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ALSO BY THE AUTHOR

Between Friends & Lovers
On Rotation

Die for Me

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One

The Grand Ballroom of the Edison Mansion is a study in gold: gold velvet curtains, gold pillars, gold candelabras from which amber-colored flames flicker and flare. Brandon Pendersen, my colleague and fellow Broadview Hospital lifer, fits right in with a gold satin tie that matches his new wife Leila's golden beach waves. I still remember his first wedding, fifteen years ago, under a sagging drop ceiling in the basement of Chicago's city hall—Brandon in an ill-fitting navy suit, Winona, his ex-wife and my best friend, in a vintage tea-length dress she'd thrifted from Goodwill two weeks earlier. They'd had nothing between them but five hundred thousand dollars in student loans, thirty cumulative hours of sleep that week, and a promise to love each other forevermore . . . which Brandon broke two years ago when he fell in lust-love with the twenty-something-year-old device rep with whom he is currently swaying to Ed Sheeran's "Perfect."

Under the table, I text Winona.

Winny. You sure it's okay for me to be here? It feels wrong.

Winny's response is immediate.

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Of course I'm sure. I asked you to go. And besides, Sophie needs an ally out there.

My eyes flicker to Sophie, Winny's twelve-year-old daughter, who is sitting at the head table in a burgundy cap-sleeved dress and examining her black fingernails with the determination of a preteen who can be forced to sit still but not to put on a show.

Well, if it's any comfort, Brandon's hairline looks like someone drew it on with a marker.

I can almost hear Winny's laughter in my ears, more wheeze than sound, like she's choking on a marble.

Oh my god the plugs! You should have seen what they looked like when they were growing in. Like a Christmas tree farm on New Year's Eve. Was hoping they would all fall out for his big day.

Trust me girl, that would've been a blessing. He looks a mess right now.

Like an old man in denial, Winny responds.

I snort, then take a sip of Bordeaux to cover for it.

Brandon invited the entire interventional cardiology subsection to his wedding, but I was still shocked to receive an invitation. On a professional level, he and I were still cool. We covered each other in the cath lab when one of us was running late, traded calls when necessary, jumped in on each other's cases when we needed a first scrub with more experienced hands than our trainees could provide. On a personal level—well,

he'd courted and eventually cheated on my best friend right under my nose at our shared place of work. Maybe our many years of calling ourselves a throuple had given him the impression that he could split my allegiance like he had his daughter's custody, but I was Winny's before I was his, and I would be Winny's forevermore. When Brandon betrayed Winona, he'd betrayed me too, spat on the sacred union that was husband, wife, and perpetual third wheel. For all his faults, Brandon should have been smart enough to know that.

And yet he'd still invited me to his wedding.

"I know you hate me right now," Brandon had said as he'd handed me the wax-sealed gold envelope. "But I still consider you my friend, Sean. I really do want you there."

Later that night, I'd asked Winny if she wanted me to burn it.

"I want you to go," she'd said instead. "If only to bear witness."

To the end of their marriage, as I had once its beginning.

The ballroom erupts with applause. I place my drink, and my phone, down on the table, plastering what I hope is a polite smile on my face as Brandon dips Leila into a passionate kiss on the dance floor.

"Gorgeous," Joseph Krause, one of the four other interventional cardiologists at my table, says. He's twenty-five years older than the rest of us and clearly losing his edge in the lab. Despite this, he still sees himself as a steward of the kind of wisdom that requires imparting whenever he senses he's losing the spotlight. Like now. "Second weddings are always much more romantic than firsts, don't you agree? You've learned more about yourself. Know what true love *actually* looks like."

My colleagues, most of whom have had lavish second weddings themselves, laugh. I exchange a queasy look with Haoran, the only man at our table still with his original wife, a lovely woman named Katherine who cuts furiously at her chicken breast and pretends not to care that the rest of the table seems to think she has an expiration

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date. Her arms are sloped, doughy, and the fine lines on her forehead have never seen Botox or filler, and she'd once confessed to me at a work dinner that she too felt like it was only a "matter of time."

I don't agree. Haoran is dutiful and kindhearted, a family man through and through. He also, however, isn't the confrontational type, which means that while Krause expounds on his idea of true love only being found on the second go-round, he says a whole lot of nothing.

Which means I have to be the bad guy.

"I don't really understand the need to get married again, in that case," I say, tilting my head to the side. "If you don't know yourself well enough to reliably keep a vow, why make another one?"

Once upon a time, seeing Krause shoot daggers at me from across a table might have made me nearly wet myself. Nowadays, it's like watching a baby throw down his rattle.

"You've never been married before, right, Sean?" Krause says, tossing an arm around the back of his (second) wife's chair. She beams up at him, either unaware or unfazed by the fact that she is being used as a prop. "I'm not sure you would understand."

"I'm not particularly interested in tying myself legally to someone, no," I say primly.

"Yes, I'm sure there's a line of suitors just banging down your door," he sneers.

I hold back a snort. Krause doesn't know that I was once engaged—albeit to a horrible man—or that my phone log is full of texts from guys who made it to date three and are begging for a chance at number four. Men like him can't comprehend that they might be the worst thing to happen to a woman. They can only conceive of themselves as a gift, even though most of us consider Krause a very powerful nuisance on his best day.

"I see you've been by my place," I snip. "You can take a ticket, if you'd like."

Krause's scowl thins his lips so much that they disappear behind his Colonel Sanders–esque white mustache.

"Marriage gives you stability. A home to go back to," he says. "Eventually you'll get old and gray, and all those suitors you turned your nose up at will head out for greener pastures. You should settle down before you run out of options."

The laugh that escapes my chest is hoarse with righteous indignation.

"Is that why you cheated on your ex-wife?" I ask. "Because she was getting a little too old and gray for your tastes?"

Krause's wife gasps, someone chokes on their drink, and Katherine gives me an appreciative look. Meanwhile, Krause's hold on his fork tightens like he's thinking about lodging it in my neck.

"Oooookay. Daggers away," Haoran, ever the peacekeeper, says. "I propose a toast—to an open bar on Brandon's tab!"

We raise our glasses, Krause begrudgingly. Then, before our tentative peace can be disrupted, the emcee clinks a glass; it's time for speeches.

For the rest of the program, I keep my attention on the happy couple, who look up at each other with sugary smiles as friends and family exalt them and their relationship. The mood is light and airy, as if the happy couple formed their bond at a run club rather than through clandestine meetings in the cath lab supply closet. The Pendersens are many in number, but I note that Leila's side is eclectic, strikingly young, and only takes up one table. I'd pieced together her backstory through brief conversations we've had since she started working at Broadview: parents who died young, an older brother who followed only a few years later. What family she has now she had to forge on her own—something that I felt had connected us. Before she

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became my best friend's ex-husband's love interest. Still, for a wedding celebrating such an unseemly union, it's surprisingly mundane. By the time the third speech ends, I'm fighting back yawns.

Then Leila's man of honor steps up to the microphone, and the whole room stills. He's tall, brooding, a storm cloud of a man, crackling with an unmistakable and unteachable magnetism, and racially ambiguous in the sort of way that makes me wonder whether his hair would curl if he grew it out.

My type? Not exactly; I usually like my men to be a little less *pretty*. And older. Considerably older than the twenty-something years this young man has on him. And yet here I am, working half the muscles in my face to keep saliva from oozing out of the corner of my mouth. Questionable choice in current husband/former affair partner aside, Leila sure has some good taste.

"Hello everyone," he says, in a deep, vaguely British-accented voice that is as smooth and sonorous as a cello's hum. "I'm Julian."

"Hi, Julian," the room calls back. He smiles, almost bashful, and every person in the room sits to attention as if someone has turned a crank.

Okay so this is very inappropriate, I text Winona, after I have picked up my jaw. But Leila's man of honor is FOINE.

Really? Winona responds. Omg. You should snatch him up. She steals my husband, my best friend steals HER best friend. It's perfect.

I suck in my inner cheek. Yes, Julian is glorious, but not glorious enough to settle my unease. All of these festivities, all of this money, has gone to celebrate the breakdown of Winona's family. Almost everyone in attendance knows her, but not one person has asked after her, skirting around her existence like she's a Bloody Mary who will appear in the middle of the ballroom if they say her name thrice. Only Sophie seems to serve as a reminder, her cascade of dark curls, sand-colored skin, and bulbous eyes too unlike the Pendersens' Scandinavian features for anyone who greets her to forget their origin. Over an elaborate crystal centerpiece, I catch my goddaughter's eye, then throw her a thumbs-up. Sophie sticks her tongue out at me in response: our shared signs of resistance.

A few feet away, Julian is finishing up his remarks. His speech is pretty standard: cute anecdote about how he met Leila (age fourteen, in her high school cafeteria where he was visiting as an exchange student) and the first time he met Brandon (last year, on the North Avenue Beach volleyball court), well-wishes for the couple. In between staring at him, making faces at Sophie, and texting Winona under the table, I miss most of it.

"And Sophia," Julian says suddenly, turning to the head table just as Sophie uncrosses her eyes. "I know today must be full of conflicting emotions for you. That you might feel like your dad's happiness came at the expense of yours. That by celebrating his new union, we are betraying your old one." He gives her a beatific smile, and she stares back, slack-jawed. "My hope for you is that whatever pain you might feel right now eventually makes room for some joy. Leila might never become another mother to you, but I hope that maybe someday she might become something like a friend."

The tense silence that follows is suffocating, like someone's just dropped a smoke bomb into the room. It's only interrupted by a loud clatter—my phone, sliding off my lap and onto the floor.

At the head table, Brandon tries his best to maintain his composure, but his bride takes it out of his hands.

In a slow, sweeping motion, Leila raises her glass.

"Screw you, Julian," she says, giving him a dazzling smile.

Julian grins.

"Only in your dreams," he says. And then he takes his seat.

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Two

Once the lights dimmed for the reception, I excuse myself from the festivities, lingering in the ballroom just long enough to see Brandon's dad spin Sophie onto the dance floor to ABBA's "Take a Chance on Me." My mind shuttles to what feels like a lifetime ago: Winona, Brandon, and I meeting for dinner during residency. Somehow Brandon and I had been placed on the same cardiology rotation, and on a schedule that would allow us to see each other to boot. And so we gathered—Brandon pre-call, me exhausted and post-call, Winona post–proposal defense for her psychology PhD program—around the peeling dining room table we'd garbage-picked three years before, inhaling Taco Bell soft shells between complaints about our micromanaging preceptors. Halfway through her Crunchwrap Supreme, Winny suddenly braced herself against the table, then excused herself into the bathroom. Brandon and I exchanged a concerned look as he raced after her. It took ten minutes for them to emerge, and when they did, they wore identical expressions: shell-shocked but ecstatic.

"Food poisoning?" I asked.

"Worse," Winny said. Then she held out a hand, turning over her

fist to reveal a positive pregnancy test. Her eyes welled with tears, and Brandon buried his fingers in her curls to press an adoring kiss to her forehead. "You'll be godmother, obviously. If all goes well."

"Obviously!" I cried, standing up to pull both of them into a hug. Our tears intermixed, three and a half bodies pressed close, nothing between us but love.

And now the "food poisoning" is twelve years old and that love has been snatched away and repackaged for someone else, and here I am, meant to celebrate it all.

At least she hasn't stopped grinning since Julian's speech. I take that as a signal that she's doing well enough that I can afford myself a moment.

I'm wandering around the venue, I text Sophie. Plan to head home at 8?

7:30, Sophie says, ever the negotiator.

Deal, I agree. One hour more. I've burned an hour in worse places than my best friend's ex-husband's wedding, and I know exactly where I want to spend it.

I sweep past the swinging doors that house the kitchen, the pink-wallpapered parlor room, down a short flight of carved cherrywood stairs. Already the sounds of the festivities are behind me, the thrumming of the bass guitar fading to a hum in my feet. Finally I arrive at a closed oak door that I'm sure marks my destination. Looking left and right, I turn the key still stuck in the ornate handle, silently rejoicing at the *click* of its opening. Then, quick as a cat, I slip inside.

The room is large and cluttered; old, wrapped furniture is pushed into a pile on the side opposite a window. I shake out the heavy curtains before throwing them wide open, wincing as golden sunlight spills inside and shrouds my target: a beautiful Steinway and Sons grand piano. I first caught a glimpse of it through this window the

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night before when I dropped off Sophie at the venue for the rehearsal dinner and thought, *Poor thing. I bet no one touches it.*

I bet correctly. The layer of dust on its lid is thick as a carpet, and when I blow it off, it peels away in tendrils. I lift the fallboard and run my fingers over the keys. To my surprise, it's in tune.

A surge of excitement rushes through me as I pull out the bench. In terms of poor wedding guest etiquette, sneaking away from the reception to play the grand piano tucked away in a hidden room in the venue is probably minor, but it still feels like a thrill. My fingers flex above the keys, and I let them decide what song to play.

They choose Chopin's "Prelude in E Minor." In the still room, each keystroke feels like a stab into the silence. Suddenly I'm no longer in Edison Mansion, a few hundred feet away from a rip-roaring reception, but in a fishbowl-shaped world of my own making. I transition into Lianne La Havas's "Lost & Found," delighting in the responsiveness of the keys, the creak of the pedals underfoot, the sight of the recently disturbed dust still swirling in the orange light of the sunset. I close my eyes, moving by muscle memory, singing its melancholic melody over the music.

Suddenly, an intrusion: an elegant chord progression that harmonizes beautifully with mine. Except I didn't produce it. My body recognizes danger before my mind can grasp it, and my hips reflexively push the bench backward in a bid to escape.

"Sorry to interrupt," the man who has just joined me says, straightening. "I heard you playing, and I couldn't help myself."

As my vision clears, I put him together. A shorn head, bronze skin, long, elegant legs that end in spotless brown leather oxfords, shoulders that seem broader now that they've been freed from their burgundy suit jacket.

Leila's best man, Julian, is looking down at me.

During his speech, I'd been so sure that his eyes were dark brown, but in the light of the setting sun they take on a different hue—amber, maybe even green. His lashes are long and doelike, his features a clash of feminine softness in the lips and masculine angularity in the shape of his face. I think, numbly, that he might be the most beautiful man I've ever seen this close.

"It's okay," I say, adjusting the front of my jumpsuit. Now that I've convinced my body that we were not just in the midst of an assault, I'm embarrassed by my reaction. "I just. Um. Thought I was alone."

Julian settles onto the bench next to me, his shoulders knocking against mine, and I stiffen, bewildered by his presumptuousness. He smells unexpectedly sweet, like vanilla and bourbon.

"Well, you aren't anymore." He lays his right hand gingerly over the keys. "Start again?"

My curiosity gets the better of me. I start the song from the top, and he weaves in his improvisations fluidly.

I can't remember the last time I played like this with another person, making music just for the love of it, feeling them respond to the minute changes in my tempo with their own. I learn more about Julian in one song than I would have in the kind of inoffensive conversation a wedding would require: that he's bold and brash and not afraid to try new things, that he's inventive and creative—and really freaking talented, considering I've probably been playing for longer than he's been alive. When the song is done, we turn to each other, grinning in the resonant silence, strangers no more.

"I liked your speech earlier," I confess.

"Did you?" Julian says, raising an eyebrow. "Didn't think you heard it. You were on your phone the whole time."

My jaw drops, stuck between embarrassment that he'd noticed me and astonishment because, well, *he'd noticed me.*

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"You were watching me, huh," I say.

Julian turns to face me, the corners of his eyes crinkling in a smile that ends before it can reach his mouth.

"You're a very beautiful woman who wasn't paying attention to me," he explains plainly. He doesn't give me a second to recover from the first shock before delivering a second. "It's Sean, right?"

I raise an eyebrow.

"How do you know my name?"

The melody Julian plays now is lilting and familiar.

"Maybe I did a little recon," he says. "Maybe I planned for us to meet like this all along." When I give him a blank stare, he grins. "Okay, fine. Brandon's mentioned you."

The reminder of why Julian and I are one degree removed slaps me back into reality. Of course. He's the best man of Brandon's new wife, a player in his new life. I imagine Leila, Brandon, and Julian sharing a drink after their beach volleyball game, Brandon complaining about me *taking sides*, like I'd once overheard him doing with our colleague Shiv in the cath lab reading room.

"Interesting," I say, finally.

"All good things," Julian assures me.

"Not sure I can say the same for him," I mumble under my breath.

Julian laughs again.

"Well, as you might remember, my name's Julian," he says, holding out a hand for me to shake. I take it. It is unexpectedly soft, but its grip is firm. "And I know it's not good to speak ill of the groom, but I don't blame you."

An age-old reflex to defend Brandon springs to my mind, and I bite my tongue and push it down. For so many years, I'd fielded complaints about Brandon's sometimes prickly nature with an "I know he seems like a hardass, but he's actually a good person," comforted the residents who came to me after he'd reamed them out with assurances that he was harmless. Because he was. He cried when his favorite clinic patients died and bought breakfasts for the trainees who worked weekends in the ICU. Kept an eye out for the learners who looked confused but were too scared to voice it and took special care to go over a topic until everyone in the room had absorbed it. Organized a committee of guys to move me out of the apartment my ex and I shared in six hours flat and build my IKEA furniture in my new studio.

He'd been, for the most part, a good man. I'm not sure when that changed. *If* it did, or if, as Krause had said, he'd just gone and found true love in the messiest way possible.

I close my eyes. I'm exhausted. If Sophie and I didn't have an hour-and-a-half-long drive home in front of us, I might have liked another glass of wine.

"Well. This was lovely. But I think I should probably start heading home."

I try to push out the bench to leave, but it's stuck, set firm by Julian's counterweight.

"Did I upset you?" Julian says innocently, as if he isn't intentionally keeping me captive. "I didn't mean to."

"No, I just—" I start.

"Then forget why you're here," Julian interrupts. "And play with me some more."

If there was any doubt in my mind that Julian is hitting on me, it's obliterated by the command in his stare. His eyes are golden now, lupine. From so close, they're a vortex, sucking me in.

"You're pushy," I observe.

"Sometimes you have to be, to get what you want," Julian says, with all the easy confidence of a man who has never been rejected in his life.

"And what you want is . . . ?"

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Julian smiles.

"Nothing much," he says. "Just to get a little more time alone with the woman I've been wanting to talk to all night."

I ignore the traitorous thrill in my stomach. *This is a young man,* I remind myself. Somebody's *son.*

"I am thirty-eight years old," I announce, holding my age out in front of me like a shield. "I'm an elder millennial at best. Didn't have a cell phone until college. My goddaughter says I use old lady emojis."

"Yes," Julian says, as if to say, *Your point?*

"And you're, what, twenty-four?"

"Twenty-seven," he corrects.

"Brandon's got some cute cousins your age," I continue. "Did you meet Hannah? Brown hair, bangs? She's lovely, and I'm sure she'd love to meet you. You'd have a lot more to talk about. There's also Bridget; very sharp, very pretty—"

"Just so I understand," Julian says, the corners of his eyes creasing with amusement. "Are you suggesting, based solely on our respective ages, that you and I won't have anything in common whatsoever? That there's no chance that you'll find our conversation riveting? And are you currently offering me to other women in response?"

I cross my arms.

"Be serious, Julian. A riveting conversation is *not* what you're looking for."

Julian's grin becomes a laugh, and his fingers dance over the keys again. I watch the tendons in his hands flex, then look away, annoyed by the hummingbird flutter in my chest. *Pull yourself together, Sean.* Julian's running circles around me, and he knows it. This is probably fun for him. Girls his age have probably gotten boring, but an older, seasoned woman? Better yet, one with an axe to grind, who might consider a night with her best friend's ex's mistress's man of honor a particularly exhilarating form of vengeance? I would be an adventure.

"You're right. I'm greedy. I also want to ask you to dinner," Julian continues. "But for now, yes, a conversation will do."

I narrow my eyes.

"I'm not going to sleep with you, you know."

Julian smiles wickedly.

"Not *yet*, maybe," he teases, and before I can think of a sharp retort, he barrels on. "You were singing when I came in. Why did you stop?"

Heat prickles up my neck. I thought the piano would have drowned me out.

"I'm not much of a singer," I confess.

"Sure you are. You're an alto. You're not hitting any whistle notes anytime soon, but of what I heard, your tone was flawless," he says.

And then he begins to play a song. A few notes in, I recognize it as "Killing Me Softly." He flashes me a smile that is all sugar. "If you're going to deny me the pleasure of a conversation, at least give me another song."

I swallow. I've never sung anywhere I could be heard. It was something I did on my own—in my shower, at the piano in my living room—but never with an audience, and most certainly not with a partner. This is possibly the most intimate thing a stranger has ever asked of me. At any other time, in any other place, I might have feigned humility and changed the subject. But there's something about this room, its glowing flecks of dust, its stacked furniture and floor-to-ceiling French windows, that make it ripe for memory making. My exquisitely handsome companion—whose hand, I've just noticed, spans over an entire octave—is a nice addition to the dreamlike ambience.

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"Fine," I say, clearing my throat. *What the heck.* "But maybe you should play 'Smooth Operator' instead."

"I can do you one better," Julian says, and when he starts playing again, I realize it is Sade's "Is It a Crime?"

I throw my head back in delight. Julian has managed to convert a song full of saxophone solos and jazzy undertones into a piano ballad while still remaining recognizable, and I don't know whether to be jealous or impressed.

"Okay, fine, so you know a few good songs," I confess.

"More than a few," he says, and then he settles into the verse and looks to me expectantly.

I'm shy at first, my voice barely a rasp over my piano accompaniment. But after the first verse passes and Julian doesn't burst into laughter, I sing a little louder. By the time we reach the chorus, I've abandoned all apprehension. Julian's shoulders bump into mine as he stretches along the span of the keys, and I find myself leaning into him, thrilled to the point of pleasure when he begins to harmonize with me. His clear baritone adds a haunting, resonant quality to our siren song, and I find myself fixated on the shape of his mouth, watching it stretch and shift around a voice that is clearly trained. He has full, pillowy lips, I realize, the kind that would look fishlike on a less balanced face, and I resist the urge to reach out and touch them. They curve into a slight smile around his open mouth, and my own goes dry.

I shouldn't want to kiss Julian. Shouldn't be wondering how those large hands would feel spanning along my back, that supple mouth opening against mine. He's cocky and handsome and I know exactly the kind of damage his type can wreak, and yet I can't look away. When was the last time I desired someone so immediately, and so intensely?

I don't notice that we've both stopped singing. The final note hangs, suspended, in the air.

"You're staring, Sean," Julian purrs.

"Am I?" I whisper, inching ever closer to my mistake. "How rude. I should definitely know better."

Julian's chuckle is breathless. He shifts his body closer to mine, brushes a thumb against my chin in a caress as bold as it is bracing.

"Don't worry," he says. "I like it."

There is no question that Julian is going to kiss me. More puzzling is my realization that I am going to let him. The sun has shifted away from us, but Julian's eyes still seem to glow, the flecks of gold and green in his irises spreading like moth's wings as his pupils shrink into pinpoints. *Beautiful,* I think distantly, but also *That's wrong, shouldn't they be getting bigger—*

The door jostles open.

"Auntie Sean?" a tinny voice says.

I spring away from Julian in horror . . . and promptly tip off the piano bench. I land on my side hard, downed like a felled tree.

Terror that she is, Sophie bursts into laughter.

"W-What are you doing here? I thought we agreed on leaving at seven thirty?" I stutter, my face burning with humiliation. Julian extends a hand to help me up, but I ignore it, dusting off the seat of my pants.

"It *is* seven thirty." Sophie stuffs her hands into the pockets of her dress, looking wickedly from Julian to me and back again. "You're the homewrecker's best friend. The one who gave the speech."

"*Sophia,*" I warn, but Julian bites back a smile.

"Pleased to meet you," he says.

Sophie grunts noncommittally, but even from across the room I can tell that she's blushing. Christ, do my twelve-year-old goddaughter and I have the same taste?

"Okay, enough of that, we're going," I say. I give Julian a brief