



**YOUNGER
THAN
YESTERDAY**

Harper Bliss

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Preview

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Warning: This title contains graphic language and f/f sex.

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The garden looks beautiful under the setting sun, gorgeous but empty. A lone cricket launches into its raspy evening song, just like every night. The sameness of the days is comforting but sometimes, after dozing off for a brief moment, when I open my eyes, I expect him to sit across from me, his lips curled into a playful smile.

“You’re getting old, darling,” he would say. “And I had planned to keep you up all night.”

I put my book down, trying to make it last longer because it’s the only one I brought. Gazing into the black-green of the pine trees hedging off the garden, I let my mind wander freely. I allow myself to think about Michael and the times we spent here. This is his house, after all.

The loud jeer of my mobile startles me. So much for reminiscing. You can’t really escape life anywhere anymore these days, no matter how remote your Tuscan refuge.

“Rose, my dear,” John’s voice beams into my ear. “How are you?”

“Looking forward to hosting you and your lovely wife next week, as ever.” Solitude is good, necessary even, but Helen and John’s annual visit is always a cathartic trip down memory lane. John and Michael were best friends and John, although repeated hundreds of times, has the best stories to tell.

“Would you mind terribly if our Catherine came along? Her holiday plans with Jenny have fallen through and she’s in desperate need of some healing sunshine.” John’s always been a good sport about Catherine’s misfortunes in romance. Most fathers aren’t half as apt at picking up the pieces of their daughter’s broken heart.

“Of course not. Tell Cat she’s most welcome.”

Despite Michael being Cat’s brother’s godfather, she was his favourite member of the Archer clan. Every year, when John and Helen visited and we sat around the teak garden table, glass in hand and brain pleasantly fogged by alcohol, he would look at the old oak tree in the furthest corner of the yard and recount the story of how Cat climbed all the way up and broke her wrist on her way down.

“She was a fearless child,” he would say. “Just like me.” He’d peer deep into Helen’s glazed-over eyes and taunt her. “If I didn’t know any better, I’d say she was mine.” He’d wink and Helen would never know what to say. “Billy stood watching at the bottom of the tree as his sister conquered it with her tiny little hands and feet, agile as a cat. Good name choice by the way.” He’d smack John on the thigh. “And then she went flying. It must have only taken two seconds but I remember it in slow-motion. Her red t-shirt flashing between branches on the way down. The soft thud and crack with which she landed on the grass. The slight tremble of her bottom lip as she fought back the tears.” He’d shake his head and smile. “Such a rascal.”

“I should have known there and then she wasn’t like other girls,” Helen had said the last summer we were all together at the villa, two months before Michael’s heart attack. She was never good at hiding the disappointment in her voice.

“Honestly, Helen,” Michael butted in, louder than was necessary but unable to conceal his anger. “A little acceptance goes a long way.”

Spurred on by the alcohol in her blood, Helen lashed out. “You may think she’s yours. But she’s not, so mind your own business.”

John, always fiercely protective of his youngest child, rose to his feet and shot them both his well-practiced headmaster look. “Enough.” That usually put a stop to the perpetual row between Michael and Helen about Cat’s sexuality. Frankly, I never understood what all the fuss was about, then again, Helen has more than a decade on me—more than ten years to grow more ignorant, even when it concerns her own daughter.

Long after I put down the phone I contemplate the special relationship Michael had with Cat. They were always whispering in a corner, up to no good, plotting ways to get on Helen’s nerves.

Cat never goes shopping with Helen. They don’t trade sponge cake recipes or make-up tips. Instead, she smokes cigars with her dad and Billy and played football with Michael until it got so dark they couldn’t see the ball anymore. Always rowdy and giggling, testing Helen’s patience when they sat down in her beige couch with grass-stained shorts.

“If only you could see her now,” I say to the empty space inhabiting Michael’s chair. “You’d be proud. Often heart-broken, but definitely proud.”

* * *

“Have you really never considered another man?” John asks, his face earnest and his intentions good. The question doesn’t come completely out of the blue. He’s been trying to set me up with a new member of his tennis club for months, but I haven’t been able to muster up any interest. I tear my gaze away from Cat’s naked shoulder, unsure of how long it has lingered there. She’s been quite withdrawn since they arrived. Nursing a relationship hangover can do that to a person, but her dad’s question seems to peak her interest. I shoot her a small smile when she looks at me, curiosity brimming in her eyes. She responds with a wink and suddenly the hair on the back of my neck stands up.

“I’ve dated.” It feels so incredibly silly to say that. “But you know better than anyone else Michael’s shoes are hard to fill.”

“Maybe you’re looking at it the wrong way.” John’s voice wavers. He loved Michael just as much as I did. “It’s not about replacing Michael. It’s about companionship. You’re too young to go through life alone.” Every year, I get the same speech from John, but this one has come mighty early. They’ve only been here a day.

“If it makes you feel any better, dear John, I’ll come watch one of your and Lionel’s tennis matches when I’m back in London.” I give him a weary smile.

“Wonderful,” Helen cooes as if it’s a done deal. “I’ll make cucumber sandwiches and we can all have tea afterwards.”

John draws his hands up in defence. “This is hardly about me. I only want you to be happy.”

“I’m perfectly all right.” I shoot a quick glance in Cat’s direction, eager to see her reaction to all of this. She rolls her eyes at me. She must sit through these kinds of conversations on the state of her love life regularly. As unlikely as it may be, I feel as if I’ve found a kindred spirit.

“Dad, please.” Cat straightens her posture. “Leave her alone.” She turns towards me. “You must forgive him. He’s still adjusting to retirement and you know his job was basically sticking his nose into everyone’s affairs. It’s been a rough transition.”

John taps his daughter playfully on the arm. She could say anything and he’d still smile.

“Sometimes all it takes is a little meddling,” Helen chimes in.

“Most people are not that fond of it, mum.” Cat chastises her mother with a harsh glance. Undoubtedly, she must have had to endure an avalanche of comments on her love life that, judging by what I’ve heard, hasn’t exactly been a bed of roses lately—if ever.

Inadvertently, I put a hand on Cat’s knee. I do it without thinking, as a gesture of gratitude because she’s siding with me, but the touch of her skin on my fingertips jerks through me and releases a slew of unexpected butterflies in my stomach. For a split second I sit there stunned, not knowing what to do with myself. When I look up I catch Cat glaring at my hand so I quickly retract it. I narrow my eyes and fake a confident smile.

“How about we go into town tomorrow?” I change the subject. “There’s a marvellous new restaurant owned by an adorable young couple. I’m sure you’ll love it.” Helen and John both nod enthusiastically while Cat stares into the distance.

The memory of walking past the open window of Cat’s room the day before surprises me again. It wasn’t entirely unplanned but I had no idea she would be half-naked. It was still easy to keep my cool then. I just made a joke about her choice of underwear and dashed off. That was before I knew I’d be awake half the night thinking about her bare breasts.

* * *

When the clock in my bedroom strikes three, I get up. I pull a dress over my naked body and open the French windows as quietly as I can. I walk to the pool and let my feet dangle in the water, careful not to make too much noise. Helen and John’s room is on the other side of the hallway but Cat’s room is next to mine and I don’t want to wake her. She must have some sleep to catch up on.

Yesterday, when doing the dishes together, I clearly noticed the pain in her eyes. All I could do was hold her close and give her a hug. Her tears wet my blouse and, unexpectedly, heated the skin underneath. I wanted her head to stay on my shoulder much longer than she left it there. But I understood the moment was getting awkward. Now all I can do is think about how her breath landed on my neck and how I wanted to trap it with my mouth.

I draw ripples in the water with my toes and wonder what is happening to me. The thought of stealing another intimate embrace with Cat excites me much more—even disproportionately so—than the prospect of watching John and his pal Lionel play an old man’s game of tennis. Maybe it’s her youth and, despite the fact she’s hurting, the energy that comes with it. She’ll get over Jenny. She’ll love again. At least she can be certain of that. I, on the other hand, have no clue what’s been stopping me.

Michael was not an easy man to lose. Of course, I hold every new person of interest to the standard he set. It’s not because I’m getting older that I have to settle for less. Still, it doesn’t explain this thing with Cat. The pure physicality of it—how that snuck up on me and made my heart rumble in my chest when I put my arms around her—has thrown me for such a loop. As far as I can remember, and I’ve been racking my brain, I’ve never been attracted to another woman before.

It must be that I recognise myself in her pain. I feel for her and want to protect her. Also, perhaps after seven years of mourning, I’m finally ready for something new. And Cat symbolises my rebirth into the world of romance.

Thoughts like this have been racing through my mind since I went to bed. Thoughts I can't place. Emotions so far buried I can't recall ever having them. Emotions from before Michael died, so suddenly, and left me to deal with life on my own.

I stare up at the moon and guess the time—not that the moon can help me with that. It must be closer to four now. Cat only woke up around noon yesterday. I caught myself checking my watch impatiently. As if my day couldn't start properly until I'd made her some scrambled eggs.

* * *

"Morning." Cat rubs the sleep from her eyes. I've been eyeing her window for an hour. John and Helen took their rental car into the village to do some grocery shopping and I've been battling with myself ever since. The selfish, crazy, inexplicably hormonal part of me wanted to wake her up so we could spend a little time alone. I didn't give in, though. I let her have her lie-in. She's on holiday and I couldn't think of a valid excuse to rouse her.

When I walked past her bedroom door half an hour ago, I had to stop myself from gently opening it and peeking my head in, but for all I knew she was hiding in there, dreaming of Jenny and better times. Also, that's no way for a hostess to behave.

"Sleep well?" I inquire, masking the grin that wants to burst all over my face. She sports a sexy bed-head, short black hair pushed up by sleep, and her athletic body is only covered by a skimpy pair of shorts and a crumpled tank top. No bra as far as I can see—and I'm looking.

"On and off." Barefoot, she pads over to a chair and pulls it back, her eyes searching for coffee. "Still getting used to the bed. It's strange coming back here after so many years. Everything is different now." She pours herself some coffee and stirs in two teaspoons of sugar. "Have mum and dad left me in your care?" She fixes her blue eyes on me, as blue as the sky reflecting in the water of the pool, and smiles. Her hair is starting to come down and a strand falls over her eyes. She has one of those unevenly cut hairstyles, short in the back and longer in the front.

"I promised them no harm would come to you." I suppress the urge to make her a sandwich, the desire to look after her and make her forget about her sudden break-up.

"Sorry they kept going on about Lionel last night." She crosses one leg over the other and cradles her coffee cup in the palm of her hand. "They can get carried away sometimes, and honestly, if you want my opinion, you're way too hot for him." She winks at me and I'm sure it's meant innocently but I have trouble taking it that way. I don't blush easily, but I feel the heat creeping up my cheeks.

"I know they mean well. They just want to keep me from turning into an old maid." I accompany my statement with a little chuckle.

"I'm sure you don't need John and Helen Archer's help with that." She gives me a once-over and, if I'm not mistaken, fixes her eyes on my cleavage for a moment. "You must be fending off advances." The sparkle in her glance fills me with joy. "A woman like you." She says it as if it's an irrefutable truth and I try not to beam too much.

"Oh, stop it, Catherine." I flutter my eyes. "You're making me blush."

"Mum may disagree, but I have impeccable taste in women." Suddenly, her eyes get cloudy and I can see her mood darken on her face. "Although I could be a better judge of character, I

guess.”

There’s that pain again. I want to make it go away, kiss it away if I have to. Or even if I don’t have to. I get a grip on myself and push these nonsensical thoughts to the back of my head. My day’s already been made, anyway. Five minutes of semi-flirting with Cat is all it takes.

“Do you want some eggs?” I want to do something for her. It’s stronger than myself. “Some toast, maybe?” I also want to get her mind off Jenny.

“I’ll wait for lunch.” She drains her coffee and stands up. Already, I feel the emptiness. “Let me clear this off.”

“I’ll take care of that.” I rise out of my chair and stand next to her, her body heat glowing against me. Simultaneously, our hands reach for the same plate and when our fingers collide sparks shiver up my spine. If I didn’t know any better I’d think I was falling in love.

“Come on, Rose.” She turns her face towards me and her mouth is so close, her lips so curvy. “You’re saving my holiday. Let me at least do something.” Our hands are still touching so I don’t want to let go of the plate. I peer into her eyes and my heart starts throbbing again, the same senseless thudding as the night before when I put my hand on her knee.

“Let’s do it together.”

“Deal.” Cat lets go of the plate and focuses her attention on the rest of the table. Tires hiss as a car pulls up on the driveway. The moment is gone. It was good enough to hold onto for a while.

***Younger Than Yesterday* is available from [Amazon US](#) & [Amazon UK](#)**