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CHRISTINA LAUREN

the
**romance
revival**

★
PIATKUS

Prologue

EMERY

On paper, we never made sense.

He's always wanted a family; I never even planned to get married. He surfs and hikes, bikes and runs; I hate sand and sun, and run only if death is the alternative or procuring coffee requires it. He's an extrovert and charms everyone he meets; I like dogs more than people. He's always down to dance with every grandma, drunk bridesmaid, and adorable flower girl at a wedding; you could not forcibly peel me from the wall during the "Cha Cha Slide." He works to live; I live to work.

But when I surprised everyone and took a long weekend to attend my cousin's wedding in Las Vegas, all it took was hearing his laugh from across the banquet hall for everything I thought I knew about myself to change.

Our eyes met, and his smile faltered for just a breath before he turned to the heavily tattooed man he was talking to, said something, and then made his way across the room to me, his eyes locked on mine. When he was only a foot away, I registered how tall he was, how broad, how attractive.

Shit.

I wanted to find some visible flaw. I couldn't.

Beneath my sternum, an anxious lever flickered desperately, begging the universe to let me not fuck it up. I'd never been good at meet-cutes; my best friend had long since stopped bothering to set me up on blind dates. The first time, I apparently turned the guy off by talking about botflies while he tried to eat his orzo. I pissed the

next one off by correcting his use of “less” when he meant “fewer.” Then there was the guy who talked the entire meal about the mountain of supplements I should be taking—and could I use his referral code at checkout?—before asking about my gym routine. Joke’s on him: I don’t even know where the nearest gym *is*. The final nail in the blind-date coffin was the one that ended before we’d even ordered entrees. It started out fine, but then he mentioned his favorite book was *American Psycho*. I knew my time would be better spent back in the lab. For, like, forever.

So that’s what I did, and gave up on dating entirely. My job was the best partner I could ask for anyway.

But then I came to Vegas, heard a perfect laugh, and suddenly *he* was in front of me. My mind went blank. Standing this close to him—he was wearing a black suit, no tie, his white shirt unbuttoned at the neck and exposing a peek of smooth, tanned collarbone—I felt as though the universe somehow answered my wish. I was no longer the lab-rat book nerd I’d always known myself to be. I was the woman in the blue strapless sequined dress who’d actually put on makeup for the first time in weeks, who’d agreed to let someone else braid her usually ponytailed hair into a woven crown on top of her head, who’d had two glasses of wine and wanted nothing more than to give the rest of the night to this man standing only inches away.

I would think back to this moment later when we stood side by side on Torrey Pines Beach, fingers intertwined, and the waves broke over our shins, cleaning away our trailing footprints like we’d never stepped anywhere but right where we were planted. That first night, he made me feel like I’d been spawned into the world, at this wedding, solely for him to walk across the room to me.

“I’m Luca,” he said, voice deep and calm.

“Emery.”

He took my hand, his smile turning from polite and a little unsure to flirtatious and elated. “Hi, Emery,” he whispered.

My heart did a painful lurch. Hot *and* endearing. My absolute kryptonite. “Hi, Luca.”

Luca huffed out a nervous chuckle as he released my hand. Reaching up, he ran his fingers through his thick dark blond hair, and I tracked the movement, mesmerized. “I saw you looking over and, I don’t know. Wanted to come meet you.”

“Oh, I just looked over because I heard your laugh,” I said lamely.

“Yeah?”

“It cut through the room like a firecracker in a library.” I immediately wanted to suck the words back into my mouth, but Luca beamed like it was the greatest compliment he’d ever received.

“A firecracker in a library, huh?”

I nodded. “I mean, it’s a pretty great laugh.”

He tilted his head at me, smiling, and I could tell that he’d heard some approximation of this before, probably a million times. His was the kind of laugh that made everyone feel good.

“You have beautiful eyes,” he said, looking at each of them in turn, his gaze lingering on the bright spot of copper in my right one.

I swallowed. “Thank you.”

The song changed, from upbeat to slow, and he stood looking at me like he had nothing else in the world to do, and just when I was about to burst from the tension, from rummaging through the attic of my rom-com cortex, looking for one usable line, Luca calmly held out his hand to me. “Do you want to dance?”

And just like that, I became someone who danced.

To be fair, it was more of a sway.

But I don’t know how I would have moved more with how tightly

he held me, how close we were. He led capably, occasionally pivoting us in smooth arcs before slowing, gently moving from side to side.

Does he dance like this with everyone? I wondered, and then cracked the whip on those thoughts. Five minutes into this interaction and I was already staking a claim.

But who wouldn't? He'd dragged more attention with him across the room than an F1 car does around a track. Males, females, young, old, queer, straight—everyone was watching him. He was gorgeous, of course—the thick flaxen hair, tanned skin, dark brows, playful blue eyes—but it was more than that. Luca had an easiness in his body, a looseness in his limbs and a smile that carried the vibe of a hot, benevolent prince who had no idea of the power he held.

"What do you do for a living, Emery?"

His question caught me off guard, though it shouldn't have, being an obvious conversation starter. Except for me, it was the conversation starter that always made my stomach suffer a small twist.

Tell the truth, I thought, and immediately discarded it. I couldn't and wouldn't.

"I work in the design and implementation of medical-grade lasers used in surgical equipment."

He stilled, pausing our rhythm and looking down at me. "Seriously?"

I nodded, surprised again. It was such a practiced, boring answer, I was rarely asked to confirm. On the off chance I was, this is where I'd veer straight into the technical weeds, using terms like *photothermolysis* and *optimal ablation* until the listener lost interest. But here with Luca, for some strange reason, I felt unwilling to expand the lie. It usually rolled right out of me, but tonight, I was sick of it. It felt like a straitjacket.

"What kind of schooling do you have to do to make *lasers*?" There was a pleasing rhythm to his speech I couldn't place, a rounded accent like an extra vowel at the end of some of his words.

Laughing at his astonishment, I said, "I went to medical school, but I don't actually practice medicine."

Mostly.

"A doctor? You're Dr. Emery?"

I laughed again, nodding. "I am. Dr. Emery Finch."

He began moving us again, a slow dance that allowed us to keep looking at each other. "Is it terrible if I tell you I haven't seen a doctor in, like, five years?"

"Yes, but I won't tell." I lowered my voice, confiding with a smile, "I don't actually know many physicians."

"I treat everything with ibuprofen and water."

"You look pretty healthy to me," I said with a grin. Understatement of the century. "As long as you wear sunblock and eat your veggies, this doctor says you're probably fine."

"Smart and hot," he said, shaking his head and smiling down at me. "I'm intimidated."

This made me laugh again. "Oh, please."

"Seriously, now I can brag that I know someone who makes lasers."

"You say that like it was on your bucket list."

"Emery Finch, I think you underestimate how much men think about lasers."

I stared up at him, absolutely charmed. "What do *you* do for a living?"

It was his turn to grin. "I'm a landscaper."

My surprise flared and then vanished. Other than the suit and the artificial Vegas setting around us, everything about Luca screamed *I work outdoors in the sunshine*. "I love that."

"You do? Why?"

Tilting my head, I studied him. "Because it fits you."

"Is that a nice way of saying I look like someone who doesn't read at work?"

I laughed. "I'm saying you look like someone who likes to be outside, in the sun, moving his body."

These words sent a hot flush of mortification down my spine, but he didn't seem to hear the overt horniness in my voice.

"I do; I love being outside."

"That's nice."

He correctly interpreted my tone. "And you, not so much?"

"I like to think of myself as *indoorsy*."

Luca laughed and it was that infectious sound again. "What sorts of indoorsy things do you like to do?"

Before I could think better of it, I lifted one eyebrow and his laugh ripped from him again, filling the room and catching the attention of people around us, who smiled. "Okay," he said, "I walked right into that one."

"To be honest, I'm a bit of a workaholic," I admitted.

"Okay, but in all fairness, I bet lasers are fascinating."

I shrugged. "To me, I guess."

"What made you get into that line of work?"

I wasn't sure anyone had ever asked me this before, and it meant I didn't have time to think of a breezier answer. "My parents died in a car accident, and what I do now is a circuitous way of inventing things that could have saved them."

My own surprise at my answer was replaced by a vague sensation of relief. Like when you're carrying something heavy and are finally able to set it down, if only for a minute. *There*, I thought. *That's a hundred percent true.*

"Oh shit," he said, pausing our movements again. "Actually? Damn. I'm so sorry."

"Thanks. Yeah."

"How old were you?"

"Fourteen."

"Jesus."

I nodded, and smiled up at him, hoping he read the expression as *I'm okay now, I promise* rather than *I smile when I talk about my parents' death*.

The song changed to a faster number. Guests flooded the dance floor, screaming in excitement, and we eagerly ducked out of their way. Luca took my hand, leading me to an empty table littered with wineglasses stained with lipstick, cake plates with only scattered crumbs remaining, muslin bags of tooth-breaking Jordan almonds that guests had left behind. He turned a couple of chairs to face the dance floor and we sat down, for a minute just watching the crowd jump around to the song while scream-singing the lyrics.

"Pardon me for assuming you wouldn't want to do the Macarena," he said.

"Thank you, you absolute legend." I toyed with a bag of candy. "This may be a controversial take, but Jordan almonds seem like something invented by dentists to increase business."

Luca laughed, taking the bag from me and looking at them. "In Italy, we give them in groups of five to symbolize the wishes for the newlyweds: health, wealth, happiness, fertility, longevity." He opened the bag, popped one into his mouth, crunched, and winced.

I laughed, and then his words registered. That was the accent. "You're from Italy?"

"I lived there until I was nine, when we moved to the States." And that explained the subtlety of it.

"Can I ask you something?"

He nodded, mock solemn, but his labored crunching of the almond made it impossible to take him seriously. "Anything."

Lowering my voice to a whisper, I asked, "Are the Volturi real?"

That perfect laugh, it sent awareness tap-dancing across my skin. "We don't speak of them, Emery," he whispered. "We pretend we don't know they exist. It's safer that way."

"That's what I thought." Smiling, I looked back out to the crowd. "Who do you know at this wedding?"

He lifted his chin to the groom. "Arlo and I were friends in high school. What about you?"

I mimicked his motion, to the bride. "Justina is my cousin."

We watched as the newlyweds were lifted in their chairs on the dance floor. In a move that was objectively unwise to a sober witness, the drunk groomsmen struggled to raise the occupied chairs overhead.

"Well, that seems safe," I said.

"Ten dollars Arlo ends up face down on the floor."

I laughed, shaking my head. "I'm not taking that bet."

Luca turned to look at me, blue eyes twinkling, smile just barely curling his lips. "Dr. Emery Finch, do you want to get out of here?"

Want doesn't even begin to cover it.

He took my hand and led me out of the banquet hall as easily as he'd led me onto the dance floor earlier. We'd find out later that Luca would have won the bet and Arlo ended up with quite the shiner, but neither of us would even think about the wedding until the next day, long after the sun came up, slanting warm and golden across the foot of Luca's hotel bed, where the bedding had wound up in a smooth, white pile.

Our first kiss had been as easy as our first word, our first dance, our first time ducking out of a party early. It was inside the elevator, a wordless moment where our eyes met. Luca stepped closer, gently crowding me against the mirrored wall as he bent and brushed his lips over mine. He pulled away, studying my reaction, and I sent a hand around the back of his neck, pulling him down, stretching on my toes to deepen the kiss. His tongue was teasing, lips strong and full, kisses so intoxicating I felt like I'd had much more to drink than I actually had.

Luca was the first man I'd slept with on the first night, and only the

third man I'd ever been with, but he made me feel like a sex goddess. There was a mirror across from the bed, and he was obsessed with how we looked together.

Do you see that?

The way you take me?

Sei perfetta. So perfect.

Show me how to make you come.

His hands were fevered and greedy, cupping my curves, squeezing, pulling me to him, stroking me to madness. Beneath me, above me, behind me, he absolutely possessed me. For the entire night, the only thought I had was *More of this, more of him.*

After the first time, we lay in bed facing each other, talking for hours through the night about everything, from the hardships in our childhoods—Luca had been left alone much of the time to care for his younger sisters while his parents traveled or socialized; I'd lived a perfectly happy life as an only child until the devastating loss of my parents—to our favorite sports, books, bands, movies. Gradually we made our way back to each other, kissing, touching, teasing, until one of us was begging for more. Over and over again, this lasted all night long.

During breakfast the next morning, with room service trays stacked precariously on the table, Luca sleepily gazed at me with adoration.

"Luca?" I asked through a bite of pancake. It felt like there was a panicked bird trapped in my chest. Something fluttering, anxious, desperate to get out.

He hummed in response, completely calm.

"Am I crazy?"

"No."

"What's happening here?"

He lifted his coffee to his lips, blowing across the hot surface. "I think you know."

I think I did.

Strange, maybe, that though we met in Vegas, our whirlwind wedding didn't take place there. It was a couple of months later in our shared hometown of San Diego, on a cliff overlooking the Pacific Ocean, with his parents and sisters, my grandmother, cousin, and aunt, and a scattering of our friends who could make the last-minute trip to California in attendance.

I struggled with the decision. Not the decision to marry Luca—I'd known from that very first night that I would do anything to keep him. No, I struggled with knowing that I could never be totally honest with him.

For his safety, and for mine.

But I'd make it work. I assured myself that I'd always been able to accomplish anything I put my mind to. I could love him enough to make up for the secrets.

We wrote our own vows, promising to encourage each other's passions, growth, and independence, though we did keep some things standard.

For better, for worse.

For richer, for poorer.

In sickness and in health.

To love and to cherish,

'Til death do us part.

I would rewrite that last part now if I could.

'Til death do us part ...

And luckily death is no match for me.

1

EMERY

THREE YEARS LATER

I can't find my keys." I limp down the hall in one shoe, and with my favorite navy pin-striped dress only halfway zipped. "Or my blazer." I peek in the bathroom for my lost items. Nope. "Or my other shoe."

Wordlessly, Luca hands me a steaming mug. Despite the missing keys, blazer, and shoe, my husband knows the priorities well in this moment: I am barely functional before nine in the morning and multiple cups of coffee.

Which is unfortunate, frankly, given that the biggest presentation of my life is happening at six o'clock on this hellfire day, a time that works for the executive team and investors in San Diego, Chicago, New York, London, and Basel, but definitely not for my stubborn circadian rhythm.

"Keys are near the microwave," Luca says, trailing behind and zipping me up. As a scientist, I believe in probability, not luck, and this dress has yet to let me down: I have never had a bad day while wearing it.

My husband's eyes are also glued to my boobs, still more evidence of the dress's power.

"The blazer is in the dry-cleaning bag hanging on the dining room chair," he says. "And did you check under your side of the bed for the shoe?"

Luca has a seemingly endless well of patience, and I peck his stubbled cheek in thanks before jogging into each room to collect my

things. The clock on the microwave reads 5:00 a.m., which feels like a time suitable only for owls and infants and people with a sunrise kink like Luca to be awake.

For as long as I've known him, Luca has always been a morning person, up for a run before sunrise, well into his workday by the time I'm barely climbing out of bed. Because my brain doesn't fully turn on until after lunch, my best work is always done after midnight, fueled by coffee and adrenaline and whatever scraps of junk food I can find in the break room at the office. In fact, I was up until only a couple of hours ago putting the finishing touches on my presentation when Luca shuffled sleepily in and made me get at least an hour or two of rest before my big day.

It's been three years, but Luca and I still don't make much sense to people. I'm not unattractive, but Luca is absolutely gorgeous. Like, golden skin and muscles and toothpaste-commercial-smile kind of gorgeous. You may think I'm biased, but I once watched a grown man ride his bike into a tree because my husband was working in the front yard shirtless.

Our sleep schedules are still totally different, our jobs are worlds apart, and our temperaments opposite—I can be intense and driven, occasionally lost in a silent brainstorm related to work even when surrounded by people, while Luca is social and playful and always smiling—but I love that about us. I like that Luca is everything that I'm not.

And, also, because without my happy, easygoing, early-riser husband I would have overslept and arrived half dressed, shoeless, and via Uber to the most important day of my career.

Luca stands, holding the front door open for me, wearing his running shorts and socks, a fitted T-shirt and baseball cap, looking tanned and relaxed, ready to leave for his run after he sees me off.

Catching me around the waist, he bends, pressing his lips just beneath my ear. "You're not leaving until I get a proper kiss."

I tilt my face up, happy to indulge, and for just a breath, work slips away and it's only the quiet pull of Luca filling my mind and body. He tilts his head, deepening the kiss, bringing one big hand up my neck, cupping my jaw.

As it always does, our chemistry takes over, flushing heat down my limbs, electricity pulsing between my legs. Until the quiet voice in the back of my head presses forward, becoming loud and shrill: *You don't have time for this.*

But I want to. I want to have more time for Luca.

Pulling away, I press my face to his neck, soaking his sweetness and hotness up with one deep breath, making the same silent promise I make nearly every morning—*Starting next week, I will be more present; I will be home before he's asleep; I will not take his steadiness or sunshine for granted; I will be a better partner*—before stretching to peck him just one more time.

"Good luck, Em," he says, smiling against my lips.

"Thank you. I'm so nervous I want to barf."

"You're going to be great." He steps back, tucking a strand of hair behind my ear and letting his gaze roam over my face. I'm wearing makeup today, something I don't always do for work, but I knew this presentation—with some of the biggest of bigwigs—called for a bit of physical polishing. Luca has always maintained he likes my freckles, but I can see in his eyes that he notices the way a touch of blush brings them out, how my lipstick accentuates my mouth, that I could cut a man with the point of my winged eyeliner. "And you look beautiful."

"So do you."

He grins. "See you tonight. I assume you'll go straight to the restaurant?"

I frown, momentarily thrown. "Restaurant?"

Luca's smile falters, barely long enough for me to catch it, but I do. He rescues it with a laugh. "Yeah. For—"

My stomach sinks as my brain hooks on the date. "Oh, right, yes, yes," I say, attempting to cover. "I was thinking I would come home before—"

"You forgot." His blue eyes glimmer with teasing, but it's tight. There's a shadow there.

"I did not!" I try to keep my voice light. It's not a complete lie. I did remember the date was coming up and had every intention of planning something spectacular, but then Tom discovered a batch of incorrectly time-stamped samples, there were a series of random mix-ups and lost vials in the lab, and our already dwindling timeline was robbed of a whole week. Just one of a dozen small-scale catastrophes recently, but any one of them could have tanked the whole project if not caught. Put them together and my best intentions just . . . slipped my mind. "I want to come home and change before dinner."

"Sounds good." Luca leans in, pressing one last kiss to my forehead. "Happy anniversary, Emery. Hope it goes perfectly today. You've got this. See you here at seven."

"Seven," I repeat, heart positively hammering behind my sternum. I step outside, laptop bag in hand, legs rubbery with nerves. I wave one last time before climbing into my car and driving off, to the meeting that will change not only my life but the entire world.

2

EMERY

In the car, I wonder whether it's possible to drown in my own self-loathing. I forgot my own fucking anniversary. Who does that?

Yes, today is an epic day for my career, and yes, deadlines and unforeseen disasters have left me more distracted than usual, but it's right there in the calendar! The one on the wall that Luca updates meticulously with family members' birthdays and doctors' appointments and Sunny Sundays at the beach. Who still uses a paper calendar, you ask? My adorable husband does, insisting he likes the tactile experience and visual accessibility. All true, but he also hangs it next to the coffee maker, knowing it's the one place I'm most likely to see it.

Unfortunately, I'm usually half asleep while I wait for my coffee to brew. And even if I wasn't, that paper calendar on the wall isn't the one I remember to check. *That* calendar, the one that holds every critical deadline and meeting and to-do item in my work life, lives on the phone I'm contractually obligated to keep out of sight.

The calendar and the phone and the small safe that Luca doesn't even know about.

That almost *no one* knows about, not even the busybody neighbor who seems to know everything, and whom I can feel watching from her window as I pull out of the driveway and turn down the street.

Hell, she probably remembered my anniversary before I did.

There's an adage that a lie told often enough becomes truth, and I've carefully built my life around it. My job isn't one I can discuss with anyone, not even the person closest to me.

The key to deception is to lead with the lie you want the world to see. With that in mind, from the moment I leave my lab every day to head home, I mentally reconstruct the fictionalized version of myself: Dr. Emery Martín, a project lead whose team develops novel optical resonators for surgical laser devices . . . the details of which are still so wah-wah and overtly boring, no one stays focused long enough to ask many questions.

But some days it's exhausting to be so compartmentalized. With Luca, I'm an affectionate—if work-obsessed—wife. On Sunny Sundays together, I love the beach and eating his cooking, or spending the entire day naked in bed. At work, I am a driven, inspired scientist with a gift for innovation.

But lying doesn't just increase mental load and create stress, it rewires the brain. I once read a study where researchers found that the part of the brain that processes emotions—the amygdala—is very active the first time a subject tells a lie, but the more times it's told, the more this activation diminishes.

Simply put, the more I lie, the more my brain becomes wired to say, "Eh. No big." Every morning and every night, I shed each side of myself so easily, I sometimes wonder if I'm slowly and deliberately creating a split personality.

I went into my marriage knowing it had to be that way. I was hopeful and in love . . . and possibly a little self-important—but the lying is getting harder. I know I'll have to tell Luca eventually; I just have to get through this presentation first.

So, as I pull into the parking lot and steer into the spot with my name—DR. EMERY MARTÍN—I compartmentalize like the pro that I am and shed the public-facing side of myself, transforming back into

the one that very few people ever see. I climb out of my car. My back straightens, my strides become longer and more confident. My gaze turns sharp. Two assistants rush toward me, Tom Halliday taking my bag, Claire Morgan handing me another coffee—Claire is my favorite—both updating me in overlapping words.

"Wei, Johns, Dunn, and Zimmerman logged on early," Tom says.

"A/V is up and ready for you," Claire adds. "Your slides are loaded, and I confirmed they're the most recent ones that you sent this morning." Her pause carries unspoken judgment. "At 3:36 a.m."

I wince in apology. "I couldn't stop tinkering."

"Behold my shock," she says with a single raised brow. Claire is my favorite for more than just feeding my caffeine addiction; she's also an active member of the Friends of Tony Bennett fan club (I support fan-girl enthusiasm at any age), and the most dependable yet no-nonsense assistant I've ever had. I used to attribute this to the twenty years she spent working around politicians, but I think raising six sons might have had something to do with it as well. She is not here for shenanigans. Mine included.

And while she'll always point out my crack-of-dawn timestamps, she'll also admit that none of us have what you'd call a "normal" work-life balance. It's the price we pay for what we do, and we all knew that going in. Signed a large stack of papers agreeing to it, in fact. "Has anyone checked in on Honey?"

"Subject 10142 is stable as of 0545 this morning," Tom reports robotically. If Claire is the most dependable assistant I've ever had, Tom is the most detail-obsessed. He's twenty-eight but looks fourteen and can often be found double-checking compound batch codes on his lunch break because he finds it soothing. When he used the words *onboarding*, *pharmacovigilance*, and *gravimetrically* during his first interview, I knew he was my guy.

I take a folder from him, leafing through it. "CRP and platelets?"