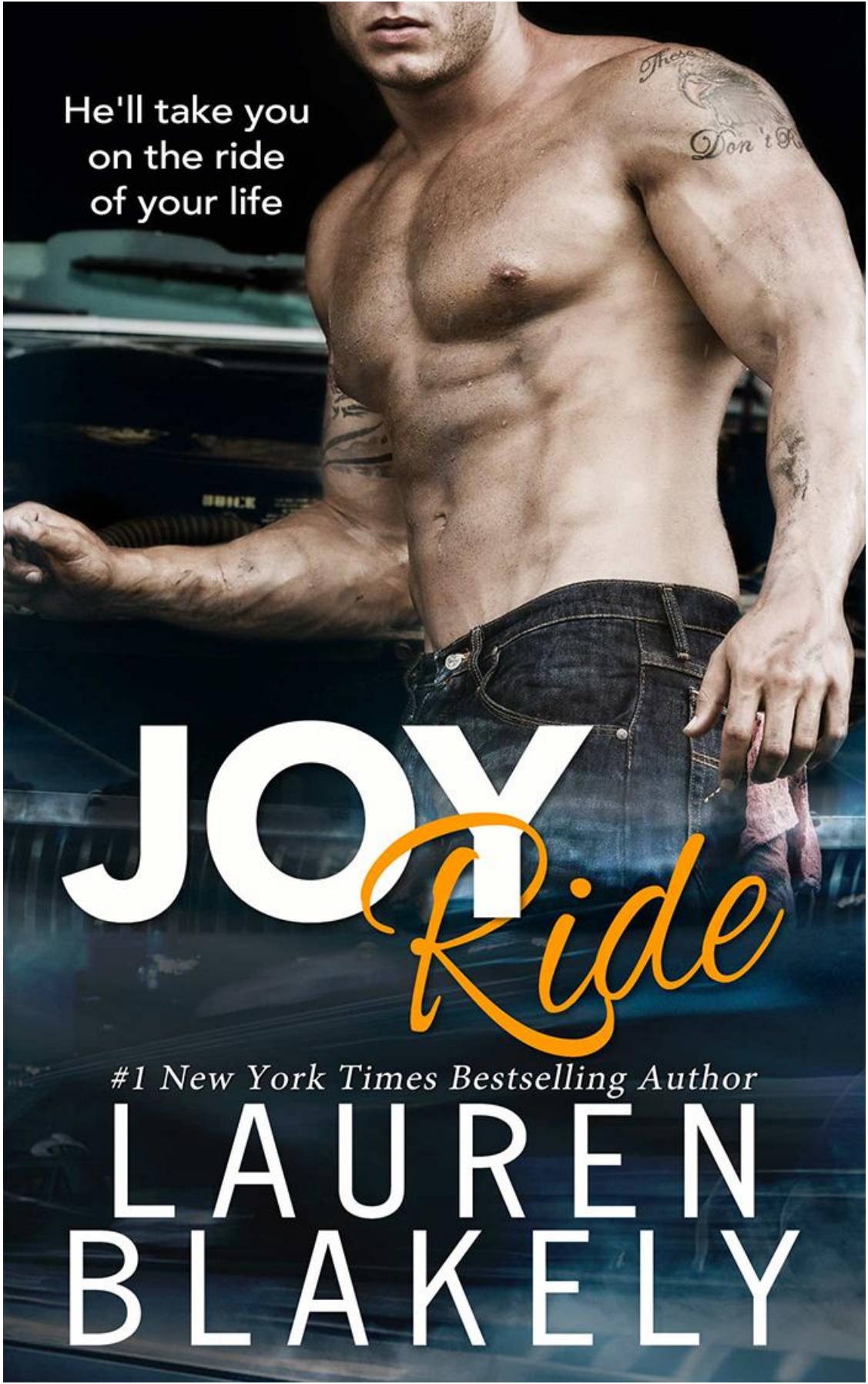


This is an exclusive sneak peek of

Joy Ride

By Lauren Blakely



He'll take you
on the ride
of your life

JOY *Ride*

#1 New York Times Bestselling Author

LAUREN BLAKELY

Prologue

Here's something I want to know. Why the fuck does the term *guilty pleasure* even exist? If something brings you pleasure, don't feel guilty.

Case closed.

But let's just be perfectly clear—I'm not talking about stuff a dude should feel ten tons of remorse about. Like, being a dick to your boss or cheating on your woman. If that kind of shit brings you pleasure, then may all the guilt from the skies rain down on you, along with golf ball-sized hail and toads too.

What I don't get is why people feel bad about the good stuff in life they enjoy. Buying that pool table just because it looks fucking awesome in your living room. Or drinking the eighteen-year-old Scotch one night after a long day fixing an engine on a Mustang, instead of waiting for a special occasion to crack open the bottle.

Screw that.

Life is short. Savor it now.

Hell, if it floats your boat to sink into a steaming-hot bubble bath every so often, then turn the water up high and toss a bath bomb into the claw-foot tub.

Not that I do *that*. Hell, I barely even know what a bath bomb is. And I absolutely, positively did not use the zingy lemongrass-scented one the other night. The type that fizzes. I don't have a clue why it's missing from the cabinet.

In any case, I say *indulge*.

Yeah, my pool table rocks, and so does the Scotch. But hands down, my favorite indulgence happens to be the one-night stand.

What? Like that's such a crime? Nothing wrong with a night of round-the-clock fun of the X-rated variety. Besides, when I take a woman home for a one-and-done fiesta of five-star fucking, I'm honest about my intentions. I never promise more than I can deliver. But what I do serve up—in extra large quantities, thank you very much—is a fantastic time between the sheets with no strings attached when the sun comes up.

I've never felt guilty about this pleasure either, and that's because I maintain a few key guidelines when it comes to my favorite horizontal hobby.

Don't be an asshole.

Always be a gentleman.

And never sleep with the enemy.

Now, about that last rule . . . don't break it. Don't bend it. Don't even dip

your toe on the other side.

Trust me on this.

I went on to shatter that last guideline in spectacular fashion, leaving me wanting a helluva lot more than one time with a certain sexy brunette. That's how I wound up on the side of the road with a new tattoo, a wrecked electric blue roadster, and a pet monkey to show for it.

Yes, I said pet monkey.

And that's a big fucking problem for the King of Pleasure.

Chapter One

Cars are like ice cream.

There's a flavor for everyone.

Some auto enthusiasts opt for vanilla. For them, a basic sports car will do just fine.

Others want a sundae with everything on it, from the badass paint job to the jacked-up wheels to the sound system that registers on the Richter scale.

Then, you've got the car buffs who gravitate toward a dark chocolate gelato when they fork over big bucks for a sleek Aston Martin, outfitted with an engine that kills it on the autobahn.

Every now and then though, you'll encounter the fellow who doesn't know what he likes, so he goes for rainbow sprinkles, bananas, chopped nuts, and a cherry on top. Like this guy I'm talking to right now at a custom car show just outside Manhattan.

The bespectacled man strokes his chin then asks in a smooth, sophisticated voice, "Could you make an armored car?"

That's the latest question from this thirty-something guy in tailored slacks and a crisp white button-down. Wire-rimmed glasses slide to the bridge of his nose as he gestures to an emerald green, fully customized sports car that holds center stage.

"Armored cars are in my arsenal," I say. "I've made a few beasts designed to outlast the zombie apocalypse, courtesy of some survivalist clients."

He arches an eyebrow. "Could you add in some sleek tail fins?"

Ah, tail fins. I have a hunch where he's going now, and it's not to the land of the undead. "I can do that too."

“And maybe it can even ride low and respond to commands?”

I stifle a laugh since I have his number for sure now, and I fucking love the enthusiasm of the newbies. “Absolutely. I assume you’d want it in black?”

His blue eyes light up. “Yes. Black would be perfect.”

For the Batmobile. Because that’s what the dude just described. I’m not knocking him or the Batmobile. That vehicle is absolutely at the top of my bucket list too. What self-respecting gearhead wouldn’t want to tool around town in a superhero’s tricked-out ride?

This guy’s nowhere near done though as he peppers me with a new set of questions. “Would you be able to make a car that—just for the sake of argument—can jump incredibly far distances?”

I don’t need precognition to know where he’s going with this new scenario. “Would you want it to play a little song when you hit the horn?”

His eyes twinkle. “Oh, that’s a nice feature indeed.”

I wonder where I came up with that idea. Could it be my vast knowledge of the General Lee from *Dukes of Hazard*?

The guy is rolling through the greatest hits of cars on TV or film. And you know what? There’s not a damn thing wrong with that. If he learns about cars from the tube or the screen, so be it. Maybe he’ll ask me to make a VW Bug that talks. My sister has begged for that for years, and if I ever figure out how, I’m delivering it to her first.

“What about wings for doors?” he asks.

“Like a Delorean?”

He nods in excitement. “I love that car so much.”

“I haven’t met a Delorean I didn’t want to marry either. That’s the reason I got into this business in the first place.”

“Are you a *Back to the Future* fan too?”

I hold up a fist for knocking. “You know it.”

“Any chance you put a flux capacitor in it for me?”

“Absolutely. And I promise it’ll hit 1.21 gigawatts when you crank the gas,” I say, and as we laugh the *click clack* of many pairs of high heels against asphalt surrounds us. This show is swarming with women in heels, working the booths, posing seductively on hoods or beside doors. Can’t say that bothers me. Nope, I definitely can’t say I’m annoyed by the proliferation of female flesh one bit.

Cars and chicks—that’s all I need for sustenance.

But now’s not the time for checking out the scenery, because business always comes first. I extend a hand to the *Back to the Future* fan. “Max Summers of Summers Custom Autos.”

He shakes. “David Winters. And I know this may shock you, but . . . *confession*—I know nothing about cars.”

“Nothing wrong with that since I know a ton.”

He smiles and shrugs sheepishly. “Excellent. I’m looking for a builder who can make the best. Like this one, I presume?” he asks, pointing to the sleek green beauty I’m keeping watch over at the show. I’m here with a client. I customized this baby for Wagner Boost—an NFL lineman who’s off signing autographs somewhere nearby. Wagner is a mammoth man. At 6’ 8” and 350 pounds—that’s his morning weight, since he jokes that he shoots up to 360 after breakfast—he needed a car tailored to fit his frame. I made it for him, and he likes to show it off.

“Let me tell you something,” I say, patting the hood of Wagner’s prized possession. “If you can dream it, I can damn near make it. If you want aftermarket tires, a new engine, or custom upholstery, I’ll take care of it. If you want to marry parts from a roadster you’ve seen in a gangster flick with a futuristic prototype, I’ll find a way. I’ll deliver on your vision because that’s what I do.”

The *tap tap* of stiletto heels sounds closer now, like someone is approaching, as David fires off another question. “Can you—?”

A woman’s voice interrupts. “Can you paint a badass tiger on the door?”

No. Fucking. Way.

That voice. That sexy purr. Like honey, like whiskey. Like dirty dreams.

Everything in me goes still. I haven’t heard that voice in years. I don’t even have to turn around because one more click, then another, and here she is, standing in front of me. Looking even hotter than she ever did before.

Long brown hair. Dark chocolate eyes. Legs that go on forever.

Henley Rose Marlowe.

Fuck me senseless.

It’s her.

The woman who drove me crazy.

I’m momentarily speechless as I take her in because she’s not twenty-one anymore. She’s five years older and twenty-five times hotter. Yes, her hotness has squared with the years.

But I’m not about to let a potential deal slide through my fingers. I never let women get in the way of work, especially not one who’s inserting herself into the middle of a conversation with a fucking *tiger* comment.

I get around her interruption by going along with it.

“The tiger can even be roaring,” I suggest, as if she’s just some random car lover who’s keen on chitchatting, not a girl who used to work under the hood in my shop.

“Maybe even breathing fire,” Henley offers, like we’ve got this rapport down pat, *who’s on first* style.

David gets into the action too, emitting a *rawr* as he holds up his hands as if they’re claws.

Henley flashes him the sexiest smile I've ever seen, and in less than a second, the fire-breathing tiger inhabits me. Because I'm jealous as hell. For no good reason.

David smiles back at her.

Okay, maybe for *that* reason.

Which is not an acceptable reason at all. I shake off the useless emotion as David speaks again. "That's it. I've officially decided I want a tiger on the door of a Delorean. Painted in green, like the color of money."

Yep, he's rainbow sprinkles all the way, and I focus on the sprinkles, not the flirty grins exchanged between this guy and a woman who was never mine.

"You can have it in royal purple, in emerald green, in sapphire blue," I tell him. "You can have it with a flag on the hood, a pinstripe on the door, and the sweetest stick shift you've ever felt in your hands."

"Purple and a sweet stick? I'm sold." He clasps my hand in a goodbye shake. "I'll be in touch." He takes a step to go then stops. "Is purple too crazy a color? What do you think?" he asks the woman who'd make any red-blooded man gawk. Perfect figure. Pouty lips. Tight waist. Gravity-defying tits. When God made the ideal woman to sell a red-blooded man any bill of goods, he crafted Henley.

Not sure he intended her to have such a smartass mouth though.

She licks her lips. "Purple is hot as sin," she says to David, like the words are for his ears only. She presses her fingertip to her tongue then touches the hood of the car as if it burns her. She raises her hand, letting the imaginary flame fly high.

David eats up her show, laughing and grinning.

"That's an excellent selling point of purple. What about you, Max? Favorite color?" He holds up one hand as a stop sign. "Wait. Let me guess. Gold? Silver? Red? Blue?"

I shake my head. "Black."

Then David says goodbye and heads off, and I'm left with the vexing vixen who hates me. She stares at me, like a cat who won't look away. I don't break her showdown.

"*Black*," she repeats, tapping the toe of her red suede pump as she glares with dark brown eyes full of fury. "Like your heart."

Have I mentioned the last time I saw her she marched out of my shop in a blaze of angry glory?

Might be because I fired her sexy ass five years ago.

Yeah, there's some bad blood between us.

Chapter Two

Henley Rose and a hot car go together like peaches and cream, like fine Scotch and a long, dirty night. Which means working with her was like walking into the Garden of Eden every single day. It was a test of willpower because the woman could craft a car as if it were an erotic dance.

Not a strip tease.

Not an in-your-face pelvis thrust.

But a beautiful fucking ballet of woman seducing machine. Those hands, the way she wielded tools, the intensity in her focus—it was sensual, and it was sinful, and it was this man’s fantasy made flesh.

Imagine what it was like working with her for one hard-on year.

I mean, hard year.

I survived the challenge because she was the best in the class. And I never treated her differently because she was a woman, or because I thought about her naked an obscene amount of time. I treated her like anyone else—specifically, all the people I work with who I never ever imagine in anything less than full-on Siberian winter garb, complete with the thermals and Michelin Man coat.

“Black heart.” I tap my sternum. “Same model as before.”

“I’d have thought you’d get an upgrade by now. Faulty parts and all.”

“No recall needed on the ticker. It works just fine in this *cruel bastard*,” I say, reminding her of the words she’d uttered the day she stormed out.

She arches a brow. “Shame. You should have let me replace it. I’m good at making all sorts of clunkers run better.”

Jesus Christ. She still takes no prisoners. “I’ve no doubt you have all the tools to fix anything, and if you couldn’t find the right one, you’d use a blowtorch.”

She adopts an expression of indignation. “There’s nothing wrong with using a *blowtorch*,” she says, taking extra time on the first syllable.

How the hell did I ever last with this woman? Before I can even fashion a comeback, she taps her toe against the tire on Wagner’s car. “I see you still like to make your cars with such *big, manly* wheels.”

I roll my eyes, then make a “give it to me now” motion with my hands. “All right, Henley. Deliver the punchline.”

She bats her lashes. “What punchline?”

“*Big? Manly?* You’re going to say it’s some sort of substitution thing going on. That’s what you always said about the guys who wanted the biggest cars with the biggest wheels.”

She smirks. “Was I wrong in my assessment?”

I laugh. “I don’t know. I didn’t check to see how that added up for them.”

“Nor did I. My focus was *always* on the work.”

“As well it should be.”

“That’s what you taught me.”

“I’m glad you learned that lesson.”

“I learned *so many* lessons from you.”

I take a deep breath and change directions. “What was up with the badass tiger comment out of nowhere? Couldn’t just wait till I was done to say hello?”

She winks. “C’mon. I was just having fun.”

“Fun? More like trying to get involved in everything.”

She feigns shock, then dances her fingertips along the hood of Wagner’s car. “I was merely being helpful and trying to land you a client. Don’t you remember? I was always trying to help you.”

I park my hands on my hips. “Why do I feel like you’re here to taunt me rather than deliver your generous humanitarian aid?”

She clasps a hand to her chest. Her ample chest. “Taunt? Me? I was just excited to say hello to my former mentor. Forgive me for my exuberance,” she says, in a too-sweet tone. “How are you these days?”

“I can’t complain.” I don’t know what to make of her, and I don’t know that I want to let her in. “What about you? It’s been a while.”

“Five years. Three weeks. And two days. But who’s counting?”

“Sounds like you are.”

She shrugs as if it’s no big deal, then pops up on the hood and parks her sweet ass on Wagner’s car. Wagner won’t care. He likes pretty ladies, especially when they’re on his prized ride. The problem is he’ll probably want to bang Henley when he returns from signing autographs, and that’s not going to fucking happen on my watch.

Not that I have any control over who she’s banging. But I’ll do everything I can to make sure it’s not a client of mine who gets his hands on her.

“What brings you to this neck of the woods?” Last I heard from her she’d gone back home to Northern California to work with a rival builder there.

She points her thumb in the general direction of Clint Savage, a burly, bearded foul-mouthed motherfucker who kills it with some of the hottest custom rides on the planet. The bastard is talented and prolific. He pumps out cars as often as he makes kids. Well, his wife pumps out the kids. “I’m just booth bitching at Savage Rides,” Henley says.

“Yeah?” That surprises me, but I don’t let on. Henley was never a pretty set of legs and tits at a show. She was under the hood, working on the engine, getting her hands dirty.

She nods and smiles a yes. “He has me pose on top of the cars. We clean up like that.” She snaps her fingers.

“Is that so?”

She runs her eyes up and down my body. Checks out the tribal bands on my biceps. Lingers on my chest. Well, my T-shirt. I’m not some ass who parades shirtless at a car show. I save that for when I drive with the top down. No, seriously. Do I look like a douche? I don’t drive shirtless either.

She straightens her spine and stands tall, hopping off the car. “No.” That’s all she says, but that one word comes out exactly like “*No, you idiot.*”

She fucking hates me still. I sigh. “What are you doing here then?”

She narrows her eyes. “You think you’re the only game in town? I run a shop now in New York.”

I didn’t keep tabs on her when she walked away in a cloud of black smoke, and I figured it was best for me not to stalk her. I needed to stay away from the kind of temptation she brought to work every day. “Good for you.”

She sets one hand on her hip and stares at me defiantly. “You really thought I was a booth babe?”

“You said you were here as one.”

She huffs. “You never thought much of me, did you?”

You don’t want to know the half of it. You don’t want to know how much I thought of you and most of it was vastly inappropriate.

“Henley,” I say, keeping my tone measured, “you were the most talented apprentice I ever worked with. I thought the world of your skills and you know it.”

She sneers, then she pokes me. She stabs her index finger against my chest, her red polished nail scratching me, and instantly stirring up not-safe-for-work fantasies of her nails down my chest then my back.

“Actions speak louder than words. And yours made it clear you never thought I was good enough,” she says.

I let my gaze drift away from her eyes. Down to her neck then to her shoulder. She follows my path, then I say, “I see you haven’t had that chip removed yet. I know a doctor who can take care of that for you.”

Her eyebrows shoot into her hairline. But her voice is even. “Thanks for the tip. I’ll be sure to think of you first when I’m ready to take it out, seeing as you’re the reason I have one in the first place.”

Let me revise my assessment. *A sexy chip on a fuck-hot shoulder.* “Glad to know you’re finally giving me credit for something.”

She rolls her eyes. “I gave you all the credit, and you gave me nada.” She curls her thumb and forefinger into an *O*. “Zilch. Zero.”

“Don’t forget goose egg while you’re at it. Wouldn’t want you to leave out another way to describe how I robbed you of all opportunity.”

She purses her lips and shakes her head. “I don’t know why I came over here to talk to you.”

“That’s a fascinating question. One I’d love to know the answer to.”

“I don’t know. Call me crazy. But I thought maybe we could have a civilized chat.”

I laugh sharply. “You did? That’s why you inserted yourself into a conversation with a potential client with your tiger comment?”

It was supposed to be funny.” For once, her tone sounds hurt, as if I’ve wounded her. “You used to tease me when I got all worked up about something. You called me tiger.”

The memory smashes back into me of the first instance I called her that. She’s right. She’s fucking right. I blink, remembering a time when she was pissed at herself over a struggle with a transmission tunnel that nicked her left hand, and I said, “Easy, tiger,” before I moved in and helped her, showing her how to do it without slicing her finger off. She thanked me in the sweetest voice, and then I put a Band-Aid on the cut.

She shrugs in an *I-give-up* gesture, and I realize I’m letting her get to me. This woman was the most fiery, spirited person I’ve ever worked with, but I can’t let her get under my skin, or make me want to put Band-Aids on her when she can damn well do it herself. I need a new approach, especially if we’re running in the same circles.

“See you later, Max.”

She turns to go, but I grab her arm. “Wait.” My voice is gentler now. “Tell me what you’re up to these days.”

“Building cars.”

“I figured that much from what you said. What’s your specialty?”

The corner of her lips curves up in a smile as she moves closer. So damn close I can smell her sweet breath, and I’m half wondering how she smells so good at four in the afternoon, like cinnamon candy. But then, that was one of her many talents. Smelling good, looking good, working hard. “The kind I would have made with you if you’d have let me,” she says and steps one inch closer. So close I could kiss her cinnamon lips. “They’re called . . . *the best*.”

She spins on a heel and walks away.

I should call out after her. I should try harder to smooth over the past. But I’m better off letting her go. She’s far too dangerous, even though a part of me likes playing with fire.

That part of me needs to stay the fuck away from a woman like her.



Joy Ride

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