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**CHRISTINA
LAUREN**

**love
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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.

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:

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

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.

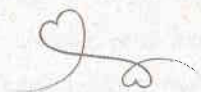
In the first couple of years after Mom died, he watched me, his ice-blue eyes somehow both soft and probing. He would ask questions that required long answers, or at least longer than “yes,” “no,” or “I don’t care.” The first time I answered one of these detailed questions with a vacant moan, too tired 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

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.

"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