

praise for

love  
and  
other words

*“Love and Other Words is a triumph, the kind of book that makes you feel so deeply for the finely drawn characters that you almost forget they’re fictional. You’ll be swept away by the heartbreak, the joy, the chemistry, and the charisma woven through the fabric of Macy and Elliot’s star-crossed relationship. As the story unfolds—expertly interweaving the past with the present—you’ll laugh, you’ll cry, and you’ll root for Macy and Elliot to find their way back to each other against all odds. A true joy from start to finish.”*

—Kristin Harmel, internationally bestselling author of  
*The Sweetness of Forgetting*

*“Christina Lauren has found a new sweet spot, with heart-breaking and hopeful language that will evoke the whirlwind immediacy of adolescence and the complicated choices of adulthood. Love and Other Words weaves past and present together in an emotional story that will have you declaring your favorite word is LOVE.”*

—Amy E. Reichert, author of *The Coincidence  
of Coconut Cake*

## praise for the novels of Christina Lauren

“At turns hilarious and gut-wrenching, this is a tremendously fun slow burn.”

—*The Washington Post* on *Dating You / Hating You*  
(A Best Romance of 2017 selection)

“Delightful.”

—*People* on *Roomies*

“A passionate and bittersweet tale of love in all of its wonderfully terrifying reality . . . Lauren successfully tackles a weighty subject with both ferocity and compassion.”

—*Booklist* on *Autoboyography*

“Christina Lauren hilariously depicts modern dating.”

—*Us Weekly* on *Dating You / Hating You*

“Perfectly captures the hunger, thrill, and doubt of young, modern love.”

—*Kirkus Reviews* on *Wicked Sexy Liar*

“Christina Lauren’s books have a place of honor on my bookshelf.”

—Sarah J. Maas, bestselling author of *Throne of Glass*

“Truly a romance for the twenty-first century. [*Dating You / Hating You* is] a smart, sexy romance for readers who thrive on girl power.”

—*Kirkus Reviews* (starred review)

“Lauren brings her characteristic charm to the story. Holland’s tale is more than an unrequited crush; it’s about self-expectations, problematic friendships, unconventional family, and the strange power of love.”

—*Booklist on Roomies*

“In our eyes, Christina Lauren can do no wrong.”

—*Bookish*

“The perfect summer read.”

—*Self on Sweet Filthy Boy*



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*Roomies*

*Love and Other Words*

*Josh and Hazel's Guide to Not Dating*

*My Favorite Half-Night Stand*

*The Unhoneymooners*

*Twice in a Blue Moon*

*The Honey-Don't List*

*In a Holidaze*

*The Soulmate Equation*

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*Beautiful Stranger*

*Beautiful Bitch*

*Beautiful Bombshell*

*Beautiful Player*

*Beautiful Beginning*

*Beautiful Beloved*

*Beautiful Secret*

*Beautiful Boss*

*Beautiful*

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*Dirty Rowdy Thing*

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# love and other words

CHRISTINA LAUREN



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*For Erin and Marcia,  
and the house near the creek in the woods.*



love  
and  
other words



## prologue



My dad was a lot taller than my mother—I mean a *lot*. He was six foot five and my mom was just over five foot three. Danish big and Brazilian petite. When they met, she didn't speak a word of English. But by the time she died, when I was ten, it was almost as if they'd created their own language.

I remember the way he would hug her when he got home from work. He would wrap his arms all the way around her shoulders, press his face into her hair while his body curved over hers. His arms became a set of parentheses bracketing the sweetest secret phrase.

christina lauren

I would disappear into the background when they touched like this, feeling like I was witnessing something sacred.

It never occurred to me that love could be anything other than all-consuming. Even as a child, I knew I never wanted anything less.

But then what began as a cluster of malignant cells killed my mother, and I didn't want any of it, ever again. When I lost her, it felt like I was drowning in all the love I still had that could never be given. It filled me up, choked me like a rag doused in kerosene, spilled out in tears and screams and in heavy, pulsing silence. And somehow, as much as I hurt, I knew it was even worse for Dad.

I always knew that he would never fall in love again after Mom. In that way, my dad was always easy to understand. He was straightforward and quiet: he walked quietly, spoke quietly; even his anger was quiet. It was his love that was booming. His love was a roaring, vociferous bellow. And after he loved Mom with the strength of the sun, and after the cancer killed her with a gentle gasp, I figured he would be hoarse for the rest of his life and wouldn't ever want another woman the way he'd wanted her.



Before Mom died, she left Dad a list of things she wanted him to remember as he saw me into adulthood:

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1. Don't spoil her with toys; spoil her with books.
2. Tell her you love her. Girls need the words.
3. When she's quiet, you do the talking.
4. Give Macy ten dollars a week. Make her save two. Teach her the value of money.
5. Until she's sixteen, her curfew should be ten o'clock, no exceptions.

The list went on and on, deep into the fifties. It wasn't so much that she didn't trust him; she just wanted me to feel her influence even after she was gone. Dad reread it frequently, making notes in pencil, highlighting certain things, making sure he wasn't missing a milestone or getting something wrong. As I grew older, the list became a bible of sorts. Not necessarily a rule book, but more a reassurance that all these things Dad and I struggled with were normal.

One rule in particular loomed large for Dad.

25. When Macy looks so tired after school that she can't even form a sentence, take her away from the stress of her life. Find a weekend getaway that is

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*easy and close that lets her breathe a little.*

And although Mom likely never intended that we actually *buy* a weekend home, my dad—a literal type—saved, and planned, and researched all the small towns north of San Francisco, preparing for the day when he would need to invest in our retreat.

In the first couple of years after Mom died, he watched me, his ice-blue eyes somehow both soft and probing. He would ask questions that required long answers, or at least longer than “yes,” “no,” or “I don’t care.” The first time I answered one of these detailed questions with a vacant moan, too tired from swim practice, and homework, and the dull tedium of dealing with persistently dramatic friends, Dad called a real estate agent and demanded she find us the perfect weekend home in Healdsburg, California.

We first saw it at an open house, shown by the local Realtor, who let us in with a wide smile and a tiny, judgmental slant of her eyes toward our big-city San Francisco agent. It was a four-bedroom wood-shingled and sharply angled cabin, chronically damp and potentially moldy, tucked back into the shade of the woods and near a creek that would continually bubble outside my window. It was bigger than we needed, with more land than we could possibly maintain, and neither Dad nor I would realize at the time that the most important room in the house would be



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the library he would make for me inside my expansive closet.

Nor could Dad have known that my whole world would end up next door, held in the palm of a skinny nerd named Elliot Lewis Petropoulos.



now



tuesday, october 3

If you drew a straight line from my apartment in San Francisco to Berkeley, it would only be ten and a half miles, but even in the best commuting window it takes more than an hour without a car.

“I caught a bus at six this morning,” I say. “Two BART lines, and another bus.” I look down at my watch. “Seven thirty. Not too bad.”

Sabrina wipes a smudge of foamy milk from her upper lip. As much as she understands my avoidance of cars, I know there’s a part of her that thinks I should just power through it and get a Prius or Subaru, like any other self-

respecting Bay Area resident. “Don’t let anyone tell you you’re not a saint.”

“I really am. You made me leave my bubble.” But I say it with a smile, and look down at her tiny daughter on my lap. I’ve only ever seen the princess Vivienne twice, and she seems to have doubled in size. “Good thing *you’re* worth it.”

I hold babies every day, but it never feels like this. Sabrina and I used to live across a dorm room from each other at Tufts. Then we moved into an apartment off-campus before quasi-upgrading to a crumbling house during our respective graduate programs. By some magic we both ended up on the West Coast, in the Bay Area, and now Sabrina has a *baby*. That we are old enough now to be doing this—birthing children, *breeding*—is the weirdest feeling ever.

“I was up at eleven last night with this one,” Sabrina says, looking at us fondly. Her smile turns wry at the edges. “And two. And four. And six . . .”

“Okay, you win. But to be fair, she smells better than most of the people on the bus.” I plant a small kiss on Viv’s head and tuck her more securely into the crook of my arm before carefully reaching for my coffee.

The cup feels strange in my hand. It’s ceramic, not a paper throwaway or the enormous stainless steel travel mug Sean fills to the brim for me each morning, assuming—not incorrectly—that it takes a hulking dose of caffeine to

get me ready to tackle the day. It's been forever since I had time to sit down with an actual mug and sip anything.

"You already look like a mama," Sabrina says, watching us from across the small café table.

"The benefit of working with babies all day."

Sabrina is quiet for a breath, and I realize my mistake. Ground rule number one: never reference my job around mothers, especially *new* mothers. I can practically hear her heart stutter across the table from me.

"I don't know how you do it," she whispers.

The sentence is a repeating chorus to my life right now. It seems to boggle my friends over and over again that I made the decision to go into pediatrics at UCSF—in the critical-care track. Without fail, I catch a flash of suspicion that maybe I'm missing an important, tender bone, some maternal brake that should prevent me from being able to routinely witness the suffering of sick kids.

I give Sabrina my usual refrain of "Someone needs to," then add, "And I'm good at it."

"I bet you are."

"Now pediatric neuro? *That* I couldn't do," I say, and then pull my lips between my teeth, physically restraining myself from saying more.

*Shut up, Macy. Shut your crazy babble mouth.*

Sabrina offers a small nod, staring at her baby. Viv smiles up at me and kicks her legs excitedly.

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“Not all the stories are sad.” I tickle her tummy. “Tiny miracles happen every day, don’t they, cutie?”

The subject change rolls out of Sabrina, loud enough to be a little jarring: “How’s wedding planning coming?”

I groan, pressing my face into the sweet baby smell of Viv’s neck.

“That good, huh?” Laughing, Sabrina reaches for her daughter, as if she’s unable to share her any longer. I can’t blame her. She’s such a warm and shapable little bundle in my arms.

“She’s perfect, honey,” I say quietly, handing her over. “Such a solid little girl.”

And, as if everything I do is somehow hardwired to my memories of *them*—the raucous life next door, the giant, chaotic family I never had—I am hit with nostalgia, of the last non-work-related baby I spent any real time with. It’s a memory of me as a teenager, staring down at baby Alex as she slept in her bouncy chair.

My brain leapfrogs through a hundred images: Miss Dina cooking dinner with the swaddled bundle of Alex slung against her chest. Mr. Nick holding Alex in his beefy, hairy arms, staring down at her with the tenderness of an entire village. Sixteen-year-old George trying—and failing—to change a diaper without incident on the family couch. The protective lean of Nick Jr., George, and Andreas as they stared down at their new, most beloved sibling. And then, invariably, my mind shifts to Elliot just beyond or behind, waiting quietly for his older brothers to move on to their fighting or running

or mess making, leaving him to pick up Alex, read to her, give her his undivided attention.

I ache, missing them all so much, but especially him.

“Mace,” Sabrina prompts.

I blink. “What?”

“The wedding?”

“Right.” My mood droops; the prospect of planning a wedding while juggling a hundred hours a week at the hospital never fails to exhaust me. “We haven’t moved on it yet. We still need to pick a date, a place, a . . . everything. Sean doesn’t care about the details, which, I guess, is good?”

“Of course,” she says with false brightness, shifting Viv to covertly nurse her at the table. “And besides, what’s the rush?”

In her question, the twin thought is very shallowly buried: *I’m your best friend and I’ve only met the man twice, for fuck’s sake. What is the rush?*

And she’s right. There is no rush. We’ve only been together for a few months. It’s just that Sean is the first man I’ve met in more than ten years who I can be with and not feel like I’m holding back somehow. He’s easy, and calm, and when his six-year-old daughter Phoebe asked when we were getting married, it seemed to switch something over in him, propelling him to ask me himself, later.

“I swear,” I tell her, “I have no interesting updates. Wait—no. I have a dentist appointment next week.” Sabrina laughs. “That’s what we’ve come to, that’s the only thing other

than you that will break up the monotony for the foreseeable future. Work, sleep, repeat.”

Sabrina sees this as the invitation it is to talk freely about her new family of three, and she unrolls a list of accomplishments: the first smile, the first belly laugh, and just yesterday, a tiny fist shooting out with accuracy and firmly grabbing her mama’s finger.

I listen, loving each normal detail acknowledged for what it really is: a miracle. I wish I got to hear all of her “normal details” every day. I love what I do, but I miss just . . . talking.

I’m scheduled today for noon, and will probably be on the unit until the middle of the night. I’ll come home and sleep for a few hours, and do it all over again tomorrow. Even after coffee with Sabrina and Viv, the rest of this day will bleed into the next and—unless something truly awful happens on the unit—I won’t remember a single thing about it.

So as she talks, I try to absorb as much of this outside world as I can. I pull in the scent of coffee and toast, the sound of music rumbling beneath the bustle of the customers. When Sabrina bends down to pull a pacifier out of her diaper bag, I glance up to the counter, scanning the woman with the pink dreadlocks, the shorter man with a neck tattoo taking coffee orders, and, in front of them, the long masculine torso that slaps me into acute awareness.

His hair is nearly black. It’s thick and messy, falling over the tops of his ears. His collar is folded under on one side, his



shirttails untucked from a pair of worn black jeans. His Vans are slip-on and faded old-school check print. A well-used messenger bag is slung across one shoulder and rests against the opposite hip.

With his back to me, he looks like a thousand other men in Berkeley, but I know exactly which man this is.

It's the heavy, dog-eared book tucked under his arm that gives it away: there's only one person I know who rereads *Ivanhoe* every October. Ritually, and with absolute adoration.

Unable to look away, I'm locked in anticipation of the moment he turns and I can see what nearly eleven years have done to him. I barely give thought to my own appearance: mint-green scrubs, practical sneakers, hair in a messy ponytail. Then again, it never occurred to either of us to consider our own faces or degree of put-togetherness before. We were always too busy memorizing each other.

Sabrina pulls my attention away while the ghost of my past is paying for his order.

"Mace?"

I blink to her. "Sorry. I. Sorry. The . . . what?"

"I was just babbling about diaper rash. I'm more interested in what's got you so . . ." She turns to follow where I'd been looking. "*Oh.*"

Her "oh" doesn't contain understanding yet. Her "oh" is purely about how the man looks from behind. He's tall—that happened suddenly, when he turned fifteen. And his shoulders are broad—that happened suddenly, too, but later. I re-

member noticing it the first time he hovered above me in the closet, his jeans at his knees, his broad form blocking out the weak overhead light. His hair is thick—but that’s always been true. His jeans rest low on his hips and his ass looks amazing. I . . . have no idea when *that* happened.

Basically, he looks exactly like the kind of guy we would ogle silently before turning to each other to share the wordless *I know, right?* face. It’s one of the most surreal realizations of my life: he’s grown into the kind of stranger I would dreamily admire.

It’s strange enough to see him from the back, and I’m watching him with such intensity that for a second, I convince myself that it’s not him after all.

Maybe it could be anyone—and after a decade apart, how well do I really know his body, anyway?

But then he turns, and I feel all the air get sucked out of the room. It’s if I’ve been punched in the solar plexus, my diaphragm momentarily paralyzed.

Sabrina hears the creaking, dusty sound coming from me and turns back around. I sense her starting to rise from her chair. “Mace?”

I pull in a breath, but it’s shallow and sour somehow, making my eyes burn.

His face is narrower, jaw sharper, morning stubble thicker. He’s still wearing the same style of thick-rimmed glasses, but they no longer dwarf his face. His bright hazel eyes are still magnified by the thick lenses. His nose is the

same—but it's no longer too big for his face. And his mouth is the same, too—straight, smooth, capable of the world's most perfectly sardonic grin.

I can't even imagine what expression he would make if he saw me here. It might be one I've never seen him make before.

"Mace?" Sabrina reaches with a free hand, grabbing my forearm. "Honey, you okay?"

I swallow, and close my eyes to break my own trance. "Yeah."

She sounds unconvinced: "You sure?"

"I mean . . ." Swallowing again, I open my eyes and intend to look at her, but my gaze is drawn back over her shoulder again. "That guy over there . . . It's Elliot."

This time, her "*Oh*" is meaningful.



then



friday, august 9  
fifteen years ago

I first saw Elliot at the open house.

The cabin was empty; unlike the meticulously staged real estate “products” in the Bay Area, this funky house for sale in Healdsburg was left completely unfurnished. Although as an adult I would learn to appreciate the potential in undecorated spaces, to my adolescent eyes, the emptiness felt cold and hollow. Our house in Berkeley was unselfconsciously cluttered. While she was alive, Mom’s sentimental tendencies overrode Dad’s Danish minimalism, and after she died he clearly couldn’t find it in himself to dial back the decor.

Here, the walls had darker patches where old paintings had hung for years. A path was worn into the carpet, revealing the preferred route of the previous inhabitants: from the front door to the kitchen. The upstairs was open to the entryway, the hallway looking over the first floor with only an old wooden railing at the edge. Upstairs, the doors to the rooms were all closed, giving the long hallway a mildly haunted feeling.

“At the end,” Dad said, lifting his chin to indicate where he meant for me to go. He had looked at the house online, and knew a bit more than I did what to expect. “Your room could be that one down there.”

I climbed the dark stairs, passing the master bedroom and bath, and continued on to the end of the deep, narrow hallway. I could see a pale green light coming from beneath the door—what I would soon know to be the result of spring-green paint illuminated by late-afternoon sun. The crystal knob was cold but unclouded, and it turned with a rusty whine. The door stuck, edges misshapen from the chronic dampness. I pushed with my shoulder, determined to get in, and nearly tumbled into the warm, bright room.

It was longer than it was wide, maybe even doubled. A huge window took up most of the long wall, looking out onto a hillside dense with moss-covered trees. Like a patient butler, a tall, skinny window sat at the far end, on the narrow wall, overlooking the Russian River in the distance.

If the downstairs was unimpressive, the bedrooms, at least, held promise.

Feeling uplifted, I turned back to go find Dad.

“Did you see the closet in there, Mace?” he asked just as I stepped out. “I thought we could make it into a library for you.” He was emerging from the master suite. I heard one of the agents call for him, and instead of coming to me, he made his way back downstairs.

I returned to the bedroom, walked to the back. The door to the closet opened without any protest. The knob was even warm in my hand.

Like every other space in the house, it was undecorated. But it wasn’t empty.

Confusion and mild panic set my heart pounding.

Sitting in the deep space was a boy. He had been reading, tucked into the far corner, back and neck curled into a C to fit himself into the lowest point beneath the sloped ceiling.

He couldn’t have been much older than thirteen, same as me. Skinny, with thick dark hair that badly needed to see scissors, enormous hazel eyes behind substantial glasses. His nose was too big for his face, teeth too big for his mouth, and presence entirely too big for a room that was meant to be empty.

The question erupted from me, edged with unease: “Who are you?”

He stared at me, wide-eyed in surprise. “I didn’t realize anyone would actually come see this place.”

My heart was still hammering. And something about his gaze—so unblinking, eyes huge behind the lenses—made me feel oddly exposed. “We’re thinking of buying it.”

The boy stood, dusting off his clothes, revealing that the widest part of each leg was at the knee. His shoes were brown polished leather, his shirt ironed and tucked into khaki shorts. He looked completely harmless . . . but as soon as he took a step forward, my heart tripped in panic, and I blurted: “My dad has a black belt.”

He looked a mixture of scared and skeptical. “Really?”  
“Yeah.”

His brows drew together. “In what?”

I dropped my fists from where they’d rested at my hips. “Okay, no black belt. But he’s huge.”

This he seemed to believe, and he looked past me anxiously.

“What are you doing in here anyway?” I asked, glancing around. The space was enormous for a closet. A perfect square, at least twelve feet on each side, with a high ceiling that sloped dramatically at the back of the room, where it was probably only three feet high. I could imagine sitting in here, on a couch, with pillows and books, and spending the perfect Saturday afternoon.

“I like to read in here.” He shrugged, and something dormant woke inside me at the mental symmetry, a buzz I hadn’t felt in years. “My mom had a key when the Hanson family owned the place, and they were never here.”



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“Are your parents going to buy this house?”

He looked confused. “No. I live next door.”

“So aren’t you trespassing?”

He shook his head. “It’s an *open* house, remember?”

I looked him over again. His book was thick, with a dragon on the cover. He was tall, and angled at every possible location—all sharp elbows and pointy shoulders. Hair was shaggy but combed. Fingernails were trimmed.

“So you just hang out here?”

“Sometimes,” he said. “It’s been empty for a couple years.”

I narrowed my eyes. “Are you *sure* you’re supposed to be in here? You look out of breath, like you’re nervous.”

He shrugged, one pointy shoulder lifted to the sky. “Maybe I just came back from running a marathon.”

“You don’t look like you could run to the corner.”

He paused for a breath, and then burst out laughing. It sounded like a laugh that wasn’t given freely very often, and something inside me bloomed.

“What’s your name?” I asked.

“Elliot. What’s yours?”

“Macy.”

Elliot stared at me, pushing his glasses up with his finger, but they immediately slid down again. “You know, if you buy this house I won’t just come over and read in here.”

There was a challenge there, some choice offered. *Friend or foe?*

christina lauren

I could really use a friend.

I exhaled, giving him a begrudging smile. “If we buy this house you can come over and read if you want.”

He grinned, so wide I could count his teeth. “Maybe all this time I was just getting it warmed up for you.”

now



tuesday, october 3

Elliot still hasn't seen me.

He waits near the espresso bar for his drink with his head ducked as he looks down. In a sea of people connecting to the world via the isolation of their smartphones, Elliot is reading a book.

Does he even *have* a phone? For anyone else, it would be an absurd question. Not for him. Eleven years ago he did, but it was a hand-me-down from his father and the kind of flip-phone that required him to hit the 5 key three times if he wanted to type an *L*. He rarely used it as anything other than a paperweight.

“When was the last time you saw him?” Sabrina asks.

I blink over to her, brows drawn. I *know* she knows the answer to this question, at least generally. But my expression relaxes when I understand there’s nothing else she can do right now but make conversation; I’ve turned into a mute maniac.

“My senior year in high school. New Year’s.”

She gives a full, bared-teeth wince. “*Right.*”

Some instinct kicks in, some self-preservationist energy propelling me up and out of my chair.

“I’m sorry,” I say, looking down at Sabrina and Viv. “I’m going to head out.”

“Of course. Yeah. Totally.”

“I’ll call this weekend? Maybe we can do Golden Gate Park.”

She’s still nodding as if my robotic suggestion is even a remote possibility. We both know I haven’t had a weekend off since before I started my residency in July.

Trying to move as inconspicuously as possible, I pull my bag over my shoulder and bend to kiss Sabrina’s cheek.

“I love you,” I say, standing, and wishing I could take her with me. She smells like baby, too.

Sabrina nods, returning the sentiment, and then, while I gaze at Viv and her chubby little fist, she glances back over her shoulder and freezes.

From her posture, I know Elliot has seen me.

“Um . . .” she says, turning back and lifting her chin as if I should probably take a look. “He’s coming.”

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I dig into my bag, working to appear extremely busy and distracted. “I’m gonna jet,” I mumble.

“Mace?”

I freeze, one hand on the strap of my bag, my eyes on the floor. A nostalgic pang resonates through me as soon as I hear his voice. It had been high and squeaky until it broke. He got endless shit about how nasal and whiny he was, and then, one day, the universe had the last laugh, giving Elliot a voice like warm, rich honey.

He says my name again—no nickname, this time, but quieter: “Macy Lea?”

I look up, and—in an impulse I’m sure I will be laughing about until I die—I lift my hand and wave limply, offering a bright “Elliot! Hey!”

As if we’re casual acquaintances from freshman orientation.

You know, as if we met once on the train from Santa Barbara.

Just as he pushes his thick hair out of his eyes in a gesture of disbelief I’ve seen him make a million times, I turn and press through the crowd and out onto the sidewalk. I’m jogging in the wrong direction before catching my mistake halfway down the block and whipping around. Two long strides back the other way, with my head down, heart hammering, and I slam right into a broad chest.

“Oh! I’m sorry!” I blurt before I look up and realize what I’ve done.

Elliot's hands come around my upper arms, holding me steady only a few inches away from him. I know he's looking at my face, waiting for me to meet his gaze, but my eyes are stuck on the sight of his Adam's apple, and my thoughts are stuck remembering how I used to stare at his neck, covertly, on and off for hours while we were reading together in the closet.

"Macy. Seriously?" he says quietly, meaning a thousand things.

*Seriously, is it you?*

*Seriously, why did you just run off?*

*Seriously, where have you been for the past decade?*

Part of me wishes I could be the kind of person to just push past and run away and pretend this never happened. I could get back on BART, hop on the Muni to the hospital, and delve into a busy workday managing emotions that, honestly, are much bigger and more deserving than these.

But another part of me has been expecting this exact moment for the past eleven years. Relief and anguish pulse heavily in my blood. I've wanted to see him every day. But also, I never wanted to see him again.

"Hi." I finally look up at him. I'm trying to figure out what to say here; my head is full of senseless words. It's a storm of black and white.

"Are you . . . ?" he starts breathlessly. He still hasn't let go of me. "Did you move back here?"

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“San Francisco.”

I watch as he takes in my scrubs, my ugly sneakers. “Physician?”

“Yeah. Resident.”

I am a robot.

His dark brows lift. “So what are you doing here *today*?”

God, what a weird place to begin. But when there’s a mountain ahead of you, I guess you start with a single step to the straightest point ahead. “I was meeting Sabrina for coffee.”

He scrunches his nose in a painfully familiar expression of incomprehension.

“My college roommate,” I clarify. “She lives in Berkeley.”

Elliot deflates a tiny bit, reminding me that he doesn’t know Sabrina. It used to bother us when we would have a month in between updates. Now there are years and entire lives unknown to each other.

“I called you,” he says. “Like a million times. And then that number changed.”

He runs his hand through his hair and shrugs helplessly. And I get it. This whole fucking moment is so surreal. Even now it’s incomprehensible that we let this distance happen. That *I* let this happen.

“I know. I, um, got a new phone,” I say lamely.

He laughs, but it isn’t a particularly happy sound. “Yeah, I figured.”

“Elliot,” I say, pushing past the clog in my throat at the feel of his name there, “I’m sorry. I really have to run. I need to be at work soon.”

He bends so that he’s level with my face. “Are you kidding?” His eyes go wide. “I can’t just run into you at Saul’s and be like, ‘Hey, Macy, what’s up,’ and then you go to work, and I go to work, and we don’t talk for another *ten fucking years*.”

And there it is. Elliot was never able to play the surface game.

“I’m not prepared for this,” I admit quietly.

“Do you have to *prepare* for me?”

“If there’s anyone I have to prepare for, it’s you.”

This hits him where I meant it to—straight in the bull’s-eye of some vulnerable nucleus—but as soon as he winces I regret it.

Goddammit.

“Just give me a minute,” he urges, pulling me to the edge of the sidewalk so we aren’t obstructing the steady stream of commuters. “How are you? How long have you been back? How is Duncan?”

All around us, the world seems to go still.

“I’m good,” I say mechanically. “I moved back in May.” I am obliterated by his third question, and my answer comes out trembling: “And, um . . . Dad died.”

Elliot lurches slightly backward. “*What?*”

“Yeah,” I say, voice garbled. I am struck dumb by this,



struggling to rewrite history, to rewire a thousand synapses in my brain.

Somehow, I'm managing to have this conversation without completely losing my shit, but if I stand here for two more minutes, all bets are off. With Elliot right here asking about Dad, and going on two hours of sleep and the prospect of an eighteen-hour day ahead of me . . . I need to get out of here before I melt down.

But when I look up at him, I see Elliot's face is a mirror to what's happening in my chest. He looks devastated. He's the only one who would look that way after hearing that Dad died, because he's the only one who would have understood what it did to me.

"Duncan *died*?" His voice comes out thick with emotion. "Macy, why didn't you tell me?"

Holy shit, *that* is an enormous question.

"I . . ." I start, and shake my head. "We weren't in touch when it happened."

Nausea rolls up from my stomach to my throat. What a cop-out. What an unbelievable evasion.

He shakes his head. "I didn't know. I'm so sorry, Mace."

I give myself three more seconds to look at him, and it's like another punch to the gut. He's my person. He's always been my person. My best friend, my confidant, probably the love of my life. And I've spent the last eleven years being angry and self-righteous. But at the end of the day, he tore a hole in us, and fate ripped it wide open.

christina lauren

“I’m going to go,” I say in an abrupt burst of awkward.  
“Okay?”

Before he can answer, I split, booking it down the street toward the BART station. The entire time I’m speed walking, and for the full rumbling trip back under the bay, I feel like he’s right there, behind me or in a seat in the next car down.

then



friday, october 11  
fifteen years ago

The entire Petropoulos family was in their front yard when we pulled up in a moving van two months later. The van was only half-full because Dad and I had both thought at the rental counter that we'd have more to bring with us. But in the end, we'd bought only enough furniture from the consignment store to have somewhere to sleep, eat, and read, and not much else.

Dad called it "furniture kindling." I didn't get it.

Maybe I would have if I'd let myself think about it for a few seconds, but the only thought I had during the entire ninety-minute drive was that we were going to a house that

Mom had never seen. Yes, she wanted us to do this, but she hadn't actually picked it out, she hadn't seen it. There was something so horribly sour about that reality. Dad still drove his rumbling old green Volvo. We still lived in the same house on Rose Street. Every piece of furniture inside had been there when Mom was alive. I had new clothes, but I always felt a little like Mom picked them out through some divine intervention when we shopped, because Dad had a way of bringing me the biggest, baggiest things, and invariably some sympathetic saleswoman would swoop in with an armload of more suitable clothing and a reassurance that, yes, this is what all the girls are wearing now, and, no, don't worry, Mr. Sorensen.

Climbing from the van, I straightened my shirt over the waistband of my shorts and stared up at the crew now assembling on our gravelly driveway. I spotted Elliot first—the familiar face in the crowd. But around him were three other boys, and two smiling parents.

The vision of the bursting-at-the-seams family there, waiting to help, only magnified the ache clawing its way up my throat from my chest.

The man—so clearly Elliot's father, with the thick black hair and telltale nose—jogged forward, reaching to shake Dad's hand. He was shorter than Dad by only a couple of inches, a rarity.

"Nick Petropoulos," he said, turning to shake my hand next. "You must be Macy."

“Yes, sir.”

“Call me Nick.”

“Okay, Mr. . . . Nick.” I had never in my life imagined calling a parent by their first name.

With a laugh, he looked back to Dad. “Thought you could use a hand unloading all this.”

Dad smiled and spoke with his trademark simplicity: “That’s nice of you. Thanks.”

“Also thought my boys could use some exercise so they don’t wallop each other all day.” Mr. Nick extended a thick, hairy arm and pointed. “Over there you’ll see my wife, Dina. My boys: Nick Jr., George, Andreas, and Elliot.”

Three strapping guys—and Elliot—stood at the base of our front steps, watching us. I was guessing they were all around fifteen to seventeen, save Elliot, who was so physically different from his brothers that I wasn’t sure how old he was. Their mother, Dina, was formidable—tall and curvy, but with a smile that brought deep, friendly dimples to her cheeks. Other than Elliot—who was the stick-figure version of his father—all of her sons looked just like her. Sleepy-eyed, dimpled, tall.

Cute.

Dad’s arm came around my shoulders, pulling me close. I wondered if it was a protective gesture or if he, too, was feeling how listless our tiny family seemed in comparison.

“I didn’t realize you had four sons. I think Macy already met Elliot?” Dad looked down to me for confirmation.

In my peripheral vision, I could see Elliot shifting on his feet in discomfort. I gave him a sly grin. “Yeah,” I said, adding in my best *who does this?* tone: “He was reading in my closet.”

Mr. Nick waved this away. “The day of the open house, I know, I know. I’ll be honest, that kid loves a book, and that closet was his favorite spot. His buddy Tucker used to come here on the weekends, but he’s gone now.” Looking to Dad, he added, “The family up and moved to Cincinnati. Wine country to Ohio? The shits, right? But don’t worry, Macy. Won’t happen again.” With a smile, he followed Dad’s stoic march up the steps. “We’ve lived right next door the past seventeen years. Been in this house a thousand times.” A stair creaked beneath his work boot, and he toed it with a frown. “That one’s always been a problem.”

Even at my age I saw what this did to Dad’s posture. He was an easygoing metro guy, but Mr. Nick’s casual familiarity with the property immediately pushed some macho rigidity into his spine.

“I can fix that,” Dad said, voice uncharacteristically deep as he leaned on the creaky step. Eager to reassure me that every tiny problem would be corrected, he added quietly, “I’m not wild about the front door, either, but that’s easy enough to replace. And anything else you see, tell me. I want it to be perfect.”

“Dad,” I said, nudging him gently, “it’s already perfect. Okay?”

While the Petropoulos boys wandered down to the mov-

ing truck, Dad fumbled with his keys, finding the right one on a ring heavy with keys for other doors, for our other life seventy-three miles away from here.

“I’m not sure what we’ll need for the kitchen,” Dad mumbled to me. “And there’s probably some renovations to come . . .”

He looked at me with an unsure smile and propped the front door open. I was still evaluating the wide porch that wrapped around to the side, hiding some unknown view of the thick trees beyond the side yard. My mind had drifted to goblins and tromping through the woods looking for arrowheads. Maybe a boy would kiss me in those woods someday.

Maybe it would be one of the Petropoulos boys.

My skin flamed with a blush that I hid by ducking my head and letting my hair fall forward. To date, my only crush had been Jason Lee in seventh grade. After having known each other since kindergarten, we’d danced stiffly to one song at the Spring Fling and then awkwardly burst apart, never to speak again. Apparently I was fine on a friend level with nearly everyone, but add in some mild romantic chemistry and I turned into a spastic robot.

We created an efficient line of arms passing boxes, and quickly emptied the truck, leaving the furniture to the bigger bodies. Elliot and I each grabbed a box labeled *Macy* to carry upstairs. I followed him down the long hallway and into the bright emptiness of my bedroom.

"You can just put that in the corner," I said. "And thanks."

He looked over at me, nodding as he set the box down.

"Are these books?"

"Yeah."

With a tiny look toward me to make sure it was okay, Elliot lifted the flap on the box and peered inside. He pulled out the book on top. *Pay It Forward*.

"You've read this?" he asked dubiously.

I nodded and took the beloved book from him and placed it on the empty shelf just inside the closet.

"It's good," he said.

Surprised, I looked up at him, asking, "You read it, too?"

He nodded, saying unselfconsciously, "It made me cry."

Reaching in, he grabbed another book and dragged a finger across the cover. "This one's good, too." His large eyes blinked up at me. "You have good taste."

I stared at him. "You read a lot."

"Usually a book a day."

My eyes went wide. "Are you serious?"

He shrugged. "People come to the Russian River on vacation and a lot of times they leave their holiday reads here when they go. The library gets a ton, and I have a deal with Sue down there: I get first crack at the new donations as long as I pick them up on Monday and bring them back on Wednesday." He nudged his glasses up the bridge of his nose. "One time, she got six new books in from a family that was visiting for the week, and I read them all."