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CROSS

SHE HAS HIS WIFE'S HEART;
THE ONE SHE WANTS IS HIS.

MY

HEART

A NOVEL



MEGAN COLLINS

AUTHOR OF *THE FAMILY PLOT*

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CROSS MY HEART

Megan Collins

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For anyone who relates to “The Prophecy” by Taylor Swift,
and for every woman who’s ever been called crazy by someone she loves.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

There are two pets in this book—a dog and a cat—who never come to any harm. I can't, however, promise the same for the humans.

PART ONE

YOU BELONG WITH ME

From: DonorConnect Communications

To: Morgan Thorne

Date: May 3, 2025

You have received the following message from your loved one's organ recipient. As a reminder, DonorConnect encourages both organ recipients and donor families to refrain from sharing identifying information (including name, address, and personal email) until a time when both parties have consented to giving and accepting those details.

Hi.

I've decided there's no way to begin this message that isn't either (1) creepy or (2) awkward, so I'm just going to dive right into the Creepy/Awkward Pool and hope I don't drown.

One year ago today, your wife saved my life. And it breaks my heart that, in order for me to live, she first had to die.

Actually, I shouldn't say that. I know it's just an expression—breaks my heart—but it feels a little reckless for me to use it. Because, this time, I plan to be careful with my heart. With your wife's, I mean. I plan on keeping it whole.

I don't remember a lot about the day of the transplant. For that whole week, I'd been in and out of consciousness. But I remember the light in the operating room, just before they put me under, so sharp and bright it felt like a slap of sunlight. I remember realizing, then, that it had been months since I'd felt the actual sun on my face, because even before the hospital, before my symptoms, I'd been in such a dark place. From November 16 to that day, May 3, I'd barely stepped outside.

Sorry if that's too bleak or too much. I just want you to know your wife gave me even more than her heart. She gave me light again. Gave me the reminder that, despite all the darkness I'd indulged, there was still, somehow, sun.

But while I'm potentially oversharing: I wonder sometimes what *else* she's given me. In the past year, I've read a lot about heart transplants, and there's one article I keep coming back to. A woman in Canada claims she feels love differently with her new heart. The love is colder, she says. More clinical. To be honest, I'm not sure what that means. How can love be cold? To me, love is so blazing it hurts. But the article did make me wonder if there's residue inside my new heart of all the love your wife once felt.

I say that in the hopes it'll be some comfort—the love she had for you didn't necessarily die with her.

We're not supposed to use names right now, but I thought you might like to know a little about the person your wife saved: I'm a thirty-year-old woman living in a Boston suburb. I work as the manager of my parents' bridal salon. I don't have a partner, pet, or children, but one of the best parts of my day is when I walk my parents' dog. I always say I'm doing it to help my dad, who's recovering from a hip replacement (this has been my family's Year of Upgraded Body Parts), but really, I do it for me. I do it to spend time with that soft, sweet Australian shepherd whose love is unconditional, who's never known anything of heartbreak (except, of course, when I deny him a fifth treat in as many minutes—then he's the most deprived dog who's ever lived; cue that Sarah McLachlan song). I do it for the exercise, too, so I can put my hand on my chest and feel my new heart beating. So I can remember that each of those beats is another chance to live the life that, for six excruciating months before my transplant, I was sure I'd never have.

And while I can't thank your wife for everything she's given me, I've decided to start using DonorConnect so I can at least thank *you*—the person with whom she trusted her heart. The person who kept it safe.

From: DonorConnect Communications

To: Rosie Lachlan

Date: May 5, 2025

You have received the following message from your donor's loved one. As a reminder, DonorConnect encourages both organ recipients and donor families to refrain from sharing identifying information (including name, address, and personal email) until a time when both parties have consented to giving and accepting those details.

Well, hello there.

First of all: don't worry; I medaled in the Awkward Olympics. Second: before you even reached out to me, I was already thinking of you. (How's *that* for awkward?)

As I'm sure you can imagine, the anniversary of my wife's death is a difficult day. But as I neared it, the date looming in front of me like a noose, I decided I'd spend it thinking of all the people—those unknown, unnamed people—who received organs from her, who carry pieces of her into the future, who keep her, in some small way, alive.

Mostly, though, I thought about you. I don't imagine my wife's essential qualities were stored in her kidneys or pancreas. It's the heart we always talk about. And yes, it's just an organ, as indifferent to love as a lung or liver; it's only a metaphor—that our emotions, our very selves, are contained in our core—but if any bit of my wife truly survived, I like to believe that whatever remains of her can be found in you.

Normally, that's not something I'd actually say to someone—most would find it weird or creepy (see? I'm right there with you, splashing around in the Creepy/Awkward Pool)—but I appreciate that you seem to see it the same way. And I'm grateful you reached out to me. Grateful for these small details you've told me about yourself. In return, here are some details about me: I'm a thirty-eight-year-old man who, like you, lives in a Boston suburb. I'm a writer (if

you can't tell from that paragraph above where I explained in obnoxious poetics what a heart is and isn't. But hey, are you a writer, too, by any chance? I love "slap of sunlight." I might just have to steal that.). Finally, I have an orange tabby named Sickle. Short for Creamsicle. Creams might have been a better nickname (my wife fought for that, believing that pluralizing any noun makes it an adorable pet name—go ahead and try it: Marbles. Sweaters. Even, somehow, Bandages)—but his claws have always been unnaturally sharp, even for a cat. Hence: Sickle.

What's your parents' dog's name? And—a better question: Will you be petitioning for them to change it to something that's a plural noun, now that you know the Foolproof Trick to Naming Pets?

Speaking of your parents, tell me more about managing their bridal salon. I'm not close with my family, so the idea of actually working with them is enough to give me hives. Hopefully, in your case, it's a rashless experience. Also, have you ever been attacked by a bridezilla?

On a more serious note, I'm sorry to hear you weren't having the best time before you got sick. This dark place you say you were in—do you want to tell me about it?

CHAPTER ONE

At first, I mistake the blood for sequins. Bright red sequins sewn onto a white gown.

Then I spot the blood on my thumb, seeping from a cut near my cuticle. I've been scraping at it, I guess, tugging a scrap of skin as I studied Morgan Thorne's latest Instagram post.

He had Chinese takeout for dinner. Dipped his dumplings in ketchup. Does anyone else do this? he asked in the caption. And the answer is me. I do. I've gotten strange looks for it all my life.

As I lingered on that post, I stopped seeing it for a moment. Instead, I saw us together, me leaning across a table to extend a dumpling toward Morgan, who took a bite, moaned with pleasure, before licking his lips, tongue wet with grease. Then it was my turn. He teased me first, inching the dumpling closer only to pull it away when my mouth tried to clamp around it. His smile was wild. Wolfish. He stared at me like I was the meal.

But then the red. It bloomed in my peripheral vision. I looked at the sequins—no, not sequins—and my eyes snapped wide.

Now I realize I must have touched the gown, stroked the lacy fabric as my mind lured me into fantasy. The dress is a Maggie Sottero fit and flare we received last week. My parents—my bosses—will not be pleased.

I tuck my phone into the pocket of my black dress and suck the blood from my thumb. Then I fold the gown over my arm to haul it down to Fittings.

"One of my brides had a nosebleed," I tell our seamstress, Jane.

Jane tsks at the gown, even grabs the fabric, squinting at it through her glasses.

"She felt *so* bad," I add. "My bride." I look at my shoes, sorry to give Jane this extra work to do; I know her son is visiting from New York.

"It's fine, Rosie." As Jane pulls the dress off my arm, her gaze catches on my thumb. Fresh blood pools in the nail bed.

“I’ll take care of it,” she adds. With one hand, she slips me a Band-Aid from the top drawer of her desk. Then she winks—and I flinch.

Brad was a winker.

I take a breath, attempt a smile. It baffles me, still, how something so tiny, literally the blink of an eye, can yank me back to him. Or—not him, I guess. The dark pit of it all. The days in bed. The tangled spirals of grief and shame. The pain in my heart that started as a metaphor, before it worsened into a symptom. Then, always, the smell of the hospital: citrus and urine. The hope, even then, that he’d hear what happened and return to me.

Back upstairs, I march through the front room of the store—all sleek gray hardwoods, subtle blush walls, ivory couches and armchairs—to lock the door. Without the chirp and chatter of brides, the salon is the kind of quiet I can feel in my head, a pleasant pressure after a packed day of appointments. The second it turned eight tonight, I let Marilee and the other consultants go, tiny thanks for all their hard work, so there’s not even the sound of their heels clicking across the floor as they sweep and straighten, tidy and tally.

Thumb freshly bandaged, I flick through a rack of gowns, ensuring the bodices all face to the left. I pivot to a mannequin, reaching to readjust a silky strap, when there’s a knock behind me—one so frantic I clutch my chest.

A woman stands outside, pressing a garment bag against the door, Just Say Yes’s rose gold logo embossed on the fabric. Her lips open and close, fogging the glass with muffled words.

We’re closed, I mouth, but that just makes her knock even harder.

Her eyes, red and puffy, shine beneath the light outside. Her cheeks are streaked with mascara. Her shoulder-length white-blond hair is nested and knotted against one side of her head, as if she’s been burrowing into pillows. *Please*, her lips say—and I recognize something in her. Despair. Desperation.

I hurry toward the door to let her in.

“Are you okay?” I ask as she steps inside. She hunches to the left, weighed down by her garment bag. “Here, let me—” I take it from her, hang it from a nearby rack.

“Thank you,” she says, almost breathless. “I’m sorry to just—I need to return my dress.”

“Is there a problem with it?” I unzip the bag a few inches, and the woman winces like I’ve squeezed lemon on a cut.

I peer inside to find a Stella York ball gown, and right away, I understand her panic. It’s a gorgeous piece, but one I never would have pulled for her. The voluminous skirt would swamp her small frame, and the bustier top would shorten her torso. She’d do much better in a fit and flare. Actually: she’d look amazing in the Maggie Sottero I bled on.

“No, the dress is—my dream,” the woman says.

Ah. This happens a lot. A bride comes in with a specific vision, a style they’ve admired on tall, hanger-thin models, and despite the consultant’s efforts to steer them toward more flattering dresses, they can’t let go of the fantasy, end up ordering a gown they fell in love with online before they ever saw it in real life.

“It’s just—” The woman swipes at her errant makeup but only smudges it more. Her cheeks blush with kohl, giving her a gray, decomposing look. “I don’t need it anymore.” She attempts to smooth her hair before dropping her hand to her side. “My fiancé broke up with me. The wedding’s off.”

It’s so fast: the dizzy whirl of memories. My reflection in a full-length mirror. The door behind me opening. Brad’s freshly shined shoes entering the room.

“And now I’m stuck with— This dress, it’s—”

My vision prickles at the edges. I blink the darkness back.

“Every time I see it in my closet, it’s like—”

“Like seeing a ghost,” I say.

The woman’s face opens—eyes widening, lips parting—like my response unlocked something inside her. “Exactly,” she whispers, fresh tears tumbling onto her cheeks.

Steady as I can, I walk to an end table, pluck a tissue from the box we keep there for parents who cry at appointments. “Here,” I say, handing it to her. Then I pick up her garment bag, carry it to reception, and drape it over the counter. The woman follows, dabbing at her eyes.

“Sorry,” she says. “I know I’m a mess. I’ve *been* a mess for days. This week has been—” She shakes her head, no words for the horror of watching her future dissolve. “But you’re right. This dress is a ghost. Thank you for putting it that way.”

I shrug off her gratitude. “I just... know what it’s like, owning an unused gown.”

She freezes, tissue still held to her face. “You’ve gone through it too.”

The dress that haunts my closet is a Casablanca A-line with a beaded lace bodice, cap sleeves, and sweetheart neckline. The satin skirt is both dramatic and simple—no appliqués or other embellishments, just a stunning chapel train. The second I saw it, shimmering on its hanger, I knew it was The One. Same as I knew Brad was.

I click the keyboard to wake the computer, force my voice to be strong. “What’s your name, so I can look it up in our system?”

“Edith Cole,” she answers, and as I type it in, I feel her studying me. She leans forward to whisper: “How did you get through it?”

She cringes at her own question, taking a step back. “Sorry. I hope that’s not too intrusive, it’s just... As you can probably tell”—she gestures toward her face, then to her T-shirt and sweatpants, too—“I’m still in the Cry All Day phase. I’d love to know what other phases are available to me.” She chuckles wetly, a bubble of snot escaping her nose. “Oh, gross, sorry.” She blows into her tissue.

“Well, there’s the *Gilmore Girls* phase,” I say, thinking of my non-Brad breakups. “Doesn’t matter how many times you’ve seen it; the *Gilmore Girls* binge is an important part of the process.”

“I’ve actually never seen it.”

“What! Oh my god, you *must*. Half the characters are kind of insufferable, but that doesn’t matter. It’s actually part of the fun.”

Edith nods. “Love to hate an insufferable character.”

“Exactly.” I click my nails on the counter. “Then there’s the Horror Movie phase. The bloodier, the better.”

She scrunches her nose. “Those tend to give me nightmares.”

“Heist movies then. The point is: nothing romantic.”

“Got it. What else?”

“The Danish for Dinner phase. I recommend two at once: one raspberry, one cheese. It’s got all the major food groups: fruit, protein, dairy, joy. Sweet Bean next door”—I gesture toward the café that shares the L-shaped plaza we’re in—“has the best Danishes.”

Morgan Thorne loves them, too.

Last Sunday, he posted a photo from Sweet Bean: his laptop on one of their tables, an open notebook beside a Danish and cappuccino. One does not simply go to Sweet Bean

and not get a Danish, he'd captioned it, and I wished I'd been working that day so I could skip next door, brush by his table, then accidentally—

"I'll definitely get some," Edith says. "This is great; I should be taking notes."

"Oh, and don't forget the New Hair phase."

"Ah, yes. A classic."

"For good reason. Breakups always make you feel like you have no control, you know? Well—they do for me, anyway. I've always been the one getting dumped. So changing your hair is this tiny thing you can do to feel some control again. It's like training yourself to become a new person."

Edith stuffs her tissue into her pocket. "Is that why yours is pink? Because your wedding got canceled?"

I finger the ends of my hair, the waves I added to it this morning still holding after eight consultations. "Uh, no. I did this... a while after that."

Seven months after.

Four weeks out of the hospital.

My best friend, Nina, drove me to the salon, helped me pick out the perfect shade. And as the stylist swept the dye into my hair, I watched my old self disappear in the mirror. No longer the woman who'd crumbled so completely after Brad that not even my breakup phases could piece me together again.

New heart, new hair, new me, I said to Nina as we stared at my reflection. But when she hugged me after, her chest pressed to mine, I felt Brad's absence in every inch of my incision.

"Oh," Edith says. "Well, it's a great color."

"Thanks. It's very cotton candy, I know." This has been my refrain, the last eleven months, whenever someone mentions my hair—safer to pretend I'm in on the joke in case they think I look crazy. In truth, I love its gentle pink, a shade inspired by the spray dye Nina used last Halloween, when she dressed as cotton candy herself. All that night, I kept holding her hair up to mine, enamored of the color, despite how it clashed with my *evermore*-era Taylor costume.

"Nothing wrong with cotton candy," Edith says. "And that means something coming from me—when I was like ten, I puked all over this boy I liked after eating too much of it

on a field trip. Totally traumatizing.” She grimaces at the memory. “But is it weird if I admit the puke was a pretty color?”

I laugh. “My childhood puke food was Twizzlers. Right after a friend’s birthday party. The back of my mom’s car looked like a bloodbath.”

As Edith smiles, her eyes brighten, despite the shadows of smudged mascara.

“Anyway,” I say, “I’m so sorry this happened to you. The dress, your wedding.” I look at her order on the monitor. “Do you want me to apply the refund to the card we have on file?”

“Wait. You’re actually letting me return it?”

“Of course.”

“Oh, wow, okay. I came here thinking this was a long shot, but”—her eyes dim as they drop to the garment bag—“I had to try.”

We do have a no-return policy. If my mom were working today, she would advise Edith to sell the dress online. But I’m taking advantage of a different policy, one specific to me as the manager: every four months, I can comp one bride a dress. Maybe it’s less a policy than it is my mother’s way of managing *me*; I used to beg her to let me comp gowns all the time—for brides with money trouble, or terminal illnesses, or recent losses of loved ones. *Can’t we do this one small thing?*

Rosie, your heart is so soft, she’d always tell me, in a way that sounded like a warning, and I’d picture my heart as a giant wad of gum, malleable enough for someone to chew.

But after my transplant, my mother never said those words again, too spooked by how soft my heart had actually become. Instead, she gave me my new policy—an effort to make me happy, I think—with one stipulation: the dress must be under fifteen hundred dollars.

Edith’s cost thirteen fifty. I click the button to initiate the return.

“Refunds are rare,” I admit, dragging the garment bag off the counter and hanging it from a rack behind me. “But we allow them in certain cases.”

I just didn’t intend to use my second comp of the year so soon.

“Wow,” Edith says. “Thank you so much.” She shakes her head through a tearful smile. “I’m so grateful.”

“It’s no problem.”

Edith wipes at her cheeks. “How many Danishes do you think I can get with thirteen hundred dollars?”

As I laugh, Edith picks at her sleeve, shifts on her feet.

“What is it?” I prompt, sensing she has more to say.

“Nothing, I was just—” She fidgets with the canvas tote slung over her shoulder. “Would you want to hang out sometime, maybe? My friends have been great this week, but none of them have actually been through this, and it’d be nice to talk to someone who’s... made it to the other side? Plus”—she shrugs—“you seem fun.”

It’s not butterflies I feel in my stomach, not that half-sick flutter I get when I look at Morgan’s photos or reread his message, but it’s still something winged and wonderful.

“I’d love that,” I say.

I’ve kept my circle small as I’ve healed—mostly just Nina, my parents, my sister and brother-in-law—but it’s been a year since the hospital. I’m already opening myself up to love again; why not friendship, too?

“Yeah?” Edith says, surprised and almost giddy, as if she’d been expecting me to say no. “Awesome! Can I give you my number?” She stops to laugh at herself. “God, I sound like I’m dating again already.”

I laugh with her. “It’s good practice! And yeah, let me get my phone.”

I slide a key off its magnet under the counter and unlock the drawer where I store my purse. I plop the bag onto the counter and rummage through it, taking out items—lip balm, compact, wallet, book—as I dig for my phone.

“Sorry,” I say. “I have way too much stuff in here.”

“Oh, I’m exactly the same,” Edith says, indicating her bulky tote. “I treat mine like it’s half purse, half garbage can.”

My chuckle stops short when I reach the bottom of my bag and remember my phone is still in my pocket.

“Oh. Duh,” I say, pulling it out. I look at Edith, waiting for her to recite her number, but her gaze is stuck on the mess I’ve made of the counter.

“You like Morgan Thorne?” she asks, reaching for the paperback I tossed from my bag. It’s *Someone at the Door*, the thriller that launched Morgan’s career six years ago, spent eighteen months on bestseller lists, earned a splashy film adaptation. I read it when it first came out, but I plucked it off my overstuffed bookshelf this morning, intent on revisiting

it on my break. Still buzzing from Morgan's message, I was hungry for more of his words. More of his stories. More of him.

"Um, yeah." I finger the book's cover. "I like him a lot."

It was Nina who first suspected our connection. She was there, working in the ER, when Daphne Thorne was brought in. There to hear the hurried discussion about her organs—the ticking clock of transplantation. There, days later in my hospital room, to say, *I know this is a hard-core HIPAA violation, but... I think your heart came from that author's wife.*

Now I know she was correct. As I sat on my bed last night, reading Morgan's response on DonorConnect, I grew almost dizzy from all the details he confirmed. A writer in a Boston suburb. Thirty-eight years old (in March, he posted a photo of him and his best friend digging into a cheesecake on the floor—Celebrating my thirty-eighth birthday by re-creating that one *Friends* scene that's always made me salivate). And then, the clincher: Sickie. A cat I've adored since I first started studying Morgan's Instagram. Initially, I'd done a deep dive on his profile because I'd been curious about Daphne, who had no social media of her own, and whose elegant but spare obit offered scant details: loved poetry; taught English at Emerson. But the more I searched Morgan's socials for specifics about his wife, the more I realized that, even if Daphne wasn't the person who saved my life, Morgan was someone I was meant to know.

I, too, have salivated over that *Friends* episode; a few years ago, it even inspired my statewide Quest for the Perfect Cheesecake. I listen to the same music Morgan uses in his Instagram Stories, rewatch the same movies he references in captions. And once, he wrote that Taylor Swift is the Sylvia Plath of our time, a sentence that had me swooning.

We have so much in common—connections that shimmer between us like starlight in constellations. So as soon as I read Morgan's message, I felt so potently what I could only hope for before: fate is nudging us together.

"Do you like him, too?" I ask Edith.

"Oh, of course. I work at the Burnham Library, so liking Morgan Thorne is basically a condition of my employment."

I laugh, even though it's probably not hyperbole. The library has a dedicated nook for Morgan's three novels, adorned with a placard referring to him as "our hometown hero."

“Isn’t it so sad about his wife?” Edith says—and my smile slips. “One of my co-workers was really close with her, and she’s still shaken up about it.”

Deep in my core, there’s a punch of guilt, a reminder that my being alive is at the cost of other people’s grief.

“Yeah, it’s—awful,” I force out.

Edith nods, her mouth a straight, sober line. “I guess it puts my problems into perspective, right? Like, at least my fiancé only dumped me. At least he didn’t crack his head open and die.”

My eyes widen as she continues.

“Actually, he might deserve something like that.” She laughs, weakly, before gasping. “Oh god, that’s dark.” Her gaze dips from mine, self-conscious again, as she nudges her chin at the phone still clutched in my hand. “You *sure* you want my number?”

I assure her I do. I know better than most the way dark thoughts intrude, the way a broken heart can break your brain a little, too.

Once Edith’s number is in my contacts and I’ve texted her mine, she scrambles through a series of thank-yous and apologies before rushing out of the store. I return to my phone, reflexively open Instagram, and revisit Morgan’s post about his Chinese takeout. Then I switch to my Notes app, add another bullet point to the document titled “MORGAN THORNE.” Eats his dumplings with ketchup, I type, right beneath my most recent entry: Thinks the best pet names are plural nouns.

Back on Instagram, I read his caption again. Does anyone else do this? Normally, I don’t look at the comments—they only remind me there are others who might feel a connection with him too—but this time, I scan the responses, as if to prove I’m the only one who shares this particular quirk.

A few people have written variations of lol gross. Others are less opposed: I don’t hate the idea, or We stan a trendsetter.

But it’s a comment from four minutes ago that freezes my thumb mid-scroll.

The only food you should be eating is the kind they serve in prison.

I frown at the words, then open the replies to find I’m not alone in my confusion. Someone’s responded with three question marks, to which the original poster—their

handle a chaotic string of numbers and letters—has answered: His wife's death wasn't an accident.

My head rears back.

The comment has nine likes but only one response: WTF why would you say that??

I dart back to the accusation, staring at it until it blurs. Finally, I refresh the post, hoping for clarity, for others to have piled on in defense of Morgan. But as I scroll, I can't find it anymore. I check again—and again and again—but no matter how many times I refresh, it still isn't there.

The comment is gone.

I shake my head, shake it off—just a sick joke, deleted as soon as the poster was scolded.

I swipe back to the picture and focus on Morgan's face, partially obscured by the dumpling he's holding. I zoom in, admire the pool-water blue of his eyes, the tortoiseshell frames of his glasses. I study the stubble along his cheeks, imagining the feel of it—a texture between velvet and Velcro—and notice a bit of ketchup in one corner of his lips. It's small and round, like an errant drop of blood.

For a moment, I stop seeing the picture, see only the two of us together.

Morgan's smile is red at the edge, and I lean in close, thumbing the color away.