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CHRISTINA
LAUREN

the

TRUE
LOVE

EXPERIMENT

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GALLERY BOOKS

New York London Toronto Sydney New Delhi

*This one is a blatant love letter to our genre.
There be romance in these pages.*

*And for Jennifer Yuen, Patty Lai, Eileen Ho, Kayla Lee,
and Sandria Wong.*

*There's a piece of each of you in here.
We are so grateful that you shared yourselves, and we hope
we've made you proud.*

prologue

FIZZY

I was born the first of three children, but I joke that I'm like that first pancake." A smattering of laughter ripples across the assembled crowd and I smile. "You know what I mean? A little messy, slightly undercooked, but still tastes good?"

The laughter intensifies, but mixed in now are a few bawdy catcalls, and I burst out laughing in realization. "See, and that wasn't even meant to sound saucy! Look at me trying to be professional, and I'm still a mess." I glance over my shoulder and grin at Dr. Leila Nguyen, the provost of UC San Diego's Revelle College and my former creative writing professor. "I guess that's what you get for inviting a romance author to give the commencement address."

Beside Dr. Nguyen sits another person struggling to smother a smile. Dr. River Peña—close friend, hot genius, and unconfirmed vampire—is also a special guest today; I guess he's receiving yet another honorary degree for being some type of sexy prodigy. He looks like he belongs up here: stiff collar, perfectly pressed suit pants visible below the hem of his full doctoral regalia, shiny dress shoes, and an air of austerity I've never been able to master. Right now, I can see the knowing amusement light up his smug, thickly lashed eyes.

When I first received the invitation to speak at this ceremony, River immediately slapped a twenty-dollar bill down onto the table between us and declared, "This is going to go completely sideways, Fizzy. Convince me otherwise."

I'm sure he and my best friend, Jess—his wife—expected that I would get up onstage and deliver *The Vagina Monologues* to the academic masses, or pull out a banana and remind everyone while I rolled a condom onto it that safe sex is still important in this here year of our Lord Harry Styles—but I swear I can play the part of a buttoned-down literary type when the situation calls for it.

At the very least, I thought I'd make it further than one line into my speech before dropping a double entendre—and that one wasn't even intentional.

I turn back to the sea of black, blue, and yellow-clad grads that stretches far across RIMAC Field and experience a wave of vicarious, breathless anticipation for all these youngsters taking flight. So many opportunities ahead. So much student loan stress. But also so much great sex.

“My younger sister is a neurosurgeon,” I tell them. “My little brother? Yeah, he’s the youngest partner in his firm’s history. One of my best friends, sitting right behind me, is a world-famous geneticist.” There’s genuine applause for biotech’s It boy, and once it dies back down, I go in for the kill: “But you know what? Despite all their accomplishments, none of them wrote a book called *Cloaked Lust*, so I think we all know who the real success story is here.”

Smiling at a fresh wave of cheers, I continue. “So listen. Giving this kind of speech is a big deal. Most people invited to send off a group of young superstars like yourselves will list concrete ways to find your place in an ever-changing culture, or encourage you to amplify your impact by reducing your carbon footprint. They would tell you to go out and change the world, and of course yes—*do that*. I support those ambitions. Global citizen: good. Ecoterrorist: bad. But Dr. Nguyen didn’t invite an inspiring climate scientist or charismatic and acceptably neutral politician. She invited me, Felicity Chen, author of books full of love and accountability and sex-positivity, and frankly the only professional advice I’m qualified to give about being eco-conscious is to support your local library.” Another muted wave of laughter. “In fact, the only thing I care about—the one thing that matters most in the world to me—is that when every single one of you gets to the end of this crazy ride, you look back and can truly say you were happy.”

It is a perfect day: bright and blue. Eucalyptus trees sway at the edge of the field, and if you breathe in at just the right moment, on the perfect gust of warm San Diego breeze, you can smell the ocean less than a mile away. Despite that, my stomach feels a little tilty at this next part of my speech. I’ve spent a majority of my adult years defending my profession, and the last thing I want to do is sound defensive. I’m standing up here in my own cap and gown with a lecture that I typed up and printed out so I wouldn’t start winging it, derailing the whole thing with penis jokes exactly the way River expects me to. I want them to hear the sincerity in my words.

“I’m going to tell you to live your life like it’s a romance novel.” I hold up a hand when those smiling graduates begin to titter, but I don’t blame them for thinking it’s a joke, that I’m being coy. “Listen.” I pause for effect, waiting for the laughter to subside and curiosity to take over. “Romance isn’t gratuitous bodice ripping. It can be, and there’s nothing wrong with that, but in the end, romance isn’t about the fantasy of being wealthy or beautiful or even being tied to the bed.” More laughter, but I have their attention now. “It’s about elevating stories of joy above stories of pain. It is about seeing yourself as the main character in a very interesting—or maybe even quiet—life that is entirely yours to control. It is, my friends, the fantasy of *significance*.” I pause again, just like I practiced, because all these babies have been raised under the dreary cloud of the patriarchy and I consider it my mission on earth to smash that with a proverbial hammer. The truth that we all deserve significance needs time to sink in.

But the pause stretches longer than I’d planned.

Because I didn’t expect my own thesis to hit me like a thunderbolt to the center of my chest. I *have* lived my entire adult life like it’s a romance novel. I’ve embraced adventure and ambition; I’ve been open to love. I enjoy sex, I support the women in my life, I actively think of ways to make the world around me a better place. I am surrounded by family and close friends. But my own significance is primarily as the sidekick bestie, the devoted daughter, the one-night stand they’ll never forget. The real meat of my story—the romance plot, including love and happiness—is one gaping hole. I’m tired of first dates, and I suddenly feel so weary I could lie down right here at the podium. I am aware, in a jarring gust, that I have lost my joy.

I stare out at the sea of faces pointed at me, their eyes wide and attentive, and I want to admit the worst bit: *I’ve never made it past the first act of my own story*. I don’t know what it feels like to be consistently significant. How can I tell these fresh babyadults to go out there with optimism because everything will be okay? The world seems intent on beating us down, and I don’t remember the last time I was genuinely happy. Everything I’m telling them—every single hopeful word of this speech—feels like a lie.

Somehow I manage to put the glowing Fizzy mask on and tell these kids that the best thing they can do for their future is to pick the right community. I tell

them that if they approach their future with the optimism of the world's boyfriend, Ted Lasso, things will turn out okay. I tell them that if they put in the work, if they allow that there will be blind curves and ups and downs, if they allow themselves to be vulnerable and loved and honest with the people who mean something to them, things really will turn out okay.

And when I step away from the podium and take my seat beside River, he presses something into my palm. "You nailed it."

I stare down at the crisp twenty-dollar bill and then discreetly hand it back to him. Plastering a big grin on my face, aware that we're still facing an audience of thousands, I say, "But what if it's all bullshit?"



one

FIZZY

Approximately one year later

If you aren't deep in a daydream about the hot bartender, then you have no good excuse for not reacting to what I just said."

I blink up across the table at my best friend, Jess, and realize I've been essentially hypnotizing myself by stirring the olive in my martini around and around and around.

"Shit, I'm sorry. I spaced out. Tell me again."

"No." She lifts her wineglass primly. "Now you must guess."

"Guess what you have planned for your trip to Costa Rica?"

She nods, taking a sip.

I stare flatly at her. She and her husband, the aforementioned River Peña, seem to be connected constantly by a vibrating, sexy laser beam. The answer here is very obvious. "Sex on every flat surface of the hotel room."

"A given."

“Running with wildcats?”

Jess stills with her glass partway to her lips. “It’s interesting that you would go there as your second guess. No.”

“A tree house picnic?”

She is immediately repulsed. “Eating with spiders? Hard pass.”

“Surfing on the backs of turtles?”

“Deeply unethical.”

Guiltily, I wince over at her. Even my Jess-Fizzy banter well has run dry. “Okay. I got nothing.”

She studies me for a beat before saying, “Sloths. We’re going to a sloth sanctuary.”

I let out a gasp of jealousy and drum up some real energy to effuse over how amazing this trip will be, but Jess just reaches across the bar table and rests her hand over mine, quieting me. “Fizzy.”

I look down at my half-finished martini to avoid her concerned maternal gaze. Jess’s Mom Face has a way of immediately making me feel the need to handwrite an apology, no matter what I’ve just been caught doing.

“Jessica,” I mumble in response.

“What’s happening right now?”

“What do you mean?” I ask, knowing exactly what she means.

“The whole vibe.” She holds up her wineglass with her free hand. “I ordered wine from Choda Vineyards and you didn’t make a joke about short, chubby grapes.”

I grimace. I didn’t even catch it. “I admit that was a wasted opportunity.”

“The bartender has been staring at you since we got here and you haven’t AirDropped him your contact info.”

I shrug. “He has lines shaved into his eyebrow.”

As these words leave my lips, our eyes meet in shock. Jess’s voice is a dramatic whisper: “Are you actually being...?”

“Picky?” I finish in a gasp.

Her smile softens the worry lingering in her eyes. “There she is.” With one final squeeze to my fingers, she releases my hand, leaning back. “Rough day?”

“Just a lot of thinking,” I admit. “Or overthinking.”

“You saw Kim today, I take it?”

Kim, my therapist for the past ten months and the woman who I hope will help me crack the code to writing, dating, feeling like myself again. Kim, who hears all my angst about love and relationships and inspiration because I really, truly do not want to drop the depth of my stress in Jess’s lap (she and River are still relative newlyweds), or my sister Alice’s lap (she is pregnant and already fed up with her overprotective obstetrician husband), or my mother’s lap (she is already overly invested in my relationship status; I don’t want to send her to therapy, too).

In the past, when I’ve felt discontentment like this, I knew it would ebb with time. Life has ups and downs; happiness isn’t a constant or a given. But this feeling has lasted nearly a year. It’s a cynicism that now seems permanently carved into my outlook. I used to spend my life writing love stories and carrying the boundless optimism that my own love story would begin on the next page, but what if that optimism has left me for good? What if I’ve run out of pages?

“I did see Kim,” I say. “And she gave me homework.” I pull a little Moleskine notebook from my purse and wave it limply. For years, these colorful journals were my constant companions. I took one everywhere I went, writing book plots, snippets of funny conversations, images that would pop into my head at random times. I called them my idea notebooks and used to scribble things down twenty, thirty, forty times a day. These scribbles were my deep well of ideas. For a few months after my romance brain came to a screeching halt in front of a thousand fresh college grads, I continued carrying one around in hopes inspiration would strike. But eventually, seeing it there in my purse stressed me out, so I left them in my home office, collecting dust with my laptop and desktop. “Kim told me I need to start carrying notebooks again,” I tell Jess. “That I’m ready for the gentle pressure of having one with me, and even writing a single sentence or drawing a doodle in it will help.”

She takes a second to absorb this. The phrase *even writing a single sentence* hangs between us. “I knew you’d been in a slump,” she says, “but I don’t think I realized how bad it was.”

“Well, it doesn’t happen all at once. For a while, I wrote, but it wasn’t very good. And then I started to worry it was actually pretty terrible, and that made

me think I'd lost my spark. And then thinking I'd lost my spark made me think maybe it was because I'd stopped believing in love."

Her frown deepens, and I press on. "It isn't like I woke up one day and thought, Wow, love is a lie." I stab the olive in my drink, then use the toothpick to point in her direction. "Obviously you're proof that it's not. But at what point do I acknowledge that maybe *my* love life isn't going to be what I think it is?"

"Fizz—"

"I think I might have aged out of the majors."

"*What?* That is—" She blinks, her argument dying on her tongue. "Well, that is actually a very good metaphor."

"It's the classic chicken-and-egg dilemma: Has the writer's block killed my romance boner, or has losing my romance boner killed my actual boner?"

"There are a lot of boners in this situation."

"If only! And once you're single for so long, you aren't even sure whether you're suitable for a relationship anymore."

"It's not like you've wanted to be in one," she reminds me. "I don't know who Felicity Chen is if she's not treating dating like it's an extreme sport."

I point at her again, energized. "Exactly! That's another fear I have! What if I've depleted the local resources?"

"Local... resources?"

"I joke that I've dated every single man in San Diego County—and inadvertently some of the married ones—but I don't really think it's that far off from the truth."

Jess scoffs into her wine. "Come on."

"Remember Leon? The guy I met when he spilled a huge tray of Greek salad on my foot in the Whole Foods parking lot?"

She nods, swallowing a sip. "The guy from Santa Fe?"

"And remember Nathan, who I met on a blind date?"

She squints. "I think I remember hearing that name."

"They're brothers. *Twins*. Moved out here together to be closer to family. I went out with them two weeks apart." Jess claps a hand to her mouth, stifling a

laugh. “When Nathan walked into the restaurant and approached the table, I said, ‘Oh my God, what are you doing here?’”

Her laugh breaks free. “I’m sure he and Leon get that all the time, though.”

“Sure, but then I went out with a guy last month named Hector.” I pause to underscore the weight of what I’m going to say next. “He’s the cousin the twins moved here to be closer to.”

To her credit, this laugh is more of a groan. This shit used to be funny. It used to crack us both up—and dating like this was a blast. The Adventures of Fizzy used to give me unending inspiration—even if a date went terribly, I could still play it for comedy or even just a tiny spark of an idea for dialogue. But at this point, I have six books partially written that get just past the meet-cute and then... nothing. There’s a roadblock on the way to the “I love you” now, a NO ACCESS sign in my brain. I’m starting to understand why. Because when I see Jess light up every time River walks into the room, I must admit that I’ve never shared that kind of reverberating joy with anyone. It’s made it increasingly difficult to write about love authentically.

I’m not sure I even know what real love feels like.

Jess’s phone vibrates on the table. “It’s Juno,” she says, meaning her ten-year-old daughter, my second-in-line bestie and one of the most charming small humans I’ve ever met. Kids are mostly a mystery to me, but Juno somehow translates in my brain like an adult would—probably because she’s smarter than I am.

I motion for Jess to take the call just as my gaze locks with that of a man across the bar. He’s gorgeous in such an easy and immediate way: messy dark hair falling into a pair of light, penetrating eyes, jaw so sharp he could slice my clothes off as he kisses down my body. Suit coat tossed over a chair, dress shirt stretched across broad shoulders and unbuttoned at the neck—he’s got the disheveled appearance of a man who’s had a shitty day, and the famished look in his gaze that says he’d use me to forget all about it. Men who deliver that kind of eye contact used to be my catnip. Past Fizzy would already be halfway across the room.

But Present Fizzy is decidedly *meh*. Is my internal horny barometer really broken? I tap it with a mental reflex hammer, imagining pulling that Hot CEO

from his barstool and dragging him by that open collar into the hallway.

Nothing.

Look at his mouth! So full! So cocky!

Still nothing.

I tear my attention away and turn back to Jess as she ends her call. “Everything okay?”

“Coordinating dance and soccer,” she says with a shrug. “I’d elaborate, but we’d both be asleep by sentence two. But back to Hector, the cousin of—”

“I didn’t sleep with any of them,” I blurt. “I haven’t slept with anyone in a year.” I did the math a couple of days ago. It feels weird to say it out loud.

It must be weird to hear it, too, because Jess gapes at me. “Wow.”

“Lots of people don’t have sex for a year!” I protest. “Is it really that shocking?”

“For you, *yes*, Fizzy. Are you kidding?”

“I watched porn the other night and there was barely a clench.” I look down at my lap. “I think my pants feelings are broken.”

Her concern intensifies. “Fizz, honey, I—”

“Last week I considered going jogging in flip-flops just to remind myself how sex sounds.” Jess’s forehead creases in worry and I deflect immediately. “The answer here is obvious. It’s time for bangs.”

There’s a tiny beat where I can see her considering battling this redirect, but thankfully she hops on this new train. “We have a strict agreement that no crisis bangs will be approved. I’m sorry, it’s a no from the best friend committee.”

“But imagine how youthful I’ll look. Quirky and up for anything.”

“No.”

I growl and turn my attention to the side, to the bar television, where the previous sportsball contest has ended and the local news is reeling through the headlines. I point to the screen. “Your husband’s face is on TV.”

She sips her wine, staring up at two-dimensional River. “That will never stop being weird.”

“The husband part, or the TV part?”

She laughs. “TV.”

And I see it all over her face: the husband part feels as natural as breathing. That's because science, specifically River's own invention—a DNA test that categorizes couples into Base, Silver, Gold, Platinum, Titanium, and Diamond love matches according to all kinds of complicated genetic patterns and personality tests—essentially told them they're as compatible as is humanly possible.

And I'm more than happy to take credit. Jess wasn't even going to try the test that matched them—the DNADuo—until I shoved an early version of it into her hands. Where are my rightfully earned karma points for that? River turned his decade-long research on genetic patterns and romantic compatibility into the app and billion-dollar company GeneticAlly. Now GeneticAlly is biotech's and the online dating industry's gold-star darling. River's company has been all over the news since it launched.

It's a lot of blah-blah-yapping-hand when he gets really sciencey about it, but it really has changed the way people find love. Since the DNADuo launched about three years ago, it's even overtaken Tinder in number of users. Some analysts expect its stock to surpass Facebook's now that the associated social media feed app, Paired, has launched. *Everyone* knows someone who's been matched through GeneticAlly.

All this is amazing, but for someone like River, who prefers to spend his days facing a fume hood rather than leading investor meetings or fielding questions from reporters, I think the frenzy has been a drag.

But, as the nightly news is reminding us, GeneticAlly isn't River's problem for much longer. The company is being acquired.

“When does the deal close?” I ask.

Jess swallows a sip of wine, eyes still on the television. “Expected Monday morning.”

I really can't fathom this. The GeneticAlly board has accepted an offer, and there are all kinds of subrights deals happening that I don't even understand. What I do comprehend is that they're going to be so rich, Jess is absolutely paying for drinks tonight.

“How are you feeling about it?”

She laughs. “I feel completely unprepared for what life looks like from now on.”

I stare at her, deciphering the simplicity of this sentence. And then I reach across the table and take her hand, fog clearing. Her right wrist has the other half of my drunken, misspelled Fleetwood Mac tattoo: *Thunner only happens and wen it's raining* forever binding us together. “I love you,” I say, serious now. “And I’m here to help you spend your giraffe money.”

“I’d rather have an alpaca.”

“Dream bigger, Peña. Get two alpacas.”

Jess grins at me, and her smile fades. She squeezes my hand. “You know the old Fizzy will come back, right?” she asks. “I think you’re just facing a transition, and figuring that out will take time.”

I glance across the bar at the disheveled hot guy again. I search my blood for some vibration, or even the mildest flutter. Nothing. Tearing my eyes away, I exhale slowly. “I hope you’re right.”