

CHRISTINA LAUREN

NEW YORK TIMES

BESTSELLING

AUTHOR

Love

and
Other

Words

advance 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.”

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praise for the novels of Christina Lauren

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love
and
other words

CHRISTINA LAUREN



gallery books

new york london toronto sydney new delhi

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

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 any- thing.

“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 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 remember 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 “*Ob*” 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.”

“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?*

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."