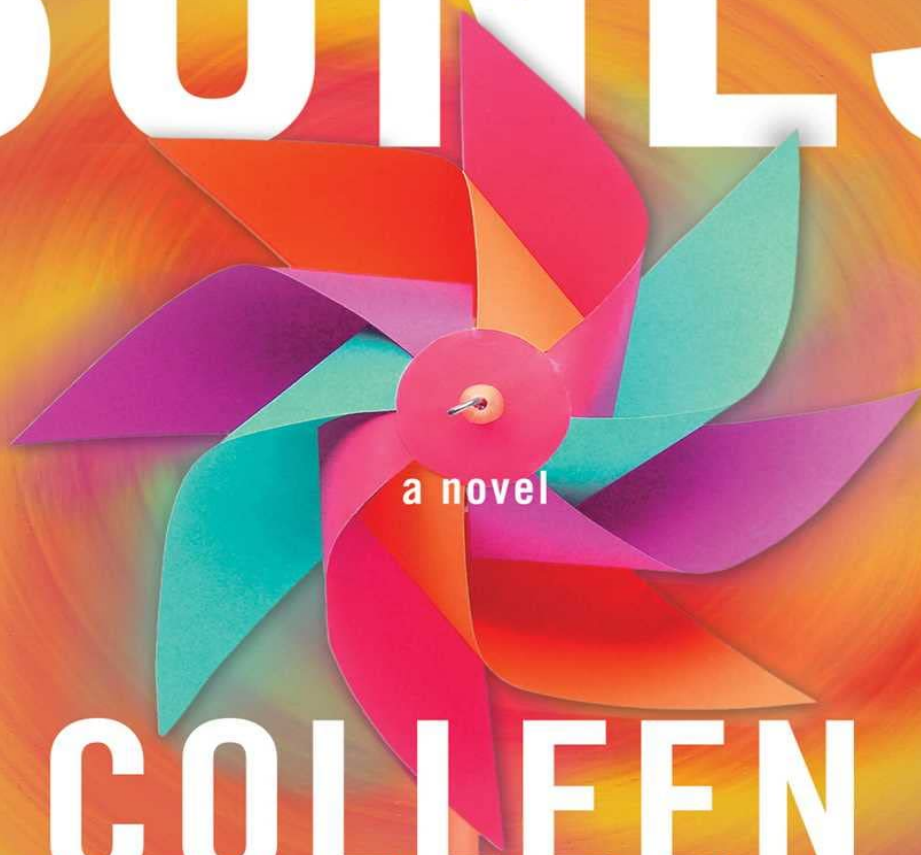


HEART BONES



a novel

COLLEEN
HOOVER

#1 *NEW YORK TIMES* BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF
IT ENDS WITH US

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Acknowledgments

HEART a novel BONES



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HOOVER

#1 NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

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HEART BONES

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Kelly Garcia, this book is for you, your husband, and your
happily ever after.

ONE

Summer 2015

There's a picture of Mother Teresa that hangs on our living room wall where a television would go if we could afford the kind of television that hangs on the wall, or even a home with the kind of walls that could hold a television.

The walls of a trailer house aren't made of the same stuff walls in a normal house are made of. In a trailer house, the walls crumble beneath your fingernails like chalk if you so much as scratch at them.

I once asked my mother, Janean, why she keeps a picture of Mother Teresa on our living room wall.

"The bitch was a fraud," she said.

Her words. Not mine.

I think when you're the worst of people, finding the worst in others becomes a survival tactic of sorts. You focus heavily on the darkness in people in hopes of masking the true shade of your own darkness. That's how my mother has spent her entire life. Always seeking the worst in people. Even her own daughter.

Even Mother Teresa.

Janean is lying on the couch in the same position she was in when I left for my shift at McDonald's eight hours ago. She's staring at the picture of Mother Teresa, but she's not actually *looking* at it. It's as if her eyeballs have stopped working.

Stopped absorbing.

Janean is an addict. I realized this around the age of nine, but back then, her addictions were limited to men, alcohol, and gambling.

Over the years, her addictions became more noticeable and a lot deadlier. I think it was five years ago, right around when I turned fourteen, when I caught her shooting up meth for the first time. Once a person starts using meth regularly, their lifespan shortens drastically. I Googled it in the school library once. *How long can a person live with meth addiction?*

Six to seven years is what the internet said.

I've found her unresponsive several times over the years, but this feels different. This feels final.

"Janean?" There's a calmness to my voice that certainly shouldn't be present right now. I feel like my voice should be shaky, or unavailable. I feel somewhat ashamed at my lack of reaction in this moment.

I drop my purse at my feet as I stare intensely at her face from across the living room. It's raining outside and I haven't even closed the front door yet, so I'm still getting soaked. But shutting the door and sheltering my back from the rain is the least of my concerns right now as I stare at Janean as she stares at Mother Teresa.

One of Janean's arms is draped over her stomach and the other is dangling off the couch, her fingers resting gently against worn carpet. She's a little swollen and it makes her look younger. Not younger than her age—she's only thirty-nine—but younger than what her addictions have made her appear to be. Her cheeks are slightly less concave and the wrinkles that have formed around her mouth over the last few years look as if they've been smoothed out by Botox.

"Janean?"

Nothing.

Her mouth is hanging slightly open, revealing yellow slivers of chipped and rotted teeth. It's like she was in the middle of a sentence when the life slipped out of her.

I've imagined this moment for a while now. Sometimes when you hate someone enough, you can't help but lie awake in bed at night, wondering what life would be like if that person were dead.

I imagined it differently. I imagined it would be much more dramatic.

I stare at Janean for another moment, waiting to see if she's just in some kind of trance. I take a few steps toward her and then pause when I see her arm. There's a needle dangling from the skin just underneath the inside of her elbow.

As soon as I see it, the reality of the moment slips over me like a slimy film and it makes me nauseous. I spin around and run out of the house. It feels like I'm about to be sick, so I lean over the rotten railing, careful not to put too much pressure on it so it doesn't buckle beneath my grip.

I'm relieved as soon as I get sick because I was beginning to worry about my lack of reaction to this life-altering moment. I may not be as hysterical as a daughter should be in this moment, but at least I feel *something*.

I wipe my mouth on the sleeve of my McDonald's work shirt. I sit down on the steps, despite the rain still pummeling down on me from the heartless night sky.

My hair and my clothes are soaking wet. So is my face, but none of the liquid streaming down my cheeks is tears.

It's all raindrops.

Wet eyes and a dry heart.

I close my eyes and press my face into my hands, trying to decide if my detachment is because of my upbringing or if I was born broken.

I wonder what kind of upbringing is worse for a human. The kind where you're sheltered and loved to the point that you aren't aware of how cruel the world can be until it's too late to acquire the necessary coping skills, or the kind of

household I grew up in. The ugliest version of a family, where coping is the only thing you learn.

Before I was old enough to work for the food I buy, there were many nights I'd lie awake, unable to sleep because my stomach would be cramping from hunger. Janean told me once that the growl coming from my stomach was a ravenous cat that lived inside of me, and the cat would growl if I didn't feed it enough food. Every time I got hungry after that, I'd imagine that cat in my belly searching for food that wasn't there. I feared it would eat away at my insides if I didn't feed it, so sometimes I'd eat things that weren't food just to satisfy the hungry cat.

She once left me alone for so long, I ate old banana peels and eggshells from the garbage. I even tried eating a few bites of stuffing from inside the couch cushion, but it was too hard to swallow. I spent most of my childhood scared to death that I was slowly being eaten from the inside by that starving cat.

I don't know that she was ever actually gone for more than one day at a time, but when you're a child, time feels stretched out when you're alone.

I remember she'd come stumbling through the front door and fall onto the couch and stay there for hours. I'd fall asleep curled up at the other end of the couch, too scared to leave her alone.

But then in the mornings following her drunken return, I'd wake up to find her cooking breakfast in the kitchen. It wasn't always traditional breakfast. Sometimes it would be peas, sometimes eggs, sometimes a can of chicken noodle soup.

Around the age of six, I started to pay attention to how she worked the stove on those mornings, because I knew I'd need to know how to work it for the next time she disappeared.

I wonder how many six-year-olds have to teach themselves how to work a stove because they believe if they don't, they'll be eaten alive by their internal ravenous cat.

It's the luck of the draw, I guess. Most kids get the kind of parents that'll be missed after they die. The rest of us get the kind of parents who make better parents after they're dead.

The nicest thing my mother has ever done for me is die.



Buzz told me to sit in his police car so I'd be out of the rain and out of the house while they retrieved her body. I watched numbly as they carried her out on a gurney, covered with a white sheet. They put her in the back of a coroner van. Didn't even bother taking her in an ambulance. There was no point. Almost everyone under the age of fifty who dies in this town dies from addiction.

Doesn't even matter what kind—they're all deadly in the end.

I press my cheek against the car window and try to look up at the sky. There are no stars tonight. I can't even see the moon. Every now and then, lightning will strike, revealing clumps of black clouds.

Fitting.

Buzz opens the back door and bends down. The rain has slowed to a mist now, so his face is wet, but it just makes him look like he's dripping sweat.

"Do you need a ride anywhere?" he asks.

I shake my head.

"Need to call anyone? You can use my cell."

I shake my head again. "I'll be fine. Can I go back inside now?"

I don't know that I really want to go back inside the trailer where my mother took her last breath, but I don't have a more appealing alternative at the moment.

Buzz steps aside and opens an umbrella, even though the rain has slowed and I'm already soaking wet. He stays a step behind me, holding the umbrella over my head as I walk toward the house.

I don't know Buzz very well. I know his son, Dakota. I know Dakota in so many ways—all ways I wish I didn't.

I wonder if Buzz knows what kind of son he's raised. Buzz seems like a decent guy. He's never given me or my mother too much shit. Sometimes he stops his car on his patrol through the trailer park. He always asks how I'm doing, and I get the feeling when he asks this, he half expects me to beg him to get me out of here. But I don't. People like me are extremely skilled at pretending we're just fine. I always smile and tell him I'm great, and then he sighs like he's relieved I didn't give him a reason to call Child Protective Services.

Once I'm back inside the living room, I can't help but stare at the couch. It looks different now. *Like somebody died on it.*

"You good for the night?" Buzz asks.

I turn around and he's standing right outside the door with the umbrella over his head. He's looking at me like he's trying to be sympathetic, but his mind is probably working out all the paperwork this has just caused him.

"I'm good."

"You can go down to the funeral home tomorrow to plan the arrangements. They said any time after ten is good."

I nod, but he doesn't leave. He just lingers for a moment, shuffling from one unsure foot to the other. He closes the umbrella just outside the door like he's superstitious, then takes a step into the house. "You know," he says, creasing his face so hard his bald head spills wrinkles over his forehead. "If you don't show up at the funeral home, they can declare it an indigent burial. You won't be able to have any type of service for her, but at least they can't stick you with a bill." He looks ashamed to have even suggested that. His eyes dart up to the

Mother Teresa painting and then he looks down at his feet like she just scolded him.

“Thanks.” I doubt anyone would show up if I held a service, anyway.

It’s sad, but it’s true. My mother was lonely, if anything. Sure, she hung with her usual crowd at the bar she’s been frequenting for almost twenty years, but those people weren’t her friends. They’re all just other lonely people, seeking each other out so they can be lonely together.

Even that crowd has dwindled thanks to the addiction that’s ravaged this town. And the type of people she did hang out with aren’t the type to show up for a funeral. Most of them probably have outstanding warrants, and they avoid any kind of organized events in the off-chance it’s a ploy by the police to do a warrant round-up.

“Do you need to call your father?” he asks.

I stare at him a moment, knowing that’s what I’ll end up doing, but wondering how long I can put it off.

“Beyah,” he says, pronouncing my name with a long e.

“It’s pronounced *Bay-uh*.” I don’t know why I correct him. He’s said it wrong since I’ve known him, and I’ve never cared enough to correct him before this moment.

“*Beyah*,” he corrects. “I know this isn’t my place, but...you need out of this town. You know what happens to people like —” He stops talking, as if what he was about to say would insult me.

I finish the sentence for him. “To people like me?”

He looks even more ashamed now, even though I know he just means *people like me* in a broad sense. People with mothers like mine. Poor people with no way out of this town. People who end up working fast food until they’re numb inside, and the fry cook offers them a hit of something that makes the rest of the shift feel like they’re at a disco, and before they know it, they can’t survive a single second of their

miserable day without hit after hit, chasing that feeling faster than they chase the safety of their own child, until they're shooting it straight into their veins and staring at Mother Teresa while they accidentally die, when all they ever really wanted was an escape from the ugliness.

Buzz looks uncomfortable standing inside this house. I wish he'd just leave. I feel sorrier for him than I do myself, and I'm the one who just found my mother dead on the couch.

"I don't know your father at all, but I know he's been paying the rent on this trailer since you were born. That right there tells me he's a better option than staying in this town. If you have an out, you need to take it. This life you've been living here—it's not good enough for you."

That might be the nicest thing anyone has ever said to me. And it's coming from Dakota's dad, of all people.

He stares at me a moment, like he wants to say something else. Or maybe he wants me to respond. Either way, the room stays silent until he nods and then leaves. Finally.

After he shuts the front door, I turn and stare at the couch. I stare so long, I feel like I'm in a daze. It's weird how your whole life can completely change in the hours between waking up and going to bed.

As much as I hate to admit it, Buzz is right. I can't stay here. I never planned to, but I at least thought I had the summer left to prepare for my exit.

I've been working my ass off to get out of this town, and as soon as August hits, I'll be on a bus to Pennsylvania.

I received a volleyball scholarship to Penn State. In August, I'll be out of this life, and it won't be because of anything my mother did for me, or because my father bailed me out of here. It'll be because of *me*.

I want that victory.

I want to be the reason I turn out the way I'm going to turn out.

I refuse to allow Janean to receive any credit for any good things that might happen in my future. I never told her about the volleyball scholarship I received. I didn't tell anyone. I swore my coach to secrecy and wouldn't even allow a write-up in the paper, or a photo-op for the yearbook.

I never told my father about the scholarship, either. I'm not even sure he knows I play volleyball. My coaches made sure I had everything I needed as far as supplies, equipment, and a uniform. I was good enough that they weren't going to allow my financial situation to prevent me from being part of the team.

I haven't had to ask my parents for a single thing related to volleyball.

It feels strange even referring to them as parents. They gave me life, but that's about the only thing I've ever received from them.

I am the product of a one-night stand. My father lived in Washington and was in Kentucky on business when he met Janean. I was three months old before he even knew he'd gotten Janean pregnant. He found out he was a dad when she served him with child support papers.

He came to see me once a year until I was four; then he started flying me to Washington to visit him, instead.

He knows nothing about my life in Kentucky. He knows nothing about my mother's addictions. He knows nothing about me, other than what I present to him, and that's very little.

I'm extremely secretive about every aspect of my life. Secrets are my only form of currency.

I haven't told my father about my scholarship for the same reason I never told my mother. I don't want him to take pride in having a daughter who accomplished something. He doesn't deserve to feel prideful of a child he puts a fraction of his effort into. He thinks a monthly check and intermittent phone

calls to my work are enough to cover up the fact that he barely knows me.

He's a *two weeks out of the year* Dad.

Because we're so far apart on the map, it's convenient for him to excuse his absence in my life. I've stayed with him fourteen days out of every summer since I was four, but in the last three years, I haven't seen him at all.

Once I turned sixteen and joined the varsity team, volleyball became an even bigger part of my daily routine, so I stopped flying out to see him. I've been making excuses for three years now as to why I can't make our visits.

He pretends to be bummed.

I pretend to be apologetic and busy.

Sorry, *Brian*, but a monthly child support check makes you responsible; it doesn't make you a father.

There's a sudden pounding on the door that startles me enough that I let out a yelp. I spin around and see the landlord through the living room window. Normally, I wouldn't open up for Gary Shelby, but I'm not really in a position to ignore him. He knows I'm awake. I had to use his phone to call the police. Plus, I kind of need to figure out what to do about this couch. I don't want it inside this house anymore.

When I open the door, Gary hands me an envelope as he pushes his way inside to get out of the rain.

"What's this?" I ask him.

"Eviction notice."

If this were anyone but Gary Shelby, I'd be surprised.

"She literally just died. You couldn't wait a week?"

"She's three months late on rent, and I don't rent to teenagers. I'll either need a new lease with someone over the age of twenty-one, or you're gonna have to move out."

“My father pays her for the rent. How are we three months behind?”

“Your mother said he stopped sending her checks a few months ago. Mr. Renaldo’s been looking for a bigger place, so I’m thinking I might let them switch to—”

“You’re an asshole, Gary Shelby.”

Gary shrugs. “It’s business. I’ve already sent her two notices. I’m sure you have somewhere else to go. You can’t just stay here by yourself, you’re only sixteen.”

“I turned nineteen last week.”

“Either way, you gotta be twenty-one. Terms of the lease. That and actually paying the rent.”

I’m sure there’s some sort of eviction process that has to go through the courts before he could actually force me out the door, but it’s pointless to fight when I don’t even want to live here anymore.

“How long do I have?”

“I’ll give you the week.”

The week? I have twenty-seven dollars to my name and absolutely nowhere to go.

“Can I have two months? I leave for college in August.”

“Maybe if you weren’t already three months behind. But that’s three months on top of two months and I can’t afford to give *anybody* almost half a year of free rent.”

“You’re such an asshole,” I mutter under my breath.

“We covered that already.”

I go through a mental list of potential friends that I could possibly stay with for the next two months, but Natalie left for college the day after we graduated to get a head start on summer classes. The rest of my friends either dropped out and are on their path to becoming the next Janean, or they have families I already know wouldn’t allow it.

There's Becca, but she's got that sleazy stepfather. I'd rather live with Gary than be near that man.

I'm down to my last resort.

"I need to use your phone."

"It's getting late," he says. "You can use it tomorrow."

I push past him and walk down the steps. "You should have waited until tomorrow to tell me I'm homeless, then, Gary!"

I walk in the rain, straight to his house. Gary is the only one left in this trailer park who still has a landline, and since most of us here are too poor to have cell phones, everybody uses Gary's phone. At least they do if they're caught up on their rent and aren't trying to avoid him.

It's been almost a year since the last time I called my father, but I have his number memorized. It's the same cell number he's had for eight years now. He calls me at work about once a month, but most of the time I avoid his call. There's not much conversation that can be had with a man I barely know, so I'd rather not speak to him than spew lies like, "*Mom's good. School's good. Work's good. Life's good.*"

I swallow my thick, compacted pride and dial his number. I expect it to go to voicemail, but my father answers on the second ring.

"This is Brian Grim." His voice is scratchy. I woke him up.

I clear my throat. "Um. Hey, Dad."

"Beyah?" He sounds way more awake and worried now that he knows it's me. "What's wrong? Is everything okay?"

Janean died is on the tip of my tongue, but I can't seem to get it out. He barely knew my mother. It's been so long since he's been to Kentucky, the last time he laid eyes on her, she was still kind of pretty and didn't look like a shallow, stumbling skeleton.

"Yeah. I'm fine," I say.

It's too weird telling him she died over the phone. I'll wait and tell him in person.

"Why are you calling so late? What's wrong?"

"I work late shift and it's hard for me to get to a phone."

"That's why I mailed you the cell phone."

He mailed me a cell phone? I don't even bother inquiring about that. I'm sure my mother sold it for some of the stuff that's sitting frozen in her veins right now.

"Listen," I say. "I know it's been a while, but I was wondering if I could come visit before I start college classes."

"Of course," he says without hesitation. "Name the day and I'll buy a plane ticket."

I look over at Gary. He's just a few feet away, staring at my breasts, so I turn away from him. "I was hoping I could come tomorrow."

There's a pause, and I hear movement on the other end, like he's crawling out of bed. "Tomorrow? Are you sure you're alright, Beyah?"

I let my head fall back and I close my eyes while I lie to him again. "Yeah. Janean just...I need a break. And I miss you."

I don't miss him. I barely know him. But whatever will get me a flight out of here the fastest.

I can hear typing coming from my father's end, like he's on a computer. He starts muttering times and names of airlines. "I can get you on a United flight to Houston tomorrow morning. You'd need to be at the airport in five hours. How many days do you want to stay?"

"Houston? Why Houston?"

"I live in Texas now. Have for a year and a half."

That's probably something a daughter should know about her father. At least he still has the same cell phone number.

“Oh. Yeah, I forgot.” I grip the back of my neck. “Can you just buy a one-way ticket for now? I’m not sure how long I want to stay. Maybe a few weeks.”

“Yeah, I’ll buy it now. Just find a United agent at the airport in the morning and they’ll print your boarding pass. I’ll meet you at baggage claim when you land.”

“Thanks.” I end the call before he can say anything else. When I turn around, Gary throws a thumb in the direction of the front door.

“I can give you a ride to the airport,” he says. “It’ll cost ya, though.” He grins, and the way his lips curl up makes my stomach churn. When Gary Shelby offers to do a favor for a woman, it isn’t in exchange for money.

And if I’m going to be exchanging favors with someone for a ride to the airport, I’d rather it be Dakota than Gary Shelby.

I’m used to Dakota. As much as I despise him, he’s been dependable.

I pick up the phone again and dial Dakota’s number. My father said I need to be at the airport in five hours, but if I wait until Dakota is asleep, he may not answer the phone. I want to get there while I still have the opportunity.

I’m relieved when Dakota answers the call. He sounds half-asleep when he says, “Yeah?”

“Hey. I need a favor.”

There’s a moment of silence before Dakota says, “Really, Beyah? It’s the middle of the night.”

He doesn’t even ask what I need, or if everything is okay. He’s immediately annoyed with me. I should have put an end to whatever this is between us as soon as it started.

I clear my throat. “I need a ride to the airport.”

I can hear Dakota sigh like I’m a nuisance to him. I know I’m not. I may not be more than a transaction to him, but it’s a transaction he can’t seem to get enough of.

I hear the creak of his bed like he's sitting up. "I don't have any money."

"I'm not—I'm not calling you for that. I need a ride to the airport. Please."

Dakota groans, and then says, "Give me half an hour." He hangs up. So do I.

I walk past Gary and make sure to slam his screen door as I leave his house.

Over the years, I've learned not to trust men. Most of the ones I've interacted with are like Gary Shelby. Buzz is okay, but I can't ignore that he created Dakota. And Dakota is just a better looking, younger Gary Shelby.

I hear people talk about good men, but I'm starting to think that's a myth. I thought Dakota was one of the good ones. Most of them just appear to be Dakotas on the outside, but beneath all those layers of epidermis and subcutaneous tissue, there's a sickness running through their veins.

When I'm back inside my own house, I look around my bedroom, wondering if there's anything I even want to take with me. I don't have much that's worth packing, so I grab a few changes of clothes, my hairbrush and my toothbrush. I stuff my clothes in plastic sacks before putting them in my backpack so they don't get wet in case I get stuck in the rain.

Before I head out the front door to wait on Dakota, I take the painting of Mother Teresa off the wall. I try to shove it in my backpack, but it won't fit. I grab another plastic sack and put the painting in it, then carry it with me out of the house.