrinkles around his mouth become more prominent as he attempts to keep from frowning. He folds his arms over the mahogany desk and clasps his hands together, pressing the pads of his thumbs against one other.

“Auburn, what you’re asking me to do is going to cost money.”

No shit.

He leans back in his chair, pulling his hands to his chest and resting them on his stomach. “Lawyers are like weddings. You get what you pay for.”

I fail to tell him what a horrible analogy that is. Instead, I glance down at the business card in my hand. He came highly recommended and I knew it was going to be expensive, but I had no idea it would be this expensive. I’ll need a second job. Maybe even a third one. Actually, I’m going to have to rob a damn bank.

“And there’s no guarantee the judge will rule in my favor?”

“The only promise I can make is that I’ll do everything I can to ensure the judge does rule in your favor. According to the paperwork that was filed back in Portland, you’ve put yourself in a tough spot. This will take time.”

“All I have is time,” I mumble. “I’ll be back as soon as I get my first paycheck.”

He has me set up an appointment through his secretary and then sends me on my way, back out into the Texas heat.

I’ve been living here all of three weeks and so far it’s everything I thought it would be: hot, humid, and lonely.

I grew up in Portland, Oregon, and assumed I would spend the rest of my life there. I visited Texas once when I was fifteen and although that trip wasn’t a pleasant one, I wouldn’t take back a single second of it. Unlike now, when I’d do anything to get back to Portland.

I pull my sunglasses down over my eyes and begin heading in the direction of my apartment. Living in downtown Dallas is nothing like living in downtown Portland. At least in Portland, I had access to almost everything the city had to offer, all within a decent walk. Dallas is spread out and expansive, and did I mention the heat? It’s so hot. And I had to sell my car in order to afford the move, so I have the choice between public transportation and my feet, considering I’m now penny-pinching in order to be able to afford the lawyer I just met with.

I can’t believe it’s come to this. I haven’t even built up a clientele at the salon I’m working at, so I’m definitely going to have to look for a second job. I just have no idea when I’ll find time to fit it in, thanks to Lydia’s erratic scheduling.

Speaking of Lydia.

I dial her number and hit send and wait for her to pick up on the other end. After it goes to voice mail, I debate whether to leave a message or just call back later tonight. I’m sure she just deletes her messages, anyway, so I end the call and drop the phone into my purse. I can feel the flush rising up my neck and cheeks and the familiar sting in my eyes. It’s the thirteenth time I’ve walked home in my new state, in a city inhabited by nothing but strangers, but I’m determined to make it the first time I’m not crying when I reach my front door. My neighbors probably think I’m psychotic.

It’s just such a long walk from work to home, and long walks make me contemplate my life, and my life makes me cry.

I pause and look into the glass window of one of the buildings to check for smeared mascara. I take in my

reflection and don't like what I see.

A girl who hates the choices she's made in her life.

A girl who hates her career.

A girl who misses Portland.

A girl who desperately needs a second job, and now a girl who is reading the HELP WANTED sign she just noticed in the window.

Help Wanted.

Knock to apply.

I take a step back and assess the building I'm standing in front of; I've passed by it every day on my commute and I've never noticed it. Probably because I spend my mornings on the phone and my afternoon walks with too many tears in my eyes to notice my surroundings.

CONFESS

That's all the sign says. The name leads me to believe it might be a church, but that thought is quickly dismissed when I take a closer look at the glass windows lining the front of the building. They are covered with small scraps of paper in various shapes and sizes, concealing views into the building, removing any hope of taking a peek inside. The scraps of paper are all marked with words and phrases, written in different handwriting. I take a step closer and read a few of them.

Every day I'm grateful that my husband and his brother look exactly alike. It means there's less of a chance that my husband will find out that our son isn't his.

I clutch my hand to my heart. What the hell is this? I read another.

I haven't spoken to my children in four months. They'll call on holidays and my birthday, but never in between. I don't blame them. I was a horrible father.

I read another.

I lied on my résumé. I don't have a degree. In the five years I've been working for my employer, no one has ever asked to see it.

My mouth is agape and my eyes are wide as I stand and read all the confessions my eyes can reach. I still have no idea what this building is or what I even think about all these things being plastered up for the world to see, but reading them somehow gives me a sense of normalcy. If these are all true, then maybe my life isn't quite as bad as I think it is.

After no less than fifteen minutes, I've made it to the second window, having read most of the confessions to the right of the door, when it begins to swing open. I take a step back to avoid being hit, while I simultaneously fight the intense urge to step around the door and get a peek inside the building.

A hand reaches out and yanks down the HELP WANTED sign. I can hear a marker sliding across the vinyl sign as I remain poised behind the door. Wanting to get a better look at whoever or whatever this place is, I begin to step around the door just as the hand slaps the HELP WANTED sign back onto the window.

Help Wanted.

Knock to apply.

DESPERATELY NEEDED!!

BEAT ON THE DAMN DOOR!!

I laugh when I read the alterations made to the sign. Maybe this is fate. I desperately need a second job and whoever this is desperately needs help.

The door then opens further, and I'm suddenly under the scrutiny of eyes that I guarantee are more shades of green than I could find on his paint-splattered shirt. His hair is black and thick and he uses both hands to push it off his forehead, revealing even more of his face. His eyes are wide and full of anxiety at first, but after taking me in, he lets out a sigh. It's almost as if he's acknowledging that I'm exactly where I'm supposed to be and he's relieved I'm finally here.

He stares at me with a concentrated expression for several seconds. I shift on my feet and glance away. Not because I'm uncomfortable, but because the way he stares at me is oddly comforting. It's probably the first time I've felt welcome since I've been back in Texas.

"Are you here to save me?" he asks, pulling my attention back to his eyes. He's smiling, holding the door open with his elbow. He assesses me from head to toe and I can't help but wonder what he's thinking.

I glance at the HELP WANTED sign and run through a million scenarios of what could happen if I answer his question with a yes and follow him inside this building.

The worst scenario I can come up with is one that would end with my murder. Sadly, that's not enough of a deterrent, considering the month I've had.

"Are you the one hiring?" I ask him.

"If you're the one applying."

His voice is overtly friendly. I'm not used to overt friendliness, and I don't know what to do with it.

"I have a few questions before I agree to help you," I say, proud of myself for not being so willingly killable.

He grabs the HELP WANTED sign and pulls it away from the window. He tosses it inside the building and presses his back against the door, pushing it open as far as it will reach, motioning for me to come inside. "We don't really have time for questions, but I promise I won't torture, rape, or kill you if that helps."

His voice is still pleasant, despite his phrase of choice. So is that smile that shows off two rows of almost perfect teeth and a slightly crooked front left incisor. But that little flaw in his smile is actually my favorite part of him. That and his complete disregard for my questions. I hate questions. This might not be such a bad

gig.

I sigh and slip past him, making my way inside the building. “What am I getting myself into?” I mutter.

“Something you won’t want to get out of,” he says. The door closes behind us, blocking off all the natural lighting in the room. That wouldn’t be a bad thing if there were interior lights on, but there aren’t. Only a faint glow coming from what looks like a hallway on the other side of the room.

As soon as the beat of my heart begins to inform me of how stupid I am for walking into a building with a complete stranger, the lights begin to buzz and flicker to life.

“Sorry.” His voice is close, so I spin around just as the first of the fluorescent lights reach their full power. “I don’t usually work in this part of the studio, so I keep the lights off to save energy.”

Now that the entire area is illuminated, I slowly scan the room. The walls are a stark white, adorned with various paintings. I can’t get a good look at them, because they’re all spread out, several feet away from me. “Is this an art gallery?”

He laughs, which I find unusual, so I spin around to face him.

He’s watching me with narrowed, curious eyes. “I wouldn’t go so far as to call it an art gallery.” He turns and locks the front door and then walks past me. “What size are you?”

He makes his way across the expansive room, toward the hallway. I still don’t know why I’m here, but the fact that he’s asking me what size I am has me a little more concerned than I was just two minutes ago. Is he wondering what size coffin I’ll fit in? How to size the handcuffs?

Okay, I’m a lot concerned.

“What do you mean? Like as in my clothing size?”

He faces me and walks backward, still heading in the direction of the hallway. “Yes, your clothing size. You can’t wear that tonight,” he says, pointing at my jeans and T-shirt. He motions for me to follow him as he turns to ascend a flight of stairs leading to a room above the one we’re in. I may be a sucker for a cute, crooked incisor, but following strangers into unknown territory is where I should probably draw the line.

“Wait,” I say, stopping at the foot of the stairs. He pauses and turns around. “Can you at least give me a rundown of what’s happening right now? Because I’m starting to second-guess my idiotic decision to place my trust in a complete stranger.”

He glances over his shoulder toward wherever the stairs lead and then back at me. He lets out an exasperated sigh before descending several steps. He takes a seat, coming eye to eye with me. His elbows meet his knees and he leans forward, smiling calmly. “My name is Owen Gentry. I’m an artist and this is my studio. I have a showing in less than an hour, I need someone to handle all the transactions, and my girlfriend broke up with me last week.”

Artist.

Showing.

Less than an hour?

And girlfriend? Not touching that one.

I shift on my feet, glance behind me at the studio once more and then back to him. “Do I get any kind of training?”

“Do you know how to use a basic calculator?”

I roll my eyes. “Yes.”

“Consider yourself trained. I only need you for two hours tops and then I’ll give you your two hundred bucks and you can be on your way.”

Two hours.

Two hundred bucks.

Something isn’t adding up.

“What’s the catch?”

“There’s no catch.”

“Why would you need help if you pay a hundred dollars an hour? There has to be a catch. You should be swarmed with potential applicants.”

Owen runs a palm across the scruff on his jaw, moving it back and forth like he’s attempting to squeeze out the tension. “My girlfriend failed to mention she was also quitting her job the day she broke up with me. I called her when she didn’t show to help me set up two hours ago. It’s kind of a last-minute employment opportunity. Maybe you were just in the right place at the right time.” He stands and turns around. I remain in my spot at the bottom of the stairs.

“You made your girlfriend an employee? That’s never a good idea.”

“I made my employee a girlfriend. An even worse idea.” He pauses at the top of the stairs and turns around, looking down at me. “What’s your name?”

“Auburn.”

His gaze falls to my hair, which is understandable. Everyone assumes I was named Auburn due to my hair color, but it’s strawberry blond at best. Calling it red is a stretch.

“What’s the rest of your name, Auburn?”

“Mason Reed.”

Owen slowly tilts his head in the direction of the ceiling as he blows out a breath of air. I follow his gaze and look at the ceiling with him, but nothing is up there other than white ceiling tiles. He takes his right hand and

touches his forehead, then his chest, and then continues the movements from shoulder to shoulder, until he's just made the sign of the cross over himself.

What the hell is he doing? Praying?

He looks back down at me, smiling now. "Is Mason really your middle name?"

I nod. As far as I know, Mason isn't a strange middle name so I have no idea why he's performing religious rituals.

"We have the same middle name," he says.

I regard him silently, allowing myself to take in the probability of his response. "Are you serious?"

He nods casually and reaches into his back pocket, pulling out his wallet. He descends the stairs once more and hands me his license. I look it over, and sure enough, his middle name is Mason.

I press my lips together and hand him back his driver's license.

OMG.

I try to contain the laughter, but it's hard, so I cover my mouth, hoping I'm being inconspicuous about it.

He slides his wallet back into his pocket. His eyebrow raises and he shoots me a look of suspicion. "Are you that quick?"

My shoulders are shaking from the suppressed laughter now. I feel so bad. So, so bad for him.

He rolls his eyes and looks slightly embarrassed in the way he attempts to hide his own smile. He heads back up the stairs much less confidently than before. "This is why I never tell anyone my middle name," he mutters.

I feel guilty for finding this so funny, but his humility finally gives me the courage to climb the rest of the stairs. "Your initials are really OMG?" I bite the inside of my cheek, forcing back the smile I don't want him to see.

I reach the top of the stairs and he ignores me, heading straight for a dresser. He opens a drawer and begins rummaging through it, so I take the opportunity to look around the massive room. There's a large bed, probably a king, in the far corner. In the opposite corner is a full kitchen flanked by two doors, leading to other rooms.

I'm in his apartment.

He turns around and tosses me something black. I catch it and unfold it, revealing a skirt. "That should fit. You and the traitor look about the same size." He walks to the closet and removes a white shirt from a hanger. "See if this works. The shoes you have on are fine."

I take the shirt from him and glance toward the two doors. "Bathroom?"

He points to the door on the left.

“What if they don’t fit?” I ask, worried he won’t be able to use my help if I’m not dressed professionally. Two hundred dollars isn’t easy to come by.

“If they don’t fit, we’ll burn them along with everything else she left behind.”

I laugh and make my way to the bathroom. Once I’m inside, I pay no attention to the actual bathroom itself as I begin to change into the clothes he gave me. Luckily, they fit perfectly. I look at myself in the full-length mirror and cringe at the disaster that is my hair. I should be embarrassed to call myself a cosmetologist. I haven’t touched it since I left the apartment this morning, so I do a quick fix and use one of Owen’s combs to pull it up into a bun. I fold the clothes I just removed and set them on the countertop.

When I exit the bathroom, Owen is in the kitchen, pouring two glasses of wine. I contemplate whether or not I should tell him I’m a few weeks shy of being old enough to drink, but my nerves are screaming for a glass of wine right now.

“Fits,” I say, walking toward him.

He lifts his eyes and stares at my shirt for much longer than it takes to acknowledge whether or not a shirt fits. He clears his throat and looks back down at the wine he’s pouring. “Looks better on you,” he says.

I slide onto the stool, fighting to hide my smile. It’s been a while since I’ve been complimented and I’ve forgotten how good it feels. “You don’t mean that. You’re just bitter over your breakup.”

He pushes a glass of wine across the bar. “I’m not bitter, I’m relieved. And I absolutely mean it.” He raises his glass of wine, so I raise mine. “To ex-girlfriends and new employees.”

I laugh as our glasses clink together. “Better than ex-employees and new girlfriends.”

He pauses with his glass at his lips and watches me sip from mine. When I’m finished, he grins and finally takes a sip.

As soon as I set my wineglass back down on the countertop, something soft grazes my leg. My initial reaction is to scream, which is exactly what happens. Or maybe the noise that comes out of my mouth is more of a yelp. Either way, I pull both of my legs up and look down to see a black, long-haired cat rubbing the stool I’m seated on. I immediately lower my legs back to the floor and bend over to scoop up the cat. I don’t know why, but knowing this guy has a cat eases my discomfort even more. It doesn’t seem like someone could be dangerous if they own a pet. I know that isn’t the best way to justify being in a stranger’s apartment, but it does make me feel better.

“What’s your cat’s name?”

Owen reaches over and runs his fingers through the cat’s mane. “Owen.”

I immediately laugh at his joke, but his expression remains calm. I pause for a few seconds, waiting for him to laugh, but he doesn’t.

“You named your cat after yourself? Seriously?”

He looks at me and I can see the slightest smile playing at the corner of his mouth. He shrugs, almost bashfully. “She reminded me of myself.”

I laugh again. “She? You named a girl cat Owen?”

He looks down at Owen-Cat and continues to pet her as I hold her. “Shh,” he says quietly. “She can understand you. Don’t give her a complex.”

As if he’s right, and she can actually hear me making fun of her name, Owen-Cat jumps out of my arms and lands on the floor. She disappears around the bar, and I force myself to wipe the grin off my face. I love that he named a female cat after himself. Who does that?

I lean my arm on the counter and rest my chin in my hand. “So what do you need me to do tonight, OMG?”

Owen shakes his head and grabs the bottle of wine, storing it in the refrigerator. “You can start by never again referring to me by my initials. After you agree to that, I’ll give you the rundown of what’s about to happen.”

I should feel bad, but he seems amused. “Deal.”

“First of all,” he says, leaning forward across the bar, “how old are you?”

“Not old enough for wine.” I take another sip.

“Oops,” he says dryly. “What do you do? Are you in college?” He rests his chin in his hand and waits for my response to his questions.

“How are these questions preparing me for work tonight?”

He smiles. His smile is exceptionally nice when accompanied by a few sips of wine. He nods once and stands straight. He takes the wineglass from my hand and sets it back down on the bar. “Follow me, Auburn Mason Reed.”

I do what he asks, because for \$100 an hour, I’ll do almost anything.

Almost.

When we reach the main floor again, he walks into the center of the room and lifts his arms, making a full circle. I follow his gaze around the room, taking in the vastness of it. The track lighting is what catches my eye first. Each light is focused on a painting adorning the stark-white walls of the studio, pulling the focus to the art and nothing else. Well, there really isn’t anything else. Just floor-to-ceiling white walls, a polished concrete floor, and art. It’s both simple and overwhelming.

“This is my studio.” He pauses and points to a painting. “That’s the art.” He points to a counter on the other side of the room. “That’s where you’ll be most of the time. I’ll work the room and you ring up the purchases. That’s pretty much it.” He explains it all so casually, as if anyone is perfectly capable of creating something of this magnitude. He rests his hands on his hips and waits for me to absorb it all.

“How old are you?” I ask him.

His eyes narrow and he dips his head slightly before looking away. “Twenty-one.” He says it like his age embarrasses him. It’s almost as if he doesn’t like that he’s so young and already has what appears to be a successful career.

I would have guessed much older. His eyes don’t seem like the eyes of a twenty-one-year-old. They’re dark and deep, and I have the sudden urge to plunge into their depths so I can see everything he’s seen.

I glance away and place my attention on the art. I walk toward the painting closest to me, growing more and more aware of the talent behind the brush with each step. When I reach it, I suck in a breath.



Sometimes I wonder if being dead would be easier than being his mother.

Owen Gentry

It’s somehow sad and breathtaking and beautiful all at once. The painting is of a woman who seems to encompass both love and shame and every single emotion in between.

“What do you use besides acrylics?” I ask, taking a step closer. I run my finger across the canvas and hear his footsteps close in on me. He pauses next to me, but I can’t take my eyes off the painting long enough to look at him.

“I use a lot of different mediums, from acrylic to spray paint. It just depends on the piece.”

My eyes are drawn to a slip of paper next to the painting, adhered to the wall. I read the words sprawled across it.

Sometimes I wonder if being dead would be easier than being his mother.

I touch the paper and then look back at the painting. “A confession?” When I turn and face him, his playful smile is gone. His arms are folded tightly across his chest and his chin is tucked in. He looks at me as if he’s nervous about my reaction.

“Yep,” he says simply.

I glance toward the window—at all the pieces of paper lining the glass. My eyes move around the room to all the paintings and I notice strips of paper adhered to the walls next to every one.

“They’re all confessions,” I say in awe. “Are these from actual people? People you know?”

He shakes his head and motions toward the front door. “They’re all anonymous. People leave their confessions in the slot over there, and I use some of them as inspiration for my art.”

I walk to the next painting and look at the confession before I even look at the interpreted piece.

I’ve never let anyone see me without makeup. My greatest fear is what I’ll look like at my funeral. I’m almost certain I’ll be cremated, because my insecurities run so deep, they’ll follow me into the afterlife. Thank you for that, Mother.

I immediately move my attention to the painting.



“It’s incredible,” I whisper, spinning around to take in more of what he’s created. I walk to the window of confessions and find one written in red ink and highlighted.

I’m scared I’ll never stop comparing my life without him to how my life was when I was with him.

I’m not sure if I’m more fascinated by the confessions, the art, or the fact that I feel like I can relate to everything in here. I’m a very closed-off person. I rarely share my true thoughts with anyone, regardless of how helpful it might be for me. Seeing all of these secrets and knowing that these people have more than likely never shared these with anyone, and never will, makes me feel a sense of connection to them. A sense of belonging.

In a way, the studio and the confessions remind me of Adam.

“Tell me something about yourself that no one else knows. Something I can keep for myself.”

I hate how I always tie Adam in to everything I see and do, and I wonder if and when that will ever go away. It’s been five years since I last saw him. Five years since he passed away. Five years, and I’m wondering if, like the confession in front of me, I’ll forever be comparing my life with him to my life without him.

And I wonder if I’ll ever not be disappointed.

Users Review

From reader reviews:

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