

THE  
**CRUSH**

LAUREN

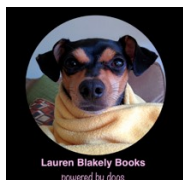
*#1 NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR*

BLAKELY

# **THE CRUSH**

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# LAUREN BLAKELY



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Also by Lauren Blakely

Contact

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## ABOUT THE CRUSH

I swear I wasn't *that* obsessed. I wouldn't have called it an obsession at all.

But a year ago, I was just a girl with the start of a crush.

Everything that happened that night was just the luck of the draw.

I wound up a little bruised—fine, a little broken—and intoxicated by a man I couldn't have.

**The Crush is a prequel to The RSVP.**

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# **THE CRUSH**

# A PREQUEL TO THE RSVP

# PROLOGUE

*Harlow*

I didn't hit the car on purpose. I wasn't *that* obsessed. I wouldn't have called it an obsession at all.

Besides, I'm not that devious.

I'd say I'm more crafty.

But a year ago, I was neither devious nor crafty. I was just a girl with the start of a crush.

Everything that happened that night was just the luck of the draw.

I wound up a little bruised—fine, a little broken—and intoxicated by a man I couldn't have.



# THE MAN IN PURPLE

*Harlow*

*Several Months Ago*

The office door clicks open. I look up from the French news site on my laptop and sit straighter at the dining room table.

This is my chance to check him out. I'm home for the summer, so I've been grabbing as many opportunities as I can. Furtively, I turn my gaze as my new crush exits my father's plush home office, then strides across the polished hardwood floors of the living room, wingtips clicking.

Sounding like money.

Looking like a magazine ad.

I've been stealing glances at Bridger for the last week, ever since I returned home from the NYU dorms. I've known him for years, but when I saw him a few weeks ago at a dinner my father hosted, my pulse surged and my skin tingled.

And a crush was born.

So, yeah, I love studying in the middle of my home, prepping for my next semester abroad. Just in case I can catch a glimpse of him.

And I'll have another one right now, thank you very much. From my vantage point at the imposing oak table, I peek at the

man's gorgeous profile as he leaves, hoping he turns toward me soon so I can steal a glance at his outrageously blue eyes. I want to know what's behind them.

My father ruins the view, though, walking right behind him, a glass of Scotch in his hand, saying goodbye to the man he built his media empire with over the last five years. "Sorry to cut this meeting short," my dad says wryly. Everything sounds wry in his English accent. Part of his charm, some say.

His American daughter isn't fooled by his British charm.

Bridger laughs lightly as they walk through the living room, empty-handed. "No, you're not, Ian."

Dad wiggles a brow. "Fine, I'm not sorry."

*At least have the decency to pretend.*

Bridger nears the door, and I'm just not that interested in the subjunctive tense this second.

Not with Bridger wearing that tailored purple shirt that hugs his arms, those trim charcoal slacks that hint at a strong body, and no tie.

Never a tie.

Bridger's tieless look is so...*tingly*.

"We'll catch up tomorrow on the Spanish deal," he says, scrubbing his hand along his chin. Stubble lines his fine jawline. A faint dusting of dark brown hair, a seven o'clock shadow.

What would it feel like along my fingers? Against my face?

A shiver slides down my spine, and I suppress a murmur.

"Tomorrow for all things Spanish deal. But not too early, you know," my dad says.

*What? No wink? How else would one know what you'll be up to?*

I'm tempted to roll my eyes, but instead I seize the chance to inject myself into their business conversation, flashing a



knowing smile Bridger's way. "Dad doesn't like to wake early," I say, innocently.

Like I don't know the real reason Dad will sleep in.

Like the real reason isn't coming over in a few minutes.

Cassie. Or Lianne. Or Marie. Or whoever the latest lady is that my dad's banging behind his fiancée's back.

Slowly, like maybe we're both in on the joke, Bridger turns my way. My pulse kicks. His eyes are dark blue, the color of the dawn before day takes over. They hold mine for a beat, then he looks away quickly. I'm hopeful enough to want to believe he's entertaining the same thoughts about dangerous kisses.

But I'm smart enough to know he's not.

"Yeah, I know," he says, then he's out the door.

Not even a smile. He's just gone. But what did I expect? I'm simply his business partner's college-age daughter, ten years his junior.

I turn back to my laptop, ready to study.

Except...

With Bridger on his way, my father turns to me, checks his watch, then hums, like he's gearing up to make a request.

*Whatever, Dad. You're not going to shock me.*

I close my laptop before he speaks.

"Harlow, love, do you think you could study in your room?"

*Translation—be a good girl, put your earbuds in, blast some music, and pretend you hear nothing while I fuck someone who's not my fiancée.*

I fake a smile. "Of course," I say, swallowing down a spoonful of disgust.

"You're such a darling," he says.

I flash a bigger smile. "Thanks."

Then, he disappears up the stairs. Naturally. He must go beautify himself before the lady shows up.

She'll probably be here in less than ten minutes. Like I am going to stay in my room for the next several hours. I'm not even going to stay in this house.

There's a big city out there for me to escape into.

I grab my backpack from the dining room floor, stuff my laptop in it, and sling it over my shoulder. Maybe when I reach Big Cup, I'll tell Dad I left.

But then again, maybe I won't. Chances are he won't notice or care.

When I stuff my phone into the pouch of my backpack, the sound of Beethoven's *Symphony No. 5* blasts from Dad's phone on the coffee table in the living room.

It's his fiancée calling. Joan's in Vermont teaching a symposium on classical music. Poor Joan. I like her well enough, considering I've only lived with her for the last two summer breaks.

His cell rattles again, the violin announcing her interest in talking to her fiancé. *Not my problem. Not my problem. Not at all my problem.*

I ignore it as I pad quietly to the door. It opens into an outside alcove. My bike's in there. I'm almost free from alibi duty.

Footsteps shuffle upstairs. "Harlow, love," he calls out.

I tense.

*Don't do it. Don't ask.*

"Can you grab Joan's call and tell her I'm in a meeting with Bridger?"

And he's asked.

I burn, but I say nothing as I reach for the knob, stuffing in my earbuds. Useful prop. But soon, I'll need Sondheim, Larsen or Miranda to cleanse my ears.

For now, the violin becomes more urgent. So does my need to go. I turn the knob.

The sound of footsteps grows louder. “Harlow, can you answer that, please?”

Flames lick higher in me as I weigh my options. Pretend I didn’t hear? Just leave? Or something else. Like, hey, how about a *no*?

I hardly even live here anymore. I did enough of this in high school. Why do I have to do it during college breaks too?

“Harlow,” he calls once more from the top of the stairs, standing by the banister now.

The violin insists.

He shouts my name. Too loud to ignore. Hand on the knob, I carelessly turn my gaze to him, adopting a confused look as I point to my earbuds. After I take one out, I ask, “What did you say?”

He laughs, shaking his head. “Joan was calling. She’ll call again. I’ll just handle it,” he says, waving a hand dismissively.

“How noble of you,” I mutter, too low for him to hear.

He peers at me curiously, cataloging my backpack, my fleece. “Are you leaving?”

*Genius.*

“Layla called. I’m meeting her at the coffee shop. Good luck with your *Bridger meeting*,” I say, sketching air quotes. I leave before he can say another word.

He can deal with his affairs on his own. I’m not his alibi anymore.

I open the door, step into the alcove. There, I tug on my helmet, then grab my silver bike, hoisting it by my shoulder. I leave the brownstone, rushing down the steps, fueled by righteous fire and rage.

He can screw his lady friend without any help from me. It’s not like he has me around in the fall or the spring. He can’t use me during the summer.

Slapping the bike down, I hop on in a flurry. I jump off the sidewalk and right onto Eighty Third Street, then race west on the smooth concrete.

Maybe, just maybe, I'll catch one more glimpse of Bridger in the six o'clock sunset as I ride down Fifth Avenue. He'll be walking. He usually walks.

He's only a few minutes ahead of me.

I bolt south on the avenue, sandwiching my body and the bike between the parked cars and the cabs, the trucks and buses screeching downtown. Fast and furious, I want speed and distance. Far away from my dad and his habits. His women showing up at all hours. Him asking me to disappear.

*Here I am, disappearing into the New York night.*

It's just me and the lights and the sounds and the streets of the city as I dodge the bullets the traffic throws at me. I weave past a car turning into Central Park, and then, out of the corner of my eye, I catch a flash of purple.

My heart surges. Bridger's a block away. I pedal faster, darting past the cars to my left.

Maybe I'll just hop over to the sidewalk, roll up beside him and say hi.

There's a cab twenty feet ahead, pulling over to the curb.

Once I jam past it, I'll—

But my phone rings. It's Joan. Someone swings a cab door open five feet in front of me. The wrong side—the traffic side, not the curb side.

Heart pounding terribly, I try to swerve, and I'm this close to making it when the door smacks my elbow, and bam.

My bones rattle. My head rings. I'm toppling off the bike, my foot slamming into the tire, my head smacking the pavement, all of New York saying *fuck you* to me too.

Pain radiates down to my marrow.

Twenty seconds later, a man in purple is over me, lifting me up, carrying me to the sidewalk. Arms wrapped around me.

When the ambulance arrives five minutes later, he tells me he'll meet me at the hospital.

Everything goes in and out of focus except for the screaming in my bones. And the wild thought that occurs to me—maybe it's the pain or the adrenaline, but I'm not sorry I lost that fight with the car door.



# ALL YOUR BROKEN BONES

## *Harlow*

I don't call my dad on the way to the hospital. But after the nurse starts my IV, Bridger's standing by my bed in the emergency room, telling me, "Your dad will be here soon. I reached him." He sounds so cool, so in control.

Like he can handle any crisis.

Including finding my father while he's finagling.

And, evidently, getting into my room in the ER. I don't ask how he pulled it off. But that's what Dad's told me Bridger does. Pulls things off. Gets things done.

"Why do people open doors into traffic?" I ask, my voice trembling more than I want it to. I don't want him to think I'm weak.

A gentle smile moves his lips. "People are terrible. But you're going to be fine, Harlow. Ian is on his way."

I don't care about Ian, though, or how Bridger tore him away from Marie or Cassie or Lianne. "Thank you for being there."

"I'm glad I was," he says.

I feel hazy. Warm all over. Whatever they put in this IV for my broken ankle is good.

“Come see me tomorrow?” I ask. Maybe it’s a plea. Hard to tell.

The stuff in the IV is *really* good.

Bridger doesn’t answer right away. His jaw tics. He’s wavering. His blue eyes are chased with conflict, his brow knitting.

I’m not above a little begging when I can blame it on the drugs. “Please,” I say with a frown. “It would make me feel better.”

He nods, resigned perhaps. “You’re a good negotiator,” he says, giving in.

I tuck the compliment into my pocket as he gives me his number. “If you need anything and can’t reach your dad.”

“Thanks,” I say, even though I’ve had Bridger’s number for some time. Dad gave it to me long ago—*here’s Joan’s number; here’s Bridger’s number; here’s the studio number.*

I’ve never used it, but now I have permission.

When a nurse comes in to tell me it’s time to cast my ankle, he wishes me well and leaves.

\* \* \*

My head CT scan is clear, so they send me home that night. My foot screams the next day, but painkillers shut that down quickly, and soon I’m feeling pretty good.

I entertain visitors nonstop in my living room. Layla appears in the morning, bearing lip gloss and nail polish. She’s an angel. Ethan brings tulips and gossip about our Carlisle Academy alum—the former senior class president of the most elite prep school in Manhattan was just thrown out of Yale after three years. Joan sends bouquets of dahlias, then calls, too, asking how I’m doing.

“I’ve been better,” I tell her, appreciating the motherly check-in.



After I get reacquainted with the joys of naptime, my brother FaceTimes from London, offering to catch a flight to New York to be with me. I decline but ask Hunter to tell me stories of life in England.

All day long, Dad swings in and out of his home office down the hall to check on me. After he orders a late lunch from my favorite Mediterranean restaurant, he tells me about the new storyline in *Sweet Nothings*, probably to distract me.

Or maybe to distract himself till he sees whoever again.

“And then Josie and Sam get all caught up in this whirlwind fling,” he says. “We see them sneak off to the wine cellar and the library.”

I have no interest in learning where his characters canoodle, but I feel too good to cut him off. “Great, Dad. Tell me more.”

He unspools the next few episodes then checks his Victoire watch and pushes up from his chair. “I have to nip off. I have a thing.” He shrugs, sheepish, and nods to the front door. “I’ll be back later, but Bridger’s going to stop by too.”

“Oh?” I try to sound blasé.

I pulled off the nonchalant look, judging from Dad’s *no big deal* grin. “Yes, he wants to make sure you’re okay. Good thing he was there to call 911.”

Dad leaves for his *thing*. The door has barely closed behind him when I grab my brush from the coffee table, run it through my hair again, then slick on lip gloss. I glance at my shirt—a cute slouchy top that goes with my shorts. Perfect.

A few minutes later, there’s a knock on the door. “Come in,” I shout. Bridger knows the code.

Bubbles bounce under my skin as Bridger unlocks the door. When the handsome, broody man strides into the brownstone, those bubbles speed through me. I am effervescent.

He holds a bouquet of gerbera daisies. “Hey there.”

“Those are my favorite flowers.” Did I mention that in the hospital last night? Have I ever said that at a dinner party, event, or gala where I saw him? I don’t know.

He peers around the living room, checking out vase after vase. The room is bursting with blooms. “It’s a florist shop in here.”

“I might start a side hustle peddling flowers.” I point to his arrangement as he sets it on the coffee table by the couch. “But I like yours best.”

“Thanks,” he says, evenly, like he has to be careful with me. Like he can’t reveal any emotion.

Understandable. I’ve known Bridger James since I was fifteen and his upstart production company acquired the TV rights to *Sweet Nothings*. He was the wunderkind new producer who spotted a hit and made it happen with my dad. They became partners, then, in growing that property to global domination, turning the book series my mom had penned and Dad had inherited into a worldwide phenom as a TV show. The risqué, racy soap opera counts legions of fans, and it started in my home when the two of them worked late on the concept, refining it and then pitching it to a network. Now, they own a renowned TV production company together called Lucky 21 that’s responsible for *Sweet Nothings*, its spin-offs and other top shows too.

Over the last few years, Bridger’s hung around at my house late at night working, then shown up early in the morning collecting Dad for meetings. I’ve seen him at fetes, galas, parties.

But someone else has always been around. Now it’s just the two of us, alone together for the first time.

“Want a seat?” I ask, gesturing to the other chair.

As he sits, I catalog his appearance—he’s in his *work uniform*. Sharp pants, fine leather shoes, and a tailored shirt. Today’s is a shade of deep, rich green.

“Nice cast,” Bridger says, gesturing to the pink cast on my foot.

“Evidently the cab door had it in for me. Have you ever broken a bone?” I ask, quickly shifting away from my ankle injury.

“Many times,” he says with a sigh, but it’s a welcoming kind of sound, like *been there, done that*.

I sit a little straighter, eager for this chance to get to know him. “Tell me all your broken stories.”

He laughs curiously, eyeing me like he isn’t sure I mean the request. “Really?”

I’m not backing down. I want what I want. “Yes. Really.”

Here in my home, the day after a nasty crash, with my father off doing whatever, his handsome, sexy, nearly inscrutable business partner wiggles three fingers on his right hand. “Broke these when the center stepped on my hand during football practice in junior high.”

“You were the quarterback?” It delights me to no end, learning these details.

“Of course.” There’s a smirk on his face, like he couldn’t be anything but the team leader.

“Were you good at football?”

He tilts his head, his gaze a little challenging, a touch cocky. “What do you think?”

“Yes,” I say, feeling a bit fluttery. A bit naughty too.

“Good answer,” Bridger replies, sinking deeper into his chair, looking comfortable or maybe even relaxed at last.

“How many games did you win? Touchdowns did you throw? Passing yards did you log?”

He raises an appreciative brow, whistling low. “Someone knows football.”

I bob a shoulder playfully. “I know a lot of things.”

His expression shifts, going dark for a second. Then he swallows and answers in a businesslike tone. “I did well,” he says, like he rearranged his answer at the last minute.

I ease up on the Lolita. “What else did you break?” Surely, this is a less sexy comment. I hope it’s enough for him to stay.

“I broke my kneecap a couple years later,” he says, recounting a high school injury.

“How’d you manage that?”

“Playing soccer my sophomore year. I planted my foot wrong while I was twisting around to try to score, and then it snapped. Felt like it fell down to my shin.” He shakes his head in remembered pain, wincing.

“That sounds terrible,” I say in sympathy. “Did it really fall to your shin?”

He taps the side of his calf under his black pants to show me where his kneecap had landed. “It was knocked about two inches out of the socket.” He blows out a sharp breath. “That hurt.”

“That sounds like an understatement,” I say.

“Yeah, it is.”

“That’s awful,” I say, but I’m giddy for more of his stories, more of him.

*Just more.*

He regales me with tales of his high school sports, from soccer games to football plays, till I say, “Is that all you did growing up? Play sports?”

With a laugh, he shakes his head. “It wasn’t all I did, but I was good at sports for a while there. Until I stopped playing,” he says, and I file that detail away as I keep listening. “Plus, I think my mom just wanted to balance out all the show tunes and cabaret I’d grown up with. You know, just to give me a full sense of the world.”

Is he for real? I nearly bolt out of the chair with excitement. “I love cabaret,” I say, breathless.

He shoots me a doubtful look. “You do?”

“Cabaret, show tunes, Broadway, you name it,” I say, enthused by this bond I didn’t know we had.

“Yeah?” His tone pitches up, maybe with excitement too.

“I do. I could spend all night in the theater,” I say, and that flirty purr returns to my voice, unbidden.

Dammit. I didn’t mean to go there.

And I shouldn’t have, because Bridger glances around nervously, checks the ornate and ominous clock on the living room wall—my dad had it shipped from his favorite shop in Knightsbridge—then sighs. “I have a meeting,” he says. “I should go.”

*Please don’t go.*

But I know better than to sound desperate. “Of course. But you wouldn’t leave without signing my cast, would you?”

There’s tension in his shoulders still as he reaches for the Sharpie on the table, then checks out my cast. Layla and Ethan already commandeered most of the fiberglass real estate.

“*Hmm.* Not much room left,” he says, analytically, checking out the options.

But I saved a spot for him. Kept it virginal. “Right by the toes,” I say, pointing to the land he can claim on me. “There’s a little space.”

I wiggle them, showing off my bright red and purple toenail polish. “My friend Layla painted them this morning. She calls them Skittles toes.”

When Bridger meets my gaze, his blue eyes darken to the color of a midnight sky. “I’ll just sign right here by those Skittles toes then.”

As he scratches out his signature near my candy-colored nails, his fingers skim against my toes.

A whoosh rushes through my body.

This is the first time he’s touched me.

I don’t intend for it to be the last.



# IS IT OBVIOUS?

## *Harlow*

Three months later my cast is gone, and it's time to wear heels again.

It's a New York party night after all, and I'm not about to show up among the glitterati of Manhattan in flats.

"I still can't believe you're leaving me to fend for myself tonight," I whine to Layla after we bound up the steps in Dad's brownstone and turn into my old bedroom suite. She's only staying for thirty minutes at the party, and I feel betrayed already.

"I'm the worst. But trust me, I tried to get out of the charity board dinner that Mom is making me go to," she says, huffing.

"Too bad bailing isn't an option," I say, heading for the closet. But it would be poor form to ghost my—cough, cough—*own* party. But it's really *Dad's* party. His why-doesn't-everyone-congratulate-me-for-having-a-daughter-land-a-prestigious-semester-abroad-program party. All his friends and business associates will be here to kiss his ring.

Why else would they come? Because they care that I'm one of ten college students in the country accepted into this French program? Or maybe how studying in Paris for a few months will help with my dual degrees?

They care as much as they cared when Dad threw a party for his little valedictorian when I graduated from Carlisle Academy three years ago.

In my walk-in closet, I flick through the options and pick a little black dress. I slip it on, then peruse the shoes, running my fingers over a few shelves. I hold up a pair of red-bottomed black heels. “The ones Dad bought for me last month after he bought us orchestra seats for the opening of *Adventures of the Last Single Guy in New York*, and then finally turned up at intermission. But hey, he was, ahem, *late from a meeting?*” I grab a pair of silvery crisscross high-heeled sandals. “Or the ones Joan bought as an *aspirational gift* after I broke my ankle?”

Layla rolls her sky-blue eyes with a particular kind of carelessness, the kind reserved for parental BS. Then, she points a French-manicured nail authoritatively at the silvery pair. Layla makes fast decisions. “Those will make your legs look extra hot. Not that that’s hard.”

I bob a shoulder, glowing a little from the compliment. “Thanks, friend,” I say, then I perch on the edge of the bed and slide into the shoes, methodically crossing the straps till they climb high enough to hug my calves. I rise, then jut out a hip, showing off the outfit.

She hums low in her throat. “Those should be illegal,” she says with a whistle. “They go perfectly with the LBD.”

Fine, fine.

Perhaps, I don’t entirely hate the idea of the party.

Bridger will be there. And maybe, dressed like this, I’ll look closer to twenty-one.

It’s less than a year away.

It’s a magic age.

Then, I’ll no longer be in college.

I’ll be his contemporary.

A frisson of possibility unfurls in my chest. I hide a grin from my friend. I haven’t breathed a word about this storm of



feelings to anyone. And I've never kept secrets from her. But this secret feels like mine. Like a private letter, locked in a box, hidden away.

\* \* \*

Layla and I circulate dutifully downstairs, making small talk, a skill we've both been schooled in for years. Her since birth, me since my father became a big deal.

*How is Jasmin doing in Tokyo?*

*Is Vikas enjoying his work in Washington?*

*Did you see the new sculpture at the Keller Gallery?*

All the while, I graciously accept congratulations from all my father's friends and associates.

*Thank you. I'm so fortunate to be going there.*

*Yes, it's going to be a wonderful challenge.*

*I can't wait to settle into my flat in the Sixth.*

And blah, blah, blah. Layla makes a few laps with me, snagging a champagne flute from a cute server in black tie, tossing the guy a wink.

He smiles back, showing straight white teeth. Layla is such a sucker for great teeth. She should consider snagging the city's top orthodontist's client list sometime.

Once he's weaving through a pack of suits, my friend waggles a glass my way. "Want one?"

"No," I say, but it's too late. She grabs a second one from another passing waitperson and thrusts it into my hand.

"Layla," I say, but I take it anyway. It's easier.

She nods to the packed home. Easily one hundred people mingle in the living room, spill into the dining room. "Who are all these people?"

I lean closer, dip my voice. "Miss Such and Such, the VP of Sucking Up. Mister Whoever, the Director of Kissing Ass.

And, finally, there's the Manager of I Have An Idea to Pitch You," I say, surveying the scene—smart dresses and blow-outs on the women, slicked-back hair and tailored shirts for the men.

"Ah, I was hoping to pitch an idea to *him*. The idea of me," she says, then points surreptitiously to a handsome guy easily fifteen years older than she is.

I shoot her a doubtful look. "Seriously?"

She just wiggles her brows. Then she looks around again. "Oh, the hot one's here."

I figure she's spotted another thirty-something guy, but when I follow her gaze my breath catches.

It's Bridger. He must have just arrived. He wears a royal blue shirt and charcoal slacks. He's leaning against the wall, not drinking either. Watching the scene unfold. Part of it but separate as he studies the people while tugging on the cuffs of his shirt.

Warmth blooms in my chest, a frothy, delicious sensation. I feel floaty, a little dreamy as I watch him. A young publicist beelines for him and his gaze shifts to *on*.

Then, Layla bumps my shoulder. "When were you going to tell me?"

Confused, I turn my face to her. "Tell you what?"

With an *I caught you* smile, she shakes her head in disbelief. "I can't believe you didn't say a word sooner. How long have you been hot for your dad's business partner?"

My stomach drops. And that secret didn't last long. "Is it obvious?" I ask. "To everyone, I mean."

Her smile is gleeful, a little wicked. "No. But to me it is because I know you. And damn, he's pretty." She nudges me again. "Go shoot your shot."

The idea is too much. Too tempting. Too dangerous. But I appreciate her efforts. "Thanks, but I don't think it'll work out," I say, since isn't that the truth. He's just not interested in

me. Not to mention the *big* hurdle—I could never be with my dad’s business partner.

Layla shrugs, then drops a kiss to my cheek. “I should vanish. Don’t miss me too much.” Then, low, under her breath, she urges, “Shoot, Harlow, shoot.”

“Get out of here,” I say, rolling my eyes.

But her command has gotten a hold of me. When she’s gone, I spin around, hunting for him again, but he’s chatting with a woman in a paisley blouse.

Bridger doesn’t have a drink in his hand, and an idea takes hold. An opening line, if you will.

As I head to a group of network execs to put in more time, my father strides over, intercepting me. Joan is with him. She looks regal, her chestnut mane swept up in a chignon.

She smiles affectionately at me. “Let’s raise a glass in a toast to our star,” she says.

“Of course,” Dad seconds.

He doesn’t even have to clear his throat. He commands a room by his mere presence, playing the part he’s mastered. A modern-day Gatsby, complete with the slicked-back hair and semi-permanent grin. His eyes gleam with fatherly pride. “To my daughter. I’ve never been prouder,” he says to the crowd, then he wraps an arm around me. “Paris will be lucky to have you this fall.”

I’m his prize, all right. I smile, the bright, shiny kind that charms his friends. Something else I learned from an early age. *Be nice to Daddy’s associates and you can do what you want.*

“Thank you,” I say to the crowd that’s smiling at me but sucking up to my father.

Except Bridger. He doesn’t need to suck up to my dad. He’s his equal. Equal shares in the company. Equal say. His dark eyes meet mine as the partygoers lift their glasses and give a collective *Cheers*.

“Thank you so much,” I say.

When the guests return to their networking, my father weaving back into the sea of black and white and gray, the paisley lady says goodbye to Bridger. Buoyed by Layla's shot of confidence, I'm determined to snag a few minutes of his time before someone else corrals him. So he can see me as a woman, not my father's daughter.

Like that, I pass my drink to a waitperson and go to him.



# LUCKY NEW YORK

## *Harlow*

When I reach Bridger, I flash him a grin. “Want a refill?” I ask, eyeing his empty hands, taking a gamble with my offer.

“No thanks,” he says, then his gaze travels to my legs, a smile shifting his lips. “You’re walking without help again.”

A zing rushes down my back. He noticed my legs.

I gesture to my high-heeled feet. “And I have a cool scar,” I say.

His eyebrow lifts. “You do?”

“On my ankle. I’m not sure if the bike cut me up or the cab. Either way, I got marked,” I tell him, a little playfully, then I turn to the side, hoping he enjoys the profile view as I bend, pointing toward the vicinity of the inch-long jagged scar, still pink. “Right there.”

As he looks down, he swallows. Roughly, maybe. Or is that my imagination? “Yeah, that’s some scar,” he says, giving nothing away.

“Guess we’re both cool now,” I say, then tilt my head, weighing the next thing on my mind. “By the way, I didn’t think you’d accept my drink offer.”

He takes a beat. “But you made it anyway?”

“I wanted to see if I was right.”

His brow knits in curiosity. I've set the trap. He's taking my bait. "I'll bite. Right about what?"

The next words come out cool, casual. Like I'm just this observant about everything. "You don't drink," I say.

There's a glint in his eyes. "You noticed?" He sounds mildly surprised, but I can't quite tell if he's making conversation to pass the time or because he enjoys talking to me.

But now's my chance. I meet his blue-eyed gaze straight on. "I notice things," I say, nervous and thrilled over the admission.

He's quiet for a few seconds. Then he says, in that measured, even tone, "Yeah. You do."

It's an observation. Maybe a curiosity. Almost impossible to read.

"I do," I say.

He scratches his jaw, then says, "So NYU, and now a semester in Paris." Like he needs the conversational shift. "You picked well."

"Don't worry," I say, a grin teasing at my lips. "I'll be back in December. You can't take the girl out of New York for long."

"Lucky New York," he says, and I want to cup those words in my palms for the rest of the night. The rest of the year.

I smile, buoyed by his response as I work out a reply to keep this going when Dad shoulders his way past me.

The buzz-killer nods at the man I'm in lust with.

"Bridger, I must steal you away. Lionel from the UK office is here," Dad says.

*Yes, of course Lionel from the UK office would attend my celebration.*

I grit my teeth in annoyance but just smile like the good daughter. Even though Dad doesn't even say a word to me. He just whisks Bridger away and that's the end of that.

\* \* \*

Later, I'm still feeling bold from his *Lucky New York*, like I've been shot up with a feel-good drug. Something that makes me feel bigger than the world. I slide into bed, under the covers, touching the wooden box of letters I keep on my nightstand. It's safe. Then, I place the phone on my pillow, just inches from me. I run my finger along the necklace I wear every day, feeling the shape of the *I* that hangs from it.

*I* for the French word *intrépidité*.

Then, as if champagne is bubbling through me—but it's not, not one bit—I tap open my text messages. At last, I have a reason to use that number.

I'm brave. I'm intrepid.

**Harlow:** I notice other things too. Like how good you looked in your shirt.

Then I hit send, a little high, a lot on top of the world.

As I get ready for bed, I check for a reply.

Nothing.

After I slip into a pair of sleep shorts, I look once more.

Silence.

I close my eyes, but sleep is so far away it might as well be in Indonesia.

In the morning, I wake to a blinking icon. I catch my breath.

**Bridger:** Thanks. Bespoke makes great shirts.



Hmm. Well, it's not what I wanted but it's something. It's more than a *thanks*. Maybe it's even an opening.

Once I'm up and out of bed, I find my dad in the kitchen, brewing a cup of tea and nuzzling Joan's neck.

"Morning, love," he says to me when he pulls away from his fiancée.

"Hello, Harlow," Joan says with a slightly embarrassed grin, like they were caught doing more than neck kissing.

*I've seen so much worse, honey.*

"Hi Joan. Hi Dad," I say breezily, then head for the fruit basket to grab a peach. When I finish it, I say, "I'm going for a bike ride."

It's my first time in the saddle since I broke my ankle, and my scar makes me feel intrepid as I ride.



# THIS COLOR WOULD LOOK GOOD ON YOU

## *Harlow*

A week later, I'm shopping in the Village with Layla and Ethan at a trendy boutique. He needs a sexy shirt for our last weekend in the Hamptons. Layla needs a barely there top. I need nothing—I'm not trying to impress anyone at our final party before we fan out to universities around the world next week for our senior years.

When they head to the dressing room, I wander around the men's clothing section, running my fingers over the shirts.

Then, my gaze catches on the brand name on one tag.

*Bespoke.*

I glance around, furtive.

This would be risky. A little wild.

But the risk fuels me. I hold up the teal button-down shirt in front of me. It's too big, of course. It's a men's large.

Grabbing my phone, I angle the camera just so.

I don't show my face. Instead, I snap a pic of the shirt fabric laying against me.

That's all. Before I can think better of it, I send it with the caption: *This color would look good on you.*

I tuck the phone away, resisting its insistent pull for the next hour. But when I'm nibbling on a chickpea dish at a

sidewalk café Ethan picks for lunch, my phone buzzes.

Immediately, my chest zings.

It has to be *him*.

When I grab it in less than a second, Ethan smirks. “Hot new date?”

I scoff, but then I sizzle when I read Bridger’s note. ***Thanks for the fashion tip.***

It’s just a chaste note. It’s just a thanks.

But it’s also a *response*.

I feel elated and defeated at the same time in equal measure. “Just a friend,” I say, then set the phone facedown.

Layla arches a perfectly groomed brow. She’s not taking this one lying down. “Just a friend?”

“Just a friend,” I repeat, since I’m not sure that he’s anything more.

“Are you sure?” she asks, staring at me, like she can extract the truth with her eyes.

“Is there a reason Harlow would be unsure?” Ethan asks curiously, jumping in.

“I’m positive,” I say firmly, then flip my hair off my shoulder. “So, what do we want to do first when we hit East Hampton on our final weekend?”

Layla’s blue eyes say she knows what I’m doing but her mouth says, “The beach, of course.”

Ethan shakes his head. “No, *the pool*. Your pool is unfairly obscene,” he says, emphatically.

“But is something obscene truly unfair?” she counters, like they’re having a philosophical argument.

Thoughtfully, Ethan taps his regal chin, the perfect match to his classical nose. He’s a looker all right, all blue-blood, Upper East Side, matinee-idol pretty. He’s attracted all the guys and gals in college.

As they debate the semantics of obscenity, I hide a smile rising inside me.

Maybe this text is *just* the start of something.

\* \* \*

On Sunday night, we cruise home from the Hamptons in Layla's sweet sports car, exhausted from the sun, the water, and our last time together for a while.

"I'll miss you all," I say after she pulls up in front of my brownstone and gets out.

"I'll miss you more," she chimes in, throwing her arms around me.

"I'll miss you the most," Ethan says, not to be outdone.

"Group hug," I declare, and we smoosh each other until tears are rolling, since the end of summer is always sweet and bittersweet.

Finally, I tear myself away from my friends and say goodbye.

Later that week, I'm in my room packing my suitcase for my semester abroad—clothing, a few books, a couple keepsakes. My father ordered his limo driver to take me to the airport tomorrow. Dad's so extra, but I can't complain.

I FaceTime Hunter, even though it's late in London. "You better come see me," he says. Hunter has an English mom and mostly grew up in London. But his accent is less posh than Dad's.

"Same to you," I say. "You'll only be a Chunnel train ride away."

We chat some more then I say goodbye, and after I zip my last bag, I flop back on my bed, checking the time on my phone. Eleven.

My phone blinks with a text from my dad. He's downstairs, but he always texts me goodnight.

*I'm off to bed. Sleep well. Joan will be back in the morning. Xoxo*

I smile faintly, a vague sense of appreciation for his note floating past me as I drift into sleep.

But in the middle of the night, I'm dreaming of takeout cartons of Thai, and Vietnamese, and tacos. My stomach growls, and I wake with a hungry start.

I blink my eyes open.

*I wish my mother were here to send me off.* Even though I remember her less and less, I still wish she were here, especially since Paris was *our* dream. She loved the city she lived in when she attended college. We'd visit as often as we could, traipsing around museums, lingering in chocolate shops, playing in the Tuileries Garden. Even after so many years without her, there are moments when the missing coils inside me. But then it unwinds seconds later. It's weird, grief. Weird the way it lingers sometimes, like a trailing scent of faint perfume long after the wearer has left the room. Sometimes you notice the scent. Mostly you don't.

My stomach growls again. I focus on the practical matters rather than faded memories. I didn't eat dinner, so I go downstairs.

The brownstone is eerie and still, as it should be after hours. I pad quietly to the kitchen. In the fridge, I snag hummus and carrots. As I dip a carrot, I hear footsteps and turn my head.

*Seriously?*

I learn two things in the next few seconds.

My father has a new lover.

And she sleeps topless. She wears only boy shorts. Her magnificent tits fly free as she walks past the dining room table, toward the kitchen before she stops short, startled.

"Oh my god," she says, her hands shooting up, covering her breasts.

I grit my teeth, swallowing down my disgust. I show nothing. I am the portrait of unflinching as I lean against the kitchen counter. Impervious.

“Hungry?” I ask as I crunch into the carrot.

Even in the dark, I can see her face turn red. “I’m so sorry.”

But she’s not moving. Perhaps her bare feet are stuck to the floor of the entryway.

“I had no idea you were going to be in the kitchen,” she says, stumbling on words.

I smile. All plastic. “That’s clear.”

She spins around, rushes off.

I finish the carrot in the silence, then return to the upstairs bedroom. I can’t wait till I don’t live here anymore. If I could *never* set foot in this house again, it wouldn’t be soon enough.

When groans slink up the stairs and curl down the hallway, I grab my headphones, punch up the soundtrack for *Ask Me Next Year*, a little-known Broadway musical, and let it help me blot out the sounds of my father’s sex den below.

The next morning when I go downstairs, still humming the bittersweet tunes, I brace myself for a run-in with the new lady. But the amply endowed woman is nowhere to be seen. Instead, my father is brewing tea and listening to NPR’s morning report, dressed for the day in a polo shirt and beige slacks.

He turns my way and smiles. “Ready for the big day?”

“Yup,” I bite out.

“What’s wrong, poppet?”

I’ve had enough. I’ve swallowed years of lies, and I’m done. “I’m not here that often,” I tell him. “Just summers and breaks. So, do you think you could ask your sleepover guests to, I dunno, wear clothes when they wander around the house at night?”

A slow grin spreads across his face, and he rolls his green eyes—the same shade as mine. “Poppet, it’s nothing. You have all the same parts.”

*That’s his argument?* “So if you were queer, and had a half-naked man as a guest this would be *not okay*. But because you’re straight, it’s *okay*?”

He furrows his brow, trying to work out my logic. “Is this about orientation or identity?”

I huff. There’s no point. He doesn’t get it. I grab a bagel and bite into it, ripping off a hunk.

As I chew, the front door creaks open and Joan sails in, just arrived from Boston. “I couldn’t miss sending you off to Paris for the semester, sweetheart,” she calls out, kind and oblivious.

My throat squeezes. *My father fucked someone else while you were out of town. Her tits are perkier than yours.* Instead, I say, “Thank you for coming.”

I know better than to tell her the truth.

When I was thirteen, and my father was married to Roselyn, wife number three, I let slip at the dinner table that his friend Graceanne had spent the night a few weeks before. I’d thought she was simply sleeping over in the guest room.

The next day, Roselyn checked into a *spa*. My father sat me down in the living room and told me I needn’t have concerned myself about Graceanne. After all, he and Roselyn had an arrangement. *An understanding*. “Darling, I know you’re trying to be helpful, but it’s better you don’t get involved. Roselyn doesn’t need to know about my guests. It’ll only upset the delicate balance of an adult relationship.”

But that left me more confused. “Okay, but you said that woman was your friend. Graceanne?”

He’d patted my knee. “Exactly. Just a friend. So we don’t need to tell Roselyn these things again. They can send her over the, well, the edge.” A fatherly hug. An unspoken warning. “Best to just keep things that happen in the house...*in the house*.”



Let sleeping dogs lie.

Roselyn moved back in a month later. “She’s so much better now,” my dad had declared. Like her stint wherever she’d been had erased the memory not only of his cheating but of my big mouth.

They stayed together for another year, then my father left her. I knew what was coming when he switched from a rainforest scent to a spicy one. He always picks out a new cologne when he’s ready for a new woman.

Perhaps Roselyn had upset his delicate balance, because he soon moved on to Mariana, marrying her for a few years, then changing his cologne again when he met Joan.

I’d learned my lesson. It wasn’t my place to breathe a word. There would be no more accidental mentions of *friends*.

So I keep quiet now. Even when my dad wraps Joan into a warm embrace, cooing, “Love you, darling,” I just keep smiling. I could nab a statuette in Hollywood with my cheery smile.

When we slide into the back of the town car, my father takes her hand, and bile rises in my throat. I stare out the window, fingering my necklace as the limo swings south on Fifth Avenue, en route to the airport.

I count down the seconds till I’m out of the country and far, far away from him.

Though, admittedly, I’ll miss seeing the one person I liked bumping into around my father.

The man whose shirts I adore.

But missing him is ridiculous. This is just a foolish little crush. Bridger’s shirts don’t matter, our bonding over Broadway doesn’t matter, and my wicked feelings don’t matter.

I vow to get over him while I’m in Paris.

\* \* \*

Mostly, I do just that in France. It helps that my father mentions offhand in an email that Bridger's started seeing someone. Someone named Emma he met online.

I ignore the burn in my chest. I ignore it for all of September.

Then, I no longer have to ignore the feeling because it fades on its own. Maybe from lack of oxygen? Not seeing a man will do that to you, I suppose. I barely think of him from thousands of miles away.

Fine, André *does* help distract me. The French art student I meet mostly takes my mind off Bridger as we wander through museums together and visit dance clubs with our friends.

Except, maybe we're wired to want what we don't have since sometimes when I kiss André in my flat in the Sixth, I think of the man in the purple shirt. Sometimes when André touches me, I imagine someone else's hands on my skin.

Maybe that's why this brief Paris romance doesn't last long enough for André to be my first. That, and art studies keep calling to me, leaving little time for my French lover...or Bridger.

There is too much beauty here in Paris to linger on one faraway man.

\* \* \*

When I return to New York in December, I nearly turn down my father's email invitation to attend a *Sweet Nothings* gala.

I want to RSVP instantly with a *no*.

And that feels fantastic. Freeing even.

Until I read on, seeing the part where Bridger's single again.

Oh.

Well.

Maybe I *should* go to the party. Just to confirm this wicked little crush is out of my system after all.

I change my reply to a *yes*.

But when I go, Bridger's wearing the teal shirt.

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