

Avery smiled uncertainly. She knew that Bailey Winter was an important fashion designer and normally, she'd have been thrilled to meet him. But now that she'd been abandoned by James, she felt shy, like Ticky might decide on the spot that she'd been wrong about assigning her the story: that she was simply not Metropolitan material.

"Hi," she finally mustered. She noticed McKenna trailing behind the two of them, carrying Ticky's silver Prada clutch in one hand and Bailey Winter's huge black Prada satchel over her shoulder. She had the same dorky-looking walkie-talkie as Gemma.

"You're all alone!" Ticky noticed, leaning in to air-kiss Avery. Ticky smelled like cigarettes, scotch, and those hard butter-scotch candies Avery's grandmother always used to eat.

"Yes, that's so sad., Avery. At least you found the food!" McKenna smiled fakely. Avery glowered. Of course McKenna had to see her standing around like a friendless loser, feed her sorrows with organic calories.

"I'm actually here with James, He and I are just . . . covering different people," Avery lied.

"Pshaw!" Ticky waved her red-manicured hand wildly in the air. Her hair didn't move from its lacquered bouffant, the same style Avery's grandmother used to wear to special events.

Noting something was wrong, Ticky rested a bony hand on Avery's bare shoulder, "You've learned the hard way, darling, James is a fantastic reporter, but he's a fucking celebrossexual. You can't take him anywhere." Ticky rolled her heavily made-up eyes. "So forget whatever orders James gave you and just have fun tonight. Circulate! Mingle! Your job is to be the fabulous face of *Metropolitan*. Someone has to be. No matter how many refreshers I've gotten from **Dr. Antell**, my face won't cut it anymore," Ticky added ruefully.

"Thanks," Avery said numbly.

"Now, I have to make sure everyone knows I'm here and not dead yet."

"My dear, your life has only just begun!" Bailey Winter exclaimed, leading Ticky over to the bar.

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"Have fun!" Ticky commanded again, looking over her shoulder before she disappeared into the crowd.

Avery nodded, then moved safely out of Ticky's view. She navigated her way past the spindly, weird-looking trees set up for the occasion and toward an exit sign. She just needed some air.

"Did you want to see the penthouse?" A blond girl standing near the elevators asked, clearly noting the dorky press badge she and James had been given at the door.

"Sure," Avery agreed curiously. Wasn't the penthouse where Jack was living?

"Great," the girl enthused, holding the elevator door open for Avery. "You can just go up. I believe Jack Laurent is there giving interviews."

"Perfect,," Avery murmured, watching the girl press P. So she was going to find Jack after all.

The elevator door opened into a cavernous, all-white and gray loft space. Cameras were set up in one corner. Jack and J.P. were obviously being interviewed. J.P. was gesticulating wildly, looking like he was having the time of his life. Jack was smiling, but something seemed off.

"You're press?" A woman placed a manicured hand on Avery's shoulder.