

A man in a dark suit and tie is kissing a woman on the cheek. The woman has long dark hair and is wearing a dark top. The background is a blurred office or modern interior with a grid ceiling. The text 'WHOLE LOTTA GRUMP' is overlaid in large, bold, light green letters with a white-to-green gradient.

**WHOLE  
LOTTA  
GRUMP**

**CASSIE MINT**

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Whole Lotta Grump

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# Contents

**[1. Maisie](#)**

**[2. Hudson](#)**

**[3. Maisie](#)**

**[4. Hudson](#)**

**[5. Maisie](#)**

**[6. Hudson](#)**

**[7. Maisie](#)**

**[8. Hudson](#)**

*[Teaser: Fixer Upper](#)*

*[About the Author](#)*

One

# Maisie



**A**t first glance, the Midas Inc skyscraper looks like any other building in this city. All glass and shiny steel; sharp edges and straight lines. Bustling with people in suits, who yell into their phones and guzzle coffee like it's the elixir of life.

When you step into the lobby, it's barely any quieter than the street. Sure, outside cabbies lean on their horns and garbage trucks rumble along, but in here, people go about their days with LOUD URGENCY. Verging on panic.

No wonder they called me in.

If the minions are this stressed, I'm surprised Hudson Katz hasn't keeled over yet. Surprised he hasn't burst a vein.

After I'm done with the boss, they should set me on the underlings next. Every single person in this dust-free, deafening skyscraper could use a back rub. I guarantee it.

They bark at each other, power walking past as I drift across the lobby. I prod the elevator button and wait, humming under my breath.

It's always strange coming here. Strange walking into any of my clients' offices, frankly. Like visiting another planet. So many of these big, powerful

CEOs are stressing themselves into an early grave, and though I'll certainly try to help, I couldn't relate to anyone less.

What's the point of all this, you know? What's it all for? A few extra zeroes on a screen?

Please. They should try the waffle truck in the downtown city park. Now *that's* something worth selling your soul.

The elevator rises, floor after floor, so quick that I get that swoopy, roller coaster feeling in my stomach. Or maybe it's because I'm two minutes away from Hudson Katz. Could be that too.

Fluffing my hair in the elevator mirror, I smile politely at the workers who bustle in and out on different floors—then pinch my cheeks, aiming for some color, though I'm still pale beneath my freckles.

Will Hudson be glad to see me? Does he like these appointments?

It's always so hard to tell.

But as I tug my sky blue tunic straight, excitement fizzes under my skin—because *I* look forward to this appointment all week, counting down the days until I'm alone with Hudson Katz again.

Talking to him.

Touching him.

In a professional way, obviously. I clear my throat, glancing around guiltily, but no one can hear my thoughts. Duh. And even if they could, I doubt these busy bees would care. Bet plenty of them have the hots for the boss. When he looks like that, who wouldn't?

They step off the elevator one by one, click-clacking away in their heels or striding off in buffed leather shoes, until I'm left all alone with my reflection. The Maisie in the mirror looks excited—but she purses her lips and waggles a finger.

“Don’t be weird.” My voice bounces around the metal box. “Don’t drool all over him. That’s not part of the service.”

Right.

Every week, I give myself this pep talk. Then every week, I step into Hudson Katz’s penthouse office... and lose my freaking mind.

No. *No.*

This time, I’ll be better. I won’t think a single unprofessional thought about the handsome grump. I’ll rub his shoulders, soothe his muscles, and get gone.

\* \* \*

Hudson Katz is always fully dressed when I arrive. Obviously, in any other job that would be standard, but I’m a massage therapist. When I meet with a client, they’re often already in a robe.

The appointments are expensive, you know? And they want their money’s worth.

Not Hudson. He stands by the huge glass window in his office in a charcoal suit, arms folded over his chest, staring out at the city skyline. It’s a sunny spring day, with a cool wind and puffs of white cloud. Beautiful.

Hudson glares like the sunshine offends him.

“Hey,” I call, locking the door behind me. Once I trust a client, I always prefer a locked door. It helps them unwind; stops them from worrying about some underling bursting in and seeing their boss in nothing but a towel. “You ready to relax, Mr Katz?”

Hudson grunts, still staring out at the spring day. He makes no move to undress, but the massage table is set up ready in the center of the floor,

complete with a folded white towel. In the wall-length tank opposite the boss's desk, little fish flit up to the glass, investigating the new furniture.

Did Hudson set up the table and fetch the towel? Or does he get an assistant to do it?

Either way, the sight of that table brings a lump to my throat. See, *this* is why I get all tingly coming to see this grouch: because of all my fancy clients, of all the rich and powerful in this city, only Hudson Katz insists on keeping a massage table in his office so I won't have to lug one all the way here on the subway.

Our first appointment, he was so mad when he saw me huffing and puffing through the doorway. "How far did you bring that?" he demanded.

His very first bark at me. Historic.

Anyway, I told him how far, and he banned me from ever carrying my table all that way again. Sent me home with his driver, too. Swoon.

"Your minions seem extra stressy today."

This is how our time together goes: I chat, Hudson scowls into the distance. Pausing by his huge desk, I drop my tote bag on the glass and snap a hair tie onto my wrist, then join him at the window. The top of my head doesn't reach his shoulder.

We're already so high up here. Like gods.

And he's a foot higher. The godliest.

Muscles bulge against suit sleeves where his arms are crossed; Hudson's jaw is harder than granite. With his dark hair and dark eyes and that thundercloud demeanor, it's no wonder everyone in this building is scared of this man. It feels like he could yell and the earth would crack apart.

"You ready to strip, Mr Katz?"

He always needs coaxing. Needs to be teased out of his angry shell.



I don't mind. I like it.

Hudson blows out a harsh breath, then frowns down at me. I smile back, tying my hair into a ponytail.

"My left shoulder is stiff," he says, that low voice of his making me shiver.

"Okay." Silence rings through the office, and Hudson doesn't move—just towers over me, all broody and beautiful. "Can I take a look?"

The big boss jolts, like the suggestion is such a shock. Like he doesn't pay to get me here each week. It's funny: he may be the Midas man, may be rich and powerful as all get out, but every single massage appointment seems to take him by surprise.

Like he can't quite believe that he let me in again. Can't fathom that we're here once more. Wasting his precious minutes on human contact, when all those lines of zeroes are waiting on his computer screen.

"Now?" Hudson asks, tone grim. Always so reluctant to get started.

*I will not find that sweet. I will not find that sweet.*

"Now," I agree with a nod. "So we have enough time for the massage."

Another grunt. The boss steps away from the giant window, and I squint down at a vendor cart on the street far below, trying to distract myself from the whisper of clothes behind me. Giving him privacy, though god knows this man's enormous chest is seared into my brain in high definition. I could sketch it by memory—could summon the image of his nipples in a heartbeat.

Soooo. What is that old guy selling on the corner down there? Hot dogs? Bet it's hot dogs.

Cotton slithers over skin; shoes thump against the rug. I stare down at the vendor, eyes dry, forgetting to blink.

With only my ears focused on the man behind me, I hear each of his

steady breaths, each step across the floor. The creak of the massage table, and the faint rustle as he unfolds the towel and drapes it over his lap.

Hudson Katz needs an extra large towel. Just sayin’.

“Ready,” he mutters.

Unknotting my fingers, I take a deep breath—then turn around with a bright smile.

The sight of his bare body always punches me in the ovaries. That vast, sculpted expanse of golden brown skin, dusted with dark hair; those ridged abs and the cut of his hips. So manly and strong and *gah*.

I want to poke him. Want to rub my whole face against his belly and blow a wet raspberry on the skin; want to pet his armpit hair and tweak his nose and pinch his cheeks like that old Russian lady on the subway. Want to roll in his pheromones like a puppy in leaves.

God. I want to *annihilate* this grump. Just... fuss over him until he explodes.

And some instinct tells me that despite his riches, Hudson Katz has never been doted on before. Not truly. He wouldn’t know what hit him.

“So, your left shoulder,” I say instead as I cross to my tote bag. *Act normal, you weirdo*. The bottle of oil is heavy as I snap the lid open. Oil pools in my palm, and I set it down with a thump on the desk. “Any other points of tension?”

“My neck,” he says, low voice drifting across the room to meet me. He’s flat on his back, glaring up at the ceiling. After the hustle and bustle downstairs, this office is an oasis: fish dart between plants in the tank by the wall, their colorful scales flashing, and the hum of the filter is soothing. “And my left hamstring. And my right side, between the ribs.”

Poor, tense King Midas. “You should work less,” I tell him, warming the

oil between my palms. It's scented with citrus blossom. "And try yoga."

The look he shoots me could incinerate a man at twenty paces. Seriously, I've seen his underlings *run* from that look, eyes panicked, cheeks flushed, ready to sprint to the nearest job opening—or to sob in the bathroom.

Doesn't work on me. Since day one, I've been immune, and I fight a smile, approaching the table. "Or not."

When I reach out my hands, we both hold our breath. The air shivers through the room, and even the fish go still, fins fluttering with anticipation.

Has it only been a week? It feels more like years since I put my hands on this man. Like a geological era has passed. Does Hudson miss me between appointments, the way I miss him? Is this the highlight of his week too? Or am I a total lost cause?

When I touch his arm, fingers sliding along his bicep, my insides quiver.

Hudson Katz lets out a soft hiss, and time speeds up again.

"Okay, Mr Katz." My voice wobbles. He scowls past me at the ceiling, no sign that he's affected by my touch at all, damn it. Did I imagine that hiss? "Let's begin."

Two

## Hudson



**L**et me be clear: a massage is my idea of hell. Stripping down for a stranger? Interrupting my work day? Having someone else's hands all over my body, slicking me up with oil that never fully washes off on the first try? Worst of all: making polite fucking conversation?

Kill me now.

I only caved and allowed Maisie in that first time because my back was ninety percent gristle: stiff and knotted and aching like hell, so bad I couldn't focus. The Midas Inc board booked her, and I let them. Call it a moment of weakness.

That's how she wound up in my office the first time, smiling and chattering away as she set up the table, all wavy black hair and dove gray eyes. So sweet and pretty and calm. The kind of girl you might see on a postcard from Switzerland, wearing lederhosen and swinging a pail of fresh milk, beaming in the mountain air. So gut-wrenchingly wholesome.

Meeting Maisie for the first time was like being slapped in the face with a rainbow. All the other times... our weekly appointment over the last three months...

I can't explain it. I *won't* explain it. But I need to see her on a regular basis, and that's non-negotiable.

For the record, I still hate massages. But Maisie's hands on me aren't so bad. She's excellent at her job—the best in the city, naturally—but more than that, I can't shake the feeling that it's *me* she's touching. Not just any other body stretched out beneath a towel. Me.

With any other massage therapist, I'd hate that even more. But with Maisie, it's exactly what I crave.

“Sir?” My assistant Carlton frowns and peers closer, a pen tapping against his notepad. He's been briefing me for the day, standing in front of my desk in his purple suit, but when he says my name, I can't remember the last five minutes. Everything is a haze.

Have I been staring into the fish tank all that time, thinking about my massage therapist? Or has he just been that boring?

“What?” I snap.

Carlton straightens, fingers tightening on his pen. “I said that the big meeting is this afternoon. The one with the Spanish division? You told me to set it up months ago, sir. Anyway, they flew in yesterday and you're set to meet at 3pm—”

Maisie o'clock. Unacceptable.

“Reschedule it,” I say, and if I were a kinder person, I'd care that Carlton looks like he might faint. “Push it forward or back by two hours. I don't care which.”

“But sir—”

“It wasn't a suggestion.”

Carlton huffs out a breath, then nods miserably. Thinking of Maisie, I attempt a smile. That's what she'd do, right? She'd smile and make everyone

feel better, but when I try it, my face feels wrong. Unnatural.

“Oh,” my assistant says, stumbling back like he’s seen a ghost. The notebook trembles in his hands. Too toothy, maybe? “Oh, well, I’d better go deal with that.”

“Thank you, Carlton.”

Another baffled glance, then his purple suit hurries through my doorway. I wait for the soft click of the door, the blissful wave of silence, then let my forced smile drop away.

Fish dance back and forth in the tank opposite me. Plants undulate in tiny currents. The glow from the tank spills into the room, warring with the morning sunshine, and I know that Carlton finds that glow eerie, but I love it.

Sometimes—and I’d never admit this out loud—I wish I was in there too. As a crab, maybe, or one of those glass-cleaning water snails.

Peaceful. Unstressed. No deadlines or people or pressure.

...But no Maisie either.

I straighten in my desk chair, clearing my throat. It’s a stupid fantasy.

\* \* \*

“The Spanish division, huh?” Maisie drops her tote bag on my desk. Her belongings clatter against the glass, barely muffled by the fabric, and something knocks my keyboard askew. “Well, nobody expects the Spanish Inquisition.”

I frown from my place by the window. I’m missing something. “Excuse me?”

Maisie’s mouth twitches. “Nothing. Don’t worry.”

Ugh. I shouldn’t have mentioned that meeting at all. Now she knows that

I rescheduled for her; that our appointments are my number one priority, even above work concerns. What will she do with that knowledge? How could she use it against me?

“Look how sour you are today!” Maisie grins as she crosses the office to join me, her hips swaying as she walks. That sky blue tunic she wears nips in at her waist, hinting at her small curves, and she wears glittery pink sneakers with leggings.

With every step, her sneakers catch the light. Like fish scales.

And when she pulls her dark waves up into a ponytail, the hair tie held briefly between her teeth, my heart shudders—then slams against my ribs, pounding faster.

That *neck*. It’s so elegant. Her skin looks soft and creamy, and those freckles disappear beneath her tunic. How far do they go? Is her whole body freckled under those clothes?

“I’m not sour,” I say at last, groping for my half of the conversation. What is wrong with me? I focus for hours on end at work, but the second this woman walks in the room, my thoughts scatter. “I’m impatient. Let’s get this over with, please—I’m a busy man.”

Maisie’s smile flickers.

She looks... hurt.

Fuck.

“Well, we’re waiting on you, Midas man.” My massage therapist’s words are teasing, but she won’t look at me. She turns to the window, folding her arms, and that’s my signal to undress and get on the table. Guess we’re done chatting.

“Maisie,” I say. My chest is tight.

A glittery pink sneaker taps against the floor. Her shoulders are tense, and

I hate that. Hate that I've brought her down to my miserable level. She's still waiting for me to go away and strip, to fall back into our roles as massage therapist and client, where I can be as brash as I like and she won't care at all because I'm nothing to her. A paycheck, that's all.

Why am I like this? Why can't I be kind to the one person I care about? The one person I want to keep around.

"Maisie," I say again. "I'm sorry." The word is foreign on my tongue, but for her, I'll say anything. Anything at all. "I didn't mean that. You're right, I am sour today."

And I'm a prick, that's what I am. A lonely, grumpy, unbearable jerk who's only good for making money. How did I get here? Where did I go wrong in life? What kind of monster could make this woman sad?

I blow out a harsh breath, tugging at my shirt collar. If I've pushed Maisie away, there's no hope for me. Everyone else, I could boss around or pay them off; I could buy or bully their good opinion back. Not her. "Can we start over?"

Her lips purse. She casts me a glance—then does a double take, gray eyes going wide with concern.

Do I look that wrecked? After the world's tiniest argument? It's kind of funny: I regularly get in screaming matches as part of my work, but the smallest tiff with Maisie makes me want to tear my own skin off. I'm falling to pieces here, and she sees it.

"Okay," she says softly, her touch ghosting over my arm. "Okay, let's start over. The Spanish division, huh? Well, nobody expects the Spanish Inquisition."

"Ha." I force a smile—but unlike Carlton, Maisie doesn't flinch. "Very funny. I completely understand that joke."



And... her laugh is pure sunshine. It spills over me, warming my skin; it soothes my tight chest. My smile relaxes and turns real. Is that all it takes? Is everything fixed?

Yes, I can tell from the sparkle in her eyes: we're okay, and I can breathe easy again. Thank god.

"Strip, mister." This time, her order is fond, and as I turn away, already flicking my shirt buttons open, Maisie watches me go. Is it my imagination, or do her eyes linger before she turns back to the window?

Surely not. Maisie's a goddess, and I'm a snarling beast locked in his tower. I've proved that again today.

She wasn't staring. It's wishful thinking, nothing more.

Three

## Maisie



“I can’t believe you massage Hudson Katz.”

My roommate Fliss raises her ancient cat overhead, cooing and making kissy faces. It’s a Friday night, and our living room is a sea of take out containers, adult coloring books, and pencil sets. The end credits of a trashy movie are paused on the TV screen, and I’m a little woozy from the half-drunk pitcher of mojitos.

Since both my roomies fell head over heels in love with their men, they’ve gotten busier. We’ve had to schedule in girls’ nights to get our fix. And I’m pint-sized, so a single drink makes me float up to the clouds.

I wasn’t ready for this ambush, though.

“God, I know, right?” Sitting beside her on the sofa, Priya reaches up to scratch Rusty behind the ear. He purrs and purrs, flecks of brown fur raining onto their laps. “*The Hudson Katz*. I’d be so scared.”

The armchair rustles as I shift, a pink-tipped pencil dropping to the floor. “He’s not scary. When you get to know him, Hudson’s not like that at all.”

Not with me, anyway. Burrowing into the armchair cushions, I pretend I don’t feel my cheeks flaming.

They both give me knowing looks.

I wet my lips and taste lime.

Car horns blare down in the street, and our ‘cocktails and chill’ playlist hums from the speaker on the bookcase. Our apartment is warm and cozy, lit by the soft glow of table lamps.

“King Midas,” Priya sing-songs, flicking her braid over one shoulder. She’s in one of her boyfriend’s huge plaid shirts, the flannel flecked with white paint. “Poor King Midas; everything he touches turns to gold. Are you gold yet, Maisie?”

Fliss snickers. “I bet bits of her are. Look at that blush!”

“He’s never touched me,” I say quickly. “Not once. Why would he? *I’m* the massage therapist in the room.”

But... now that they mention it, *why* hasn’t he touched me? Wracking my brain, I can’t think of a single time Hudson Katz has reached out to me. Not for a friendly pat on the shoulder. Not even a businesslike handshake. It’s been months. Isn’t that weird?

Doesn’t he want to? Is he secretly repulsed? I mean, I spend all week between our appointments so desperate for the feel of his skin. So eager to feel his pulse and his strong bones and those silky dark chest hairs. Jonesing for my fix.

Even now, my fingers tingle with how badly I want to touch him again. I squeeze them into fists, knuckles aching.

“He’s got these fish,” I say out of nowhere, distracting myself by talking crap. “In a giant tank in his office. They’re really pretty.”

“Nice,” Fliss says, cuddling Rusty against her chest, either not noticing or not caring when he starts licking her pink-streaked hair. “We like fishies,

don't we, handsome?" Then the girls are off, talking about the movie we watched, and I'm left plucking at a loose thread on the armchair. Agitated.

I'm not done talking about Hudson yet—but I've got no reason to bring him up again. He's not my boyfriend, or even a reasonable crush. He's a client.

Professionalism. Bleurgh.

Leaning forward, I pour myself another mojito. Half-melted ice and a chunk of lime bob in my glass, and I stab them with my paper straw. The end's gone all soggy. Are there no happy endings?

"Why are you scowling like that, Maisie?" Fliss grins. "Guess crankiness is catching. Hudson Katz has rubbed off on you."

"If only," I say, the mojitos making me bold, then clap my hand over my mouth. But they both whoop, cackling together on the sofa—and, okay. My mouth twitches behind my palm. Okay. I'm very lucky, my life is great, and this bad mood has gone on long enough. My doomed crush on Hudson Katz can settle down.

Because what's a little heartbreak? I have everything I need right here. Closing my eyes, I draw in a deep breath, and cast my mind back to the meditation class I took last year, where they were super into visualization. Can't hurt to try, right?

I count to three, then imagine myself unbuckling a heavy velvet cloak. Feel the weight drop away from my shoulders, taking all my angst with it.

When my eyes flutter open, I'm a million times lighter. Nailed it. Placing my drink down, I reach for Rusty. "Gimme."

The scruffy brown fur ball is passed along a train of cooing women. He's the real Lothario around here, and I settle back in the armchair, his purr

vibrating against my chest. Tiny claws needle through my shirt, and hey, that's second base with Rusty. Is that a win?

"You," Priya says, fixing me with a stern look, "should tell Hudson Katz you like him."

I snort. "Hardly. He's my favorite client. And Hudson doesn't do *feelings*, everyone in the city knows that. Too sticky," I add, but they don't run with the joke. They're both suddenly serious, watching me.

The speaker hums. Air bubbles cling to the sides of my glass, and the cat rustles in my arms, purring louder.

"Maybe he would for you." Fliss's voice is soft, and I bury my face in Rusty's fur, where it's warm and safe and musty. Our sweet, musty Rusty.

Yes, maybe Hudson would. Or maybe I'd lose the tiny bit of the Midas man I already have.

He's so closed off to the world. So impenetrable. And with the awkward smiles he gives me, with the apology he made this afternoon, I already have more of Hudson Katz than I had any right to hope for. More than anyone else gets, that's for sure.

Gratitude, that's the trick. I can't let myself get greedy.

\* \* \*

"You're very calming, did you know that?" Despite his words, Hudson's thick eyebrows are pinched. Eyes closed, he frowns at the ceiling as I massage his forearm.

So much bare skin. So many muscles. God, he's so *huge*, laid out on the massage table like a surly giant on a slab.

When Hudson shifts, the folded white towel draped over his lap brushes

my hip. I swallow.

“And yet you’re so tense.” Seriously, his forearm is rock-hard, corded with muscle and tendons. It’s heavy when I slide my fingers underneath, slicking oil over the skin. “Are you sure these massages even help?”

As soon as I ask the question, I want to snatch it back—want to stuff it back in my mouth and chew it to pieces. What the hell am I doing? What if Hudson agrees, and I never see him again?

There’s a long pause, where the only sounds are our steady breaths and the hum of the fish tank. Normally, I play spa-themed music from a portable speaker for these appointments, but with Hudson I never do. I like hearing the soft sound of our skin brushing together, because I am a tragic weirdo.

“I’m sure,” he rasps at last.

Whew. My shoulders drop down from my ears.

Here’s another thing I do differently with Hudson Katz compared to my other clients: for most of the appointment, I have him lay on his back. Oh, he’ll turn over eventually so I can dig all the knots from his shoulder blades, but for the first half of our time together, I like being able to see his face.

Eyes closed, jaw ticking. Exposed in some ways, closed off in others.

So dreamy.

Everyone else, I start them face down—and mostly keep them there, unless they have tension in their front. Because they don’t have Hudson Katz’s face, do they? Their closed-eyed scowls don’t make my heart pound.

Meanwhile, with Hudson, I’m plenty flustered. Every time I see this man, clothed or unclothed, my mouth goes dry.

And touching him? Smoothing my way along his chest like this, digging into the hard planes of muscle? Feeling his heartbeat thud against my palm? Forget it.

My thumb brushes his nipple.

Hudson grunts, frowning harder.

“Sorry,” I whisper. Bad Maisie.

I spend the rest of the massage with my lips pressed together, extra careful of where I touch. Like coloring in the lines.

Four

## Hudson



**T**he whole time I've known Maisie, she's been a walking ray of sunshine in a massage therapist's tunic. She never bears a grudge, never lets the world get her down. Even I, in all my surliness and silence, as the most infamous grouch in the city, can't seem to upset her for long—though god knows that's my biggest fear these days.

Four months in, she's got me conditioned like one of Pavlov's dogs. The elevator pings outside my office, announcing her arrival for our appointment, and already I'm calmer, the tension bleeding from my muscles. Already my chest feels looser, my lungs filling with air.

"Hey, Mr Katz." She pokes her head around my office door. Those freckles. Those *eyes*. "Ready to relax?"

Leaning back in my chair, I offer one of my standard awkward smiles. It still feels stiff and unnatural on my face, but it's worth the effort when Maisie lights up in response. "Definitely. Come in."

Lately, I've taken to clearing this whole afternoon. Maisie comes at 3pm, but I like having at least an hour to prepare. To set up the table and towel; to



prowl around my office like a caged tiger; to work myself into an agitated lather and then collapse behind my desk, breathing hard.

And once she's gone, I need time to recover too. The rest of the day is a write-off, because any time spent with Maisie leaves me raw—blundering through the world with my newfound feelings on my sleeve, not fit for public interaction.

So. Friday afternoons are now Maisie time.

The best part of the week.

“I walked past this churro cart on my way here.” Maisie slips inside, locking the door behind her. The *thunk* of that lock always gives me a little thrill, though I know she doesn't mean anything by it. Still, it's a sign of trust. “It smelled amazing—all cinnamon sugar and hot dough. I nearly melted into a puddle of drool right there on the street.”

“Then you should get churros on the way home.”

She laughs, pleased by my answer. I resist the urge to punch the air. Has she always had me wrapped around her little finger, right from day one? It feels that way.

“Maybe you should come with me, Mr Katz. Treat yourself to something sweet.” Maisie's eyes sparkle as she reaches the desk, slipping her tote bag off. “I'm sure you've earned it.”

Christ. I know she doesn't really mean that invitation, but I'm so damn tempted. “Maybe I will.”

Though let's be honest: there's only one sweet treat that I'm craving, and she's walking over to inspect the fish tank. Maisie's black hair is braided down her back today, and every time she moves her head, the end swings between her shoulder blades. Fish dance through the water, their scales sparkling in the light.

“So pretty,” Maisie murmurs.

Yes. She is.

I stand, heart thumping. “Should I...?”

“Go ahead.” A teasing smile over her shoulder. “I won’t peek, I promise.”

Ha. Part of me wishes she would, though I can’t even articulate why. Maybe I don’t want to be the only one driven half out of my mind by these appointments; maybe I want a hint, *any* hint, that I’m more than just a client. And a difficult one, at that.

My fingers move quickly, sliding my shirt buttons free. The fabric rustles as I shrug it off, draping it carefully over the back of my chair.

Cool air hits my bare skin. I’m flushed already, nipples pebbling, and my gut tightens as it always does when I strip for Maisie, peeling my clothes off with her in the room. And I know it’s purely professional, I *know* she thinks nothing of it, but I can’t help the hunger pounding through my veins.

*Look at me.*

Would she ever peek?

When she sees me undressed... does she like what she sees?

The massage table creaks beneath my weight. I drape the towel across my lap, glad for the heaviness of it—the way it hides my sins. “Ready.”

She always takes one final breath before she turns around. Bracing herself? Trying not to seem repulsed?

Or maybe she’s like me: trying desperately to remember that this is her work, that she wouldn’t be here otherwise, that we shouldn’t get any ideas.

A faint blush spreads over her cheeks as she walks over. I close my eyes and frown at the ceiling, pretending I didn’t notice.

\* \* \*

“You have scar tissue here.” Maisie’s voice is soft, twining around me where I lay bared on the table. Her thumbs probe at my shoulder, exploring the knotted flesh. It’s tender, like poking an old bruise, but it’s a good kind of pain. Everything with Maisie is a good kind of pain.

“Tore my rotator cuff in college.”

“Playing sports?”

“Pitching baseball.”

There’s a long pause, like she’s holding her breath. Then Maisie says, her voice higher pitched than before: “Baseball, huh? Did you wear those tight pants, Mr Katz?”

I grin into the darkness, eyes still closed. “For games.” Her delighted laughter warms me down to my bones, and her fingertips scorch trails over my skin. Moving, always moving, goosebumps prickling in their path.

I’m haunted by these hands. For days after each appointment, I feel them ghosting over my body, tickling beneath my clothes.

“I can’t imagine it,” Maisie says. “You in those pants.”

“No? Try harder.”

Are we really flirting right now? I’m not imagining it, am I? Maisie’s appreciative hum makes my heart lurch. No, I’m not imagining it. Fuck. “Okay, I see it now. I’m picturing it. Gosh, Mr Katz.”

Definitely flirting. “Hudson.”

“Hudson, then. Too bad about your shoulder.” Maisie strokes down to my chest, kneading the thick muscle, and I fight to keep my breathing even. That

heavy towel is working overtime, weighing down my rigid shaft. “Bet you looked great playing baseball.”

“Yes, losing the pants was definitely the saddest part.”

She lets out another peal of bright laughter. There’s no better sound in the world.

“You know, this is what I like to see.” Maisie’s fingertip on my forehead makes me jolt, and I stiffen on the table. She presses gently between my eyebrows. “No frown.”

As if by magic, the scowl settles back over my face. Maisie sighs and lifts her finger away, and we lapse into silence. I lie there with her hands on me, brooding and bemused and irritatingly turned on.

What did she mean by that? Does she find me too grumpy usually, the same as everyone else? Maybe she wishes I’d change—that I’d magically become a sunny, happy-go-lucky person. A completely different man.

But why flirt with me then? I am who I am. And Maisie gets by far the softest version of me, because everyone else gets the full ogre.

“Ready to turn over?” Maisie says at last, and she’s all business again. No hint of the woman who teased me minutes ago.

“Yes.” A chance to hide my disappointment—that’s exactly what I need.

\* \* \*

“You never touch me.” Maisie blurts out the words at the end of our appointment, when she’s wiping her oily hands on the towel. Her back is turned, and she stares into the fish tank while I dress. An angel fish floats a few inches from her nose, fins fluttering in the water.

I pause with my shirt half-fastened. “Excuse me?”

...Should I touch Maisie?

*Could* I touch her? Since when?

“Forget that. Sorry.” Maisie’s whole body seems to slump, and she stares down at the floor. The angel fish drifts away between the plants. “Can I turn around?”

What? Oh. “Yes,” I rasp, doing the last few buttons up. Maisie spins around, her gray eyes snagging on the triangle of my bared chest before she looks away.

I could touch her? She’d really want that?

“I didn’t realize I could. Touch you, I mean.” Already, my heart knocks against my ribs, and the fish tank filter buzzes in my ears.

Where to start... cupping her cheek? Stroking her hair? I’ve dreamed about touching this woman so many times, spent so many fevered hours imagining her body pressed against mine. Her lips on my neck; my hands in her hair.

Where to begin?

“Yeah, you know. Like a handshake,” Maisie says, staring past me at the wall. It’s her turn to wear a scowl, and it looks as normal on her as a smile does on me. “Or a shoulder pat. Normal stuff.”

My gut sinks.

Right. Obviously.

“I didn’t mean to be rude.” Crossing the room to her side, I revise my statement. “Not to you, anyway. To be honest, I don’t really care about offending anyone else.”

“I know.” Her laugh is strained. “You’re *the* Hudson Katz,” she says, as if I might have forgotten my role as the most obnoxious man in the city.

It’s strange standing beside her in this halfway state: pants and shirt on,

feet bare. Usually, Maisie sees me all one way or the other. Why does this feel more vulnerable?

When I pat her shoulder, Maisie startles. Her chin jerks up, and she stares at me, wide-eyed. “Thank you for today,” I offer. What else do normal people say to each other? “Good work.”

Maisie splutters, but she doesn’t move away. “Oh my god,” she says at last. “You’re like a robot learning to emote. That was wild.”

*Emote* hardly seems to cover it. More like: I’m a robot whose cold electric circuits keep getting fried with my feelings for this woman. Burned to ash.

I nudge her arm. “How did I do?”

First a pat, now a nudge. If I’m truly allowed to touch her, even if only in these small, innocent ways, then she’d better buckle up. Maisie has opened the floodgates, because two touches will never be enough. Neither will two thousand.

“G-good.” She smooths her hair, frazzled. Hands me the towel in a daze. “So... same time next week?”

When I can touch her again. Pat her shoulder, and maybe shake her hand. Game-changing.

“Yes. Same time next week.”

If I survive without her that long.

Five

## Maisie



**A**n emergency appointment with Hudson Katz. Jeez. I hurry across the Midas Inc lobby, chewing on my bottom lip. Suited employees bustle all around, barking into phones and rustling papers, and I prod the elevator button, willing it to come fast.

What happened? Is Hudson okay? His assistant Carlton wouldn't give me any details, but our last appointment was only a few days ago. Maybe that shoulder injury flared up? Or maybe all this awful stress has finally gotten to him—felled him like a big, angry tree. God, I'd hate that.

“Come on, come on.” I jab the elevator button again, impatient. My shoulders are tense, and I shift my weight from foot to foot. Long gone is my usual serenity. Normally I'm the island of calm in this lobby, but right now, I'm ready to tear out my hair.

When I got the call an hour ago, I canceled another appointment to be here. That's a cardinal sin for a massage therapist, but there was no way on this earth that I'd hear the words 'Hudson Katz' and 'emergency' in the same sentence and not come running. Oh god, what's wrong?

The elevator pings, and the doors slide open. It's already crammed with bodies, but I elbow my way on, ignoring the huffs and loud mutters. My forehead is sweaty, and I swipe it with my arm.

At floor nineteen, I realize: I forgot my massage therapist uniform. The sky blue tunic. My harried reflection in the elevator mirror, with pale cheeks and wild hair—she's in a daisy-patterned sundress. At least I remembered my tote! So unprofessional. Gah.

And it's a good thing Hudson keeps a massage table for me here, because no way would I have heaved that thing all the way on the subway, not while panicking and desperate to see him.

I hop from foot to foot, nerves fizzing. Could this freaking elevator go any slower? If it takes any longer, I'll be a skeleton in a sundress when we reach the top floor, slumped on the ground and covered in cobwebs.

*Ping.*

I hurtle out of the elevator onto the penthouse floor, banging my elbow against the nearest wall. Hudson's assistant stares at me from behind his desk, then calls my name as I tear past, but I don't slow down. *Can't* slow down, not until I've seen him.

I burst into Hudson's office, sweaty and red-faced and breathing hard. Hudson is on the phone. He lifts a finger to me, in the universal signal for: *be with you shortly*. Dark eyes rove over my sundress, and his deep voice rumbles on about quarterly figures.

Is he...?

Propping my hands on my hips, I suck in a strangled breath. The office spins around me, and okay, I definitely need to do more cardio, but I focus on what matters: the healthy glow to Hudson's cheeks, his firm jaw and steady



voice. His strong posture behind the desk, and the sheer vitality coming off him in waves.

He's fine! This asshole is totally fine!

Choking back a growl, I stomp to the massage table in the center of the room. The fish dart back and forth in their tank, as frazzled as my mood. My tote bag thumps against the table.

"Apologies," Hudson says, putting down the phone. I turn to face him with a glare. "Usually, I clear the whole afternoon for our appointments, but since this was so last minute—"

"An emergency," I interrupt, and wow, I don't sound like myself at all. My voice is clipped and taut, throbbing with anger. "Not 'last minute'. An emergency, your assistant said. *Where* is the emergency, Hudson?"

His mouth flattens. He sits up ramrod straight, and those dark eyes bore into me, crackling with challenge. Even though he's sitting down on the other side of the room, somehow it feels like he's looming over me. "I told Carlton it was urgent. Not an emergency."

Is he serious? I throw up my hands and lose all volume control, my voice bouncing around the penthouse office. "Hudson! How are those things any different? I thought you were hurt! I thought something serious had happened. I ran all the way here, and I freaking hate running!"

His mouth twitches; his scowl softens. How dare Hudson Katz discover his sense of humor *now*, when I've lost mine?

"You were worried about me," the Midas man says, and he sounds so pleased. His desk chair rattles over the floorboards, then he stands, shoulders suddenly taking up half the room. He's in a deep blue suit today, so dark it's nearly black, with a white shirt unbuttoned at the collar.

No tie. That's new.

No! I will not gather details of this man, like a squirrel with a crush. I'm freaking *mad* at him. Ugh.

"I like the dress," Hudson says, rounding his desk. "Though of course I like your tunic too."

My teeth grind together, and my pulse races as he gets near. "What was so urgent, Mr Katz?"

The city's most famous grump stops right in front of me. His smile drains away, and he's suddenly solemn.

"I wanted to see you," he says quietly. "No emergency, I suppose, but it felt fairly urgent."

*Thump. Thump. Thump.* My heart slams against my ribs, and it's not from my sweaty run across the city, tote bag jostling my shoulder. Not from anger anymore. No, this is something else.

My dress is stuck to my back. My mouth is so dry. Wordlessly, I turn and dig in my bag for my water bottle, then crack the lid and swig.

Behind me, Hudson sighs. His suit rustles, and warmth tickles my shoulder. Out of the corner of my eye, I see his hand hovering above my skin, waiting for permission.

My chin jerks in a nod, throat still working as I drink, and Hudson's hand settles on my shoulder.

"I'm sorry," he says, and I can tell he means it this time. The pad of his thumb digs into my tense muscle, and I'm super glad he can't see my face, because my eyes practically cross.

Oooh god. When was the last time *I* got a back rub? As in, not from my own hands? Can't even remember it. But here we are, with Hudson kneading both of my stiff shoulders now, his warmth against my back and his deep

voice like velvet in my ear. “Forgive me, Maisie. I didn’t think. I should have thought this through. But I’ll make it up to you, I promise.”

Well...

Okay yeah, he messed up. But if Hudson Katz was truly desperate to see me, if he wanted me here so badly he couldn’t wait a few more days...

It’s relatable. And so sweet it makes me giddy.

I breathe out, my chest loosening.

“Just text me next time. *You*, not Carlton.”

Hudson makes a low noise, his big hands so firm against my shoulders. I’ve never resented the straps of my sundress before, but here they are cutting off two strips of skin-on-skin contact with my crush. Stupid straps.

“And... you don’t need to make an appointment. Just say you want to hang out.”

Hudson exhales. “Hang out?”

Honestly. He really is like a robot learning our human ways. I smile at the fish tank, swaying beneath his grip, and it’s so sweet and sad and lovely. All the anger drains out of me in a rush, and my heart feels so full, because yes, this miscommunication was annoying—but what is there to *really* be mad about?

This grump wanted to see me. Urgently.

And I know the feeling. I know it well.

“Yeah. Hang out.” Wetting my lips, I watch a tiny crab scuttle beneath a stone in the tank. “You know, like getting coffee together. Or drinks. Or going for a walk by the river. Or catching a movie, or cooking dinner together, or...”

Dates. I’m describing dates.

Because sure, you could do those things with friends, but when I picture

them with Hudson, I picture kissing. Lots of kissing.

But does the Midas man kiss? Does he feel those kinds of feelings? Hudson's a celebrity, he features on Hottest Bachelor lists and gets hounded for gossip mags, but he's never been seen with a date. Believe me, I've checked.

And sure, his hands are moving greedily over my bare shoulders right now, but he's not roaming further south. Not trying to slip beneath the fabric of my dress, or press his body against my back.

Am I alone in this? We have a connection, sure. That's undeniable. But does he want me the same way I want him?

Slowly, I screw the water bottle cap back on and place it next to my tote bag.

Okay. Okay. Time to be brave.

I suck in a deep breath, then say, "You're good at that." He is, too. My shoulders feel looser already, less achy. Other parts of me are throbbing like hell, but that's a separate problem. "So... here's an idea. A way for you to make things up to me. Only if you want to, obviously, and really I'm already over it, so if you don't like this idea you definitely shouldn't agree—"

"You're babbling."

I roll my eyes. Awesome.

Hudson squeezes my shoulders. "Tell me your idea."

Here goes. "Role reversal," I whisper, then squeak as he leans in closer. His spicy clean-man scent fills my nose.

"Say it again," he commands. "At a normal volume."

"Role reversal," I say, louder this time. My cheeks are blazing hot. "I'm definitely the more stressed party right now, Hudson Katz. And you're nailing this back rub. So if you're up for it..." I trail off, horrified at myself.

Wait. What am I suggesting? What am I thinking? This is the kind of request you make of your boyfriend, not a client. I don't go to my dentist, then clean *his* teeth. How did I ever think this might be okay?

It's that girls' night, putting ideas in my head. Those mojito-fueled confessions, and the way Priya and Fliss encouraged me. They spurred me on, made me think I could actually date this man. They legitimized my crush, and now I've stepped way out of line.

"Yes," Hudson says. The floor drops out beneath me. His hands lift away, and when I peek back over my shoulder, he's turned around to let me get undressed.

Get. Undressed.

So that my client can massage *me*. Aah!

"This is nuts," I say, and I wholly mean it, but I'm also sliding the dress straps off my shoulders. The girls will lose their minds when I tell them how reckless I've been. Alarm bells blare in my head, but like a lovesick idiot, I keep going.

Because I need to know—need to see if Hudson wants me the same way. Need to see if he'll take this golden opportunity to kiss me.

"I won't hurt you," Hudson says, as if that's what I'm worried about. "I know to avoid the spine. And I'll be gentle."

"Not too gentle, I hope."

The Midas man splutters out a cough, and I'm savagely glad, my dress whooshing past my thighs to puddle around my feet. The cool air sends goosebumps prickling over my skin.

Yes, I'm setting my whole career on fire right now, but I don't care, okay? I don't care.

I need answers. And his hands on my body.

Else I'll go mad.

Six

## Hudson



If it weren't for the feedback from all my senses, I'd think this was a dream. After all, I've pictured a moment like this plenty of times over the last four months.

Maisie's bare body is stretched out on her front on the massage table, her hands pillowed beneath her head. All that creamy skin and those freckles are on full display. There's a mole near her hip, and dimples at the base of her spine, and I swallow at the delicate shift of her shoulder blades as she fidgets to get comfortable. Her dark hair is thrown in a messy bun.

Yeah. My money would definitely be on *dream*. Except the fish tank filter has never hummed in the background in my dreams; the room has never been this cool; Carlton's muffled voice has never floated through the wall as he talks on the phone.

"One moment," I say. My steps echo across the office, and Carlton's voice gets louder as I near the door. I spin the lock, throat tight, and glance back at Maisie. "Is this alright?"

We can leave it unlocked if she prefers, but if Carlton bursts in here and sees Maisie undressed, I'll have to burn his whole life down and chase him

out of the city. And I hate hiring new assistants, so that's not ideal.

She nods, her cheek squished against her hand. "It's alright."

So much trust in one day. It presses on my chest—makes it harder to breathe.

I *cannot* screw this up. I'll go mad.

But already, the sight of Maisie's sundress puddled on the floor by the table makes me want to bellow and sprint around the block. My hands ball into fists.

Need to touch her.

Stroke her.

Need to bury my face against her shoulder blades, and feel each tiny shift as she draws breath. Need to drag Maisie's most intimate scents into my lungs, and sink my teeth into the swell of her ass, currently hidden beneath that white towel.

"The oil is in my bag."

Right: a massage. I'm giving her a massage. This is not an access-all-areas pass, and maybe that's the real punishment. The real way I'm to atone for my sins.

Taunting me with what I'll never have. Harsh but fair.

Her belongings rattle together as I search through the bag. A hairbrush, a compact mirror, a notepad, a pen. A tin of breath mints and a tube of lipstick that I've never seen Maisie wear. It's so *red*. How would her lips look, stained this shade of crimson and wrapped around my cock?

Christ. Not helping.

My heart thumps faster as I hold up the oil at last, cracking open the lid. It pools in my palm, and I place the bottle down then rub my hands together, warming the oil like Maisie always does. It smells like orange blossoms.



Maisie bites her lip as I move closer. Her gray eyes track my movements, widening as they stare up at me.

I pause, both palms hovering over her bare back. “Ready? It’s not too late to change your mind.” Though if she says no, I’ll die.

Maisie’s eyes flutter closed. “No,” she says. “I’m ready.”

And...

Her heat tickles my palms before I reach her skin. Her back rises and falls as she breathes faster, squirming on the massage table. That white towel rustles as she shifts, and my throat is too tight to speak, and when my hands finally make contact—

I choke back a groan.

So warm. So soft. Maisie is so *alive*, her heartbeat thumping against my roving fingers, her body never one hundred percent still. An escaped strand of dark hair tickles my wrist, and I shake my head silently, stroking both hands along her shoulders.

There are two pink lines where her sundress straps dug in. I knead them with my thumbs, wishing I could smooth them away.

All her aches and pains; all her stresses and cares. I’d dedicate my life to fixing them, if she’d only let me. So much for the grumpy, evil Midas man.

Instead, I have this: an unknown amount of time with my hands on her body. Perhaps two minutes, perhaps an hour. Depends when Maisie gets tired of torturing me, I suppose. Punishing me for my ‘emergency’ appointment.

Maisie shifts and chews her lip. “You can press a little harder,” she whispers.

Gritting my teeth, I do as she says, keeping my hips a careful inch away from the table. No need for Maisie to know that her words leave me harder

than granite. She's set the terms—a massage, nothing more—and I'll abide by them, even if it kills me.

After months of watching this woman out of the corner of my eye, I thought I knew all her quirks and features. I already spotted the scar on the back of her left elbow; already memorized the soft, curling hairs at the back of her neck. But now, with my hands coasting over her body, finally free to look my fill, it's clear my explorations have barely begun.

Is she ticklish anywhere?

Are there freckles on her ass?

How would she fit, tucked against the side of my body? Stretched out together in my bed on a lazy Sunday morning, reading the paper together. Doing the crossword.

Maisie hums, and my gut twists in response. Back to reality. "Feels really good," she mumbles, eyes still closed. I stroke down to her lower back, rubbing small circles with my thumbs—and when Maisie bites her lip, I get the feeling that she's waiting for something. Hoping for something. Testing me somehow, but why? What does she want? What am I missing, damn it?

"Should I do your front?" I ask, and Christ, the second the question is out, I want to charge across the office and slam my head against the fish tank. There's only one towel, and Maisie's not wearing a bra. It's a ridiculous offer.

But: "Sure," Maisie murmurs, and I turn to stone as she rolls over, the pink beads of her nipples coming into view. Her bun squishes to one side beneath her head, and her breasts are small and perfect—less than a handful. Just how I've shamelessly, hopelessly pictured them all these months.

"Ngh," I say.

Maisie's mouth twitches, but she keeps her eyes closed. "Keep going, Mr

Katz.”

Fuck. Keep going? Touch her—touch her like *this*, her nipples peaked, a flush creeping up her neck? With her breath coming faster and that white towel slipping down her hips?

This. Is. Torture.

“I don’t know the rules,” I manage to say, kneading her shoulders again with shaky fingers. Her shoulders, where it is safe. PG land. “Where can I...?”

Maisie shrugs, and the movement slips my thumbs into the dips beneath her collarbone. Her pulse thrums against my touch. “Wherever you like.”

Hm. Is there a hidden camera in this room? A TV crew about to jump out and yell “GOTCHA!”? Is this some kind of twisted joke?

“Wherever I like,” I repeat, testing out the words. Nope. Definitely a trap. “And if I do something you don’t want...”

“Then I’ll tell you.” Maisie’s smile is so sweet, even with her eyes closed. There’s no frown in her forehead. She’s peaceful while I loom over her, losing my mind.

Well, then.

There are a million things I want to do to her right now, but I settle for letting my hands drift lower, leaving the safe harbor of her shoulders. Her breasts are soft compared to her muscles and bones, and I cup them guiltily, feeling like a criminal. Ready for her to scream and launch off the table, slapping me across the face. Ready for the punchline.

But Maisie hums, smiling wider. She shifts, arching her back, and presses more firmly into my hands.

Jesus. She’s not... she’s not messing with me?

“You really like this?” My thumbs rub her nipples, and my mouth is so

dry. Want to suck on them. Want to *bite*.

“From you,” Maisie says, still squirming, and that flush has reached her cheeks. “I really like this from you, Hudson Katz.”

Fuck. My face is locked in my usual scowl, and my pulse throbs in my ears as I cup and knead her breasts. Too good to be true.

The floor creaks as I move along the massage table. The white towel rustles in my grip, and I lift it an inch, pausing there.

“Go on,” Maisie says. The fabric drags slowly to one side, dropping to the floor with a soft thump.

Her thighs part.

*Christ.*

And there’s still so much more I want to do, so many places I want to touch and tease and taste, but Maisie draws her legs wider, showing me the center of the goddamn universe, and it’s slick and pink and swollen for me already, her hips lifting as she lets out a sigh.

“I’ve got you.” I press on her hip, weighing her back down. Nudge her thighs even wider with the other hand. “Do you want to feel good, sweetheart? Is that what this is about?”

Maisie’s breath catches as she nods. Small fingers have found my belt loop, hooking through the fabric, keeping me anchored as though I might run.

Hardly.

The angle is awkward, my neck already twinging as I lean over the side of the massage table, Maisie’s knee pressing against my stomach. But all that fades away when I breathe in a lungful of her salty musk; when I feel her warmth down here, the hint of moisture in the air. My temples throb.

Somewhere over my head, somewhere on another planet, fish float between the green tendrils of water plants, their scales sparkling. Carlton

drones into a distant phone, his voice muffled.

That isn't real. *This* is.

Maisie's moan is agonized when I lick her, but she lifts her hips again, demanding more. Her free hand grips the table above her head, and her posture is so sensual, so obscene, her nipples pointing at the ceiling. This is a whole new angle to view her from—her dips and swells, her secret topography—and my eyes are dry from refusing to blink.

Don't want to miss a single second of this.

*Hot. Wet.* I work her with my tongue. Lick and suck and nibble, roaming over every inch, tasting inside her and torturing her clit. When I press one finger inside her then two, pumping in and out, knuckles shiny, I marvel at the fierce way she grips me.

Yeah, she's *seriously* tight. A belated suspicion tickles my brain.

"Have you ever done this before, Maisie?"

"N-no."

My heart beats hard enough to crack a rib. "Me neither."

Why would I have? No one else interests me the way Maisie does. No one else brings out my softer side, and no one else would dare challenge me to this game of chicken. We live in a world of time-wasting idiots, we're surrounded on all sides, and Maisie is the only person I have ever wanted to spend time with.

*Spend time with.* Such a weak phrase for the things I feel for this woman. Spend time with her? I want the rest of her goddamn life. Want to see her walk toward me in a wedding dress, and want to watch her gorgeous body swell with my baby. Make that babies, plural.

Yeah, sure. We can *spend time*.

But this will have to be enough. She hasn't asked for any of that—only

my mouth and hands on her body. Her sighs fills my ears.

And if Maisie wants pleasure... I'll give her pleasure. Bowing my head, I snarl into her slit, bitterness warring with my primal satisfaction at her salty-sweet taste. I want so much more from her, and it's already too much to bear.

Don't know how much time passes—could be minutes, could be hours. Don't care. I'll die down here. I'll die happy.

Maybe that would be preferable. Better to go out on a high than to resurface and go back to *normal*. Back to my cold, empty life; my strange envy for those fish with their peaceful existence. Hours and weeks and months of yearning for Maisie.

Will she still massage me after this?

What if she balks—finds it all too weird? What if I'm ruining everything right now?

Too late. My fingers are shiny with the evidence of how *too late* it is. Her taste is on my lips and tongue; her rasping breaths echo around my brain. At some point, Maisie plunged one hand into my hair, and now she's tugging, twisting, a sweet pain prickling over my scalp.

“Oh! Hudson—”

I growl and clamp my lips around her clit, sucking hard. My fingers crook inside her, her inner muscles squeezing tight, and it's like I've pressed a secret button, because—

Maisie detonates.

She shakes and trembles. Gasps and moans. Yanks my hair hard enough that moisture stings in my eyes. Her whole body is caught up in the storm, pleasure wracking her in waves, and I suck her through all of it, jaw aching.

Beside the table, I'm so hard it hurts. When I press my hips against the padded edge, it gives no relief—only makes my gut twist tighter.

“Oh,” Maisie says at last, so hoarse it’s like she’s been screaming at a rock concert. “Oh, god.” She collapses in a sweaty heap, nudging my head away. “Oh, god, stop. Please stop. You’re going to kill me.”

In a good way? My back aches like hell as I straighten up, fiery pain crackling across the muscles, and the irony is not lost on me. This is the first massage appointment where I’ll go home in worse shape than when we started.

Worth it.

I wipe my mouth on my forearm. Maisie watches the movement, her eyes heavy-lidded. She’s still breathing hard, still clinging to my belt loop with one hand, and her chest is one big blush.

“Was that alright?” I demand.

Maisie’s laugh is strangled. “Better than alright.”

...Okay. That’s good.

Shoulders dropping, I scrub one hand over my face. Every breath I draw is laced with her scent. Her taste is seared on my tongue. Was this a one-off thing? Should have asked before we started, because if I never get to do that again, I’ll be ruined for life.

“Can’t wait ‘til Friday,” Maisie jokes weakly, sitting up with a groan. She rolls her neck, like she’s aching too. “I’m gonna need our appointment more than you.”

Guess that answers my question. Whatever this is, it can happen again.

By appointment only.

## Seven

# Maisie



“Hudson Katz *again?*” Fliss gapes at me from our sofa, where she sits with both legs draped over her boss-turned-boyfriend, Sebastian. They’ve paused their movie while I bustle around the living room, snatching up my keys and phone and wallet and every other trinket I own, blindly stuffing it all in my tote bag. I’m in my blue massage therapist’s tunic, and it’s getting dark outside.

“*The Hudson Katz?*” Sebastian says.

Fluss nods, staring at me over Rusty’s moth-eaten head. Her cat is snuggled against her chest, shooting smug looks at his human rival. “Isn’t it a bit late? Since when do you do evening appointments?”

Since Hudson and I started hooking up in his office every chance we got. Since his appointments suddenly became daily instead of weekly. Since every hour I spend away from that man makes the ache inside me grow worse.

Sometimes Hudson massages me, then ends the session with his head between my legs, our bodies lit only by the glow of the fish tank. Sometimes I massage *him*, then peel the towel away and suck on his thick shaft like it’s



the world's most delicious lollipop. Not the happy ending I was hoping for with Hudson Katz, but one I'm addicted to nonetheless.

Pathetic? Hell yes. A blow to my bruised heart? Every time.

But I don't care. When it comes to the Midas man, I'll take whatever I can get.

"He tore his rotator cuff in college," I say, as though that explains the sudden barrage of appointments.

Sebastian's eyebrow raises. "Ah, yes. It's time sensitive, then."

Fliss snorts, and I give them both the stink eye as I shove an umbrella in my bag. Out of everyone in this room, only Rusty gets me. My jacket sleeve is inside out, and I huff as I wrestle it on, trying to punch my way through.

"Maisie," Fliss says, more gently this time. I brace myself and pause, breathing hard. "Is he still... paying you? For this?"

Shame swarms my insides.

Oh god, she knows. She knows what I'm doing. Is it that obvious? Does Priya know too?

"I'm not judging!" Fliss says quickly, petting Rusty in nervous strokes until he meows and lashes his tail. "You know I'll support you no matter what, and Priya will too. But I thought you really liked him. Are you sure this is what you want?"

Is it? I bite my lip, jacket half on.

No. Not even close.

Hudson's breath against my belly button, his teeth scraping my nipple, his muscles quaking under my palms—yes. I want that.

But the scheduling? The payment for something I desperately want to do for free? The cold, hollow feeling I get walking home afterward? The non-

stop *longing*, blistering my chest from the inside, demanding that I stay with Hudson for more than an hour at a time, and that he kiss my lips for once?

No. This hurts so much.

My chin wobbles. Fliss lunges off the sofa, dumping Rusty on Sebastian's lap, ignoring both sets of protests.

Her arms wrap around me, and I hug her back, clinging and tragic.

"It's my fault," I wail, the words muffled by her pink-streaked hair. "I started us on this path, and maybe if I hadn't, he'd have asked me out for real. But why would he ever want to date me now? He's getting everything with no strings attached, and there's no way Hudson would ever want the messier version. He hates feelings."

"Have you asked him?" Sebastian says quietly. His deep voice cuts through the room.

Huh. Kind of forgot my roommate's boyfriend was even there. "No," I say, still hugging Fliss. Her yellow pinstripe pajamas crinkle in my grip, and I'm ruining their movie night, but whatever. There is a limit to how much guilt I can feel in one go, and I'm maxed out.

"You should ask him," Sebastian says, like it's truly that simple. "Some men want the mess. They would rather have something real."

And I scoff, but when Fliss and I pull apart, she smiles at her boyfriend, all misty-eyed. "Sebastian tried to pay me for our first weekend together," she says, glancing back at me. "Remember? He tried to give me overtime, and I had to tell him no. They're idiots, Maisie."

And her boss rolls his eyes, but he's so fond when he looks at her. The love beams out of his eyes, focused into lasers by those nerdy glasses.

Then Rusty steps on his crotch, and he winces. Moment over.

"I should ask him," I say, rehearsing the thought out loud.

“Yes!” Fliss pumps the air. “You should totally just *ask* him. Tonight! Then video chat us and tell us how it goes.”

“Fully clothed,” Sebastian adds quickly.

Fliss sticks out her tongue. “Prude.”

I leave them there, bathed in the glow of their happiness, and step out into the cool night. My tote bag weighs down my shoulder, crammed full of god only knows what, but as I walk down the street... for the first time in weeks, my steps are light.

\* \* \*

*Ask him.*

*Just ask him.*

*Ask Hudson how he feels.*

The instructions play on a loop in my brain, keeping time with my steps. I march to their beat along the subway platform, and they repeat over and over as I sway in place on the train.

I should ask him. I *will* ask him. How hard could it be? And what exactly am I risking? My favorite client, yes. My daily hook up and my pride. Sure.

And my heart.

Ugh.

The train rattles through the stone warren beneath the city, and I cling, grim-faced, to my pole, searching for the right words to say. The magic words that will lead to my *real* happy ending.

But as I step off the train, I’ve got nothing. Just an aching shoulder from carrying my bag, and the early rumblings of a headache.

It’s getting late, stars prickling through the night sky overhead, but the

financial district still clamors with life. Half the office windows are lit up in their skyscrapers—money never sleeps, I guess—and the streets bustle with tourists and sellers.

One rickety table groans under the weight of key chains, dusty shot glasses, and baseball caps. The next has two chairs and a board covered in sharpie sketches, with a slumped caricaturist buried in her jacket, napping as people stream past.

Cars rumble in the road. Lights turn red, then green, then back.

I hover outside the Midas Inc skyscraper, my belly squirming with nerves.

What if he says no? What if this is all Hudson ever wants from me?

And what if he gets bored of even *this* soon? Crap. My chest splinters at the mere thought. Okay, gotta keep moving.

It's cool in the Midas Inc lobby. The lights are bright, the floor shiny, and even though the working day ended hours ago, I have plenty of company in the elevator. Hudson's employees stream in and out, the elevator stuttering through the floors, all talking on their phones or tapping out an email, moving with certainty and purpose.

Maybe I should throw myself into my career, like these folks. Get super intense about massage. Kind of defeats the point, but if Hudson doesn't want me... maybe that's how I'll cope.

*Ping.*

For once, I'm reluctant to step onto the top floor. The doors swoosh closed behind me, the elevator already humming down to pick up someone new, and part of me wants to pound on the metal doors and beg for it to come back and pick me up. I force myself forward instead.

Carlton's desk stands empty—a neat, silent sentinel. My fingertips brush

the wood as I walk past. *Wish me luck.*

Hudson's office door is open. He stands by the window, arms folded, gazing out at the lit-up city skyline.

"Hey," I say softly, leaning in the doorway.

He turns and smiles, arms dropping to his sides. I swear, every time this man smiles at me, the expression looks a little more comfortable on his face. More at home. More natural. "Maisie. Hello."

The massage table is already set up, complete with the folded white towel, even though that kind of shyness is a distant memory. We've seen every inch of each other. We've felt each other come.

But we'll go through this whole dance anyway. We'll pretend this is a normal appointment—nothing to see here, folks. No broken rules, and no sticky feelings.

"Ready?" Hudson asks, strolling toward the table. His fingers are deft, flicking his shirt buttons open one by one, the triangle of his bared golden chest getting wider. The valleys of his muscles are shadowed.

His turn tonight. My mouth waters just thinking about it—my hands on his body, the heavy weight of him on my tongue, his clean, masculine scent in my lungs—but as I join him by the table, I hold up a palm. "Wait. Wait a second. I need to ask you something first."

Hudson leans against the table and waits, so calm. Dark eyes rove over my body, my face, the pinch between my eyebrows.

"Do you..."

The fish tank hums by the wall, the glow tinting the room blue. Shapes drift between the plants, pale as tiny ghosts under their night light.

I clear my throat and try again. "Hudson, do you... have you ever..."

The words die on my tongue, and Hudson raises an eyebrow. Heat crawls

up my neck. This is a famously impatient man, and I'm wasting his time.

Ugh. Screw this. "Is your shoulder better?" I blurt.

Hudson frowns. "It's fine." He waits, but when it becomes clear that I'm done chewing on my own tongue, he starts flicking his shirt buttons open again, his movements slow.

He stops halfway down his abs. His beautiful, beautiful abs. "Would you rather have a turn tonight? Or would you rather reschedule? You don't seem..."

What don't I seem?

Happy? Mellow? *Sane*?

Hahahahaha.

"I'm fine," I say, echoing his words. The heel of my hand digs into my eye. "Just tired. But let's do this," I add when Hudson's frown deepens. "Let's do this. I want to."

Every day for the rest of my life, I want to do this. That's the whole freaking problem, but Hudson still moves extra slowly to undo his final buttons, watching me the whole time. "Alright."

The fabric slips from his shoulders, and all that sculpted perfection comes into view, tinted by the blue light from the tank.

I can't help myself. My body moves with a mind of its own, stepping between the Midas man's thighs where he leans against the table. My palms spread over his strong chest, and I press a kiss right over his heart.

Hudson grunts like I punched him in the stomach.

"S-sorry." Way too late, I stumble back, cheeks on fire. Because we don't do that—we don't casually touch and kiss. We're not lovers, we're whatever *this* is. A calendar-scheduled tryst.

But Hudson catches my wrist and tugs me back in close, back to where

his heat and scent make me reckless. He cups the back of my neck, so gentle my stomach hurts.

“Do that again,” Hudson says.

I take a shuddering breath, then press a second kiss over his heart.

And Hudson groans like I’ve done something pornographic, not given him a chaste peck on the chest. His grip tightens, and the massage table creaks as he shifts his weight.

“Again.”

I kiss the hollow of his throat this time, then work my way left along his collarbone, all the way to his shoulder, then do the same on the other side. And Hudson keeps still, his body thrumming with tension. The hand on my neck slides into my hair.

“Again.”

Back to the hollow of his throat. My tongue flicks out, tasting the salt on his skin, then I kiss my way up Hudson Katz’s neck.

“Maisie,” he breathes. I rock onto my tiptoes, but I can’t quite reach his mouth. “Maisie,” he says again.

So I grip his shoulders and climb onto the table, knees on either side of Hudson’s hips. It creaks angrily under the lopsided strain, metal scraping, but I don’t care.

Not when two big hands find my ass, boosting me higher. Holding me close. Not when my arms are around his neck, and his breath is on my cheek, and somehow even though we’ve *tasted* each other, we’ve never been close like this before.

“What were you going to ask me?” Hudson demands, challenge sparking in his dark eyes. “Tell me the truth this time, you little coward.”

Um, excuse me? I twist his nipple, and Hudson chokes out a curse. He

swats my ass, the heat prickling under my clothes.

“Why should I be the vulnerable one?” I glare from inches away, so intoxicated at being in his arms—and so freaking irritated. “I did that last time, you big jerk. When are you gonna take one for the team?”

Hudson straightens, affronted. “I didn’t think you’d want that. Didn’t want to scare you off. If I’d known—”

“You *can’t* know, dummy. That’s why it’s so vulnerable. That’s why it sucks.”

Hudson frowns at me. A muscle ticks in his jaw. I wait, my stomach tangled in one giant knot.

Am I asking too much? Risking it all? With an ordinary man, maybe a demand like that could work: a man like Fliss has, like Sebastian, with his nerdy glasses and his pajama pants and the way he cooks her pancakes with bacon and syrup on Sunday mornings.

I know Fliss would probably not describe the love of her life as ‘ordinary’. But no one ever fled in tears from Sebastian, you know? He’s stern and serious sometimes, but he’s so *reasonable*.

Hudson Katz is not reasonable. Hudson Katz is a thundercloud in a tailored suit, and his underlings scurry from him in the halls, whispering about weather warnings. Hudson Katz is the stuff of legend.

“Maisie...” He says my name so begrudgingly. Like he’s being held at gunpoint, and god, who dreams of a confession like this? No one, that’s who.

I tap his shoulder, all my earlier hopes going sour. “Okay, put me down.”

“What?” Strong arms grip me tighter, and Hudson scowls from three inches away. “No, not yet. I’m not done.”

“Hudson.”

“*Maisie*. Let me think, will you?” He jostles me against his chest, like he



wants to oh-so-gently shake some sense into me. “You just set the highest stakes of my whole fucking life, and I need a minute. I need to get this right.”

My lips press together, and my bruised heart lifts. The highest stakes? The highest in his whole life?

Maybe that’s enough. Maybe that says it all. Maybe we’re both clueless but desperately, hopelessly stuck on each other.

I kiss the tip of his nose. “I love you.”

Hudson’s glare is thunderous, even as his heart beats faster against my front, so strong I feel it even through my tunic. “I was going to say it first, Maisie.”

Aah!

I shrug, fighting a grin. “Too slow.”

And his snarl, his heat, the teeth on my throat, the rough hand in my hair... it’s perfect. The best confession I could have wished for.

“I love you,” Hudson grits out, like he’s mad about it, but I know better. He’s mad that I said it first. That I threw down the gauntlet, then changed my mind and picked it up myself. It pains him. “I love you so fucking much. You’re *mine*, Maisie, and I’m going to keep you forever. Do you understand?”

“Uh-huh.” Can’t stop grinning as he turns us around and sets me on the massage table, shoving the towel onto the floor. My tunic rucks up around my hips, already creased from climbing all over my client, and—

No. Not my client.

My boyfriend? Lover?

The demon in a suit that bargained for my soul?

Don’t care. It’s all details, because Hudson is right. I’m his, and he’s mine, and I remind him of that fact with ten red lines scored down his chest

with my fingernails, the sides of his shirt brushing my wrists. He hisses, yanking my leggings and underwear down my hips, stripping me from the waist down and tossing it all into a shadowed corner.

“I love you,” he says again, and he’s still pissed, jaw flexing. He shoves my thighs apart, crowding close—and *damn*, I love being manhandled by Hudson Katz. I’m giddy, a rapid pulse thudding between my thighs, already slick with how much I want him. “You don’t know what you’ve started, Maisie. You don’t know what you’ve unleashed. You think I love you in that petty, pedestrian way that every other asshole in this city feels?” His belt clinks. Hudson notches at my entrance, and his dark eyes glitter down at me. “You’re wrong.”

A stinging sensation. *Pressure*. My body trembles.

“Let me in,” Hudson commands. He bends down and sucks a bruise on my throat, and I cling to his open shirt. “Maisie, let me in. Feel what you’ve done.”

My voice is shaky in the darkened office. “It’s not that simple. You’re really *big*, okay, and I’ve never done this before. It’s not an ‘open sesame’ deal.”

And all I meant was that I needed to go slow, to take a moment to adjust, but Hudson crashes to his knees and buries his face against my slit. With both hands squeezing my thighs, it’s savage the way he licks me, sucks me, nips with his teeth. I wheeze for breath, clinging to his thick, dark hair.

“Oh my god.” I yank on the strands, but he ignores me, even when my hips jerk and I choke out a wail. “Hudson! Oh my *god*.”

You know, we’ve done this before. Plenty of times by now, because there seems to be some secret ingredient between my legs that the Midas man is

always hungry for. But it's never felt like *this*, like being eaten alive, and when I come, it's in record time.

I barely recognize the sound of my own voice. I'm *ragged*. "Oh. Oh, shit."

Then Hudson looms above me once more, scowling as he lines up again. "That was no hardship," he says, and yeah, I felt his enthusiasm in every lash of his tongue, in the vibration of every growl, "but now you will let me in. I need in, Maisie."

My shaking legs move wider. I'm desperate for this too.

Hudson grunts in approval, then presses forward again.

Eight

## Hudson



Can this be real? Could I get this lucky? How do I know I'm not slumped over my desk at 3pm on a rainy Tuesday, passed out from exhaustion as emails ping one after another into my inbox?

It's too good to be true. *Maisie* is too good to be true, and getting to touch her... taste her...

With our new routine over the last few weeks, I thought I'd struck gold. Thought I'd won the lottery, and that I should be grateful for every second with her, even if it killed me to let her go after every appointment. Shouldn't let myself get greedy.

Now I see the truth: those encounters were a shadow of this. A weak imitation, cartoonish and wrong, like the sloppy caricatures that hack artist draws on the sidewalk near this building.

This time, our hearts thunder in sync. This time, I finally press inside, stretching *Maisie's* slick channel—filling her up and feeling her pulse tap against my shaft.

“Oh,” she says, eyelids fluttering.

Yes. *Oh*.

My grip is harsh on her hips, my face set in a scowl. Anyone else would probably cower from me, but Maisie yanks me closer, burying her face in my neck. I need her so badly, it turns me feral. Makes me forget how to speak, how to be gentle, how to do anything except press inside her, invading inch by inch, panting hot against her hair.

“Mine,” I grit out, the only word left in my vocabulary. “Mine.”

Maisie whimpers, her body sucking me deeper. I can’t breathe.

When I bottom out, when our bodies are sealed as tight as they can go, I rub my face against her silky black hair. My stubble rasps against the strands, barely audible over the fish tank hum and the faint rumble of traffic and our strained breaths.

I’ve never done this before. Never felt the urge.

Now I may never stop.

Want to pound this woman until she sobs for relief, clinging to my shoulders; want to work her into a sweaty mess again and again and again.

“Mean face,” Maisie whispers, leaning back in my arms and smoothing the pinch of my eyebrows with her thumb. “Don’t you like it, Mr Katz?”

“No, I do.” Obviously. “But it’s too good. So good I’m losing my mind, and I’m pissed about it.”

Maisie snorts and nibbles my chin, clearly delighted with my answer. “Temper, temper.”

My heart is working overtime, racing like I’ve just run ten miles. And my fingers shake, but when I take a fistful of her hair, wrapping the strands around my palm—I’m still gentle.

That’s a relief. Beneath these dark, hungry eddies, I’m still careful with her. My Maisie.

“Need to fuck you,” I mutter, and this feels like a confession too, just as

vulnerable as earlier. The Midas man is out of control, and what if that puts her off? What if she liked me icy and unreachable, like my legend says? “I’ll try to make it good. But I—if I don’t fuck you soon, and hard—”

“Do it,” Maisie interrupts, the massage table creaking as she shifts her ass closer. I throb inside her. “I’ve been waiting for so long, Hudson. Please, do it.”

My teeth grind as I draw back.

I slam forward, and Maisie hiccups a moan.

We start slow then build speed, sweat dripping, the table rattling like it’s caught in an earthquake. Fish flit back and forth in the tank, their scales flashing in the edge of my vision.

She’s so tight and wet and hot. Knees clamped around my waist, her head lolling from my grip in her hair; lips parted and eyes hazy.

Maisie watches me from beneath heavy lids as I pound into her, working out months and months of clawing hunger in one go. She bites her lip against a cry.

“No more appointments,” I grind out, moisture trickling down my spine, muscles aching as I grip her, clasp her, shove my way deeper. “No more goddamn calendar reminders. Say it, Maisie.” A little shake. “You’ll wake up in my bed and kneel for me in the shower. You’ll introduce me to your friends. You’ll take me to your bedroom and stretch out for me on your mattress and let me lick you until you scream.”

“I have roommates,” Maisie gasps, but her eyes are sparkling, her cheeks flushed. Her hips rock forward with each thrust, meeting me, coaxing me deep. “There’ll be no screaming.”

I blink sweat from my eyes. “We’ll see.”

And we slam together in a torturous rhythm. When I cram a hand

between us, finding her clit with my thumb, Maisie arches like a drawn bowstring.

Such a calm, gentle girl—but with me, she’s a firecracker.

“Come for me.” The air’s muggy with our sweat. Our breaths. The massage table is about to rattle apart, and pleasure stabs me in the gut, then twists the blade. Won’t last much longer. My thumb rubs back and forth. “Come for me.”

“It’s not... that... easy...” Maisie trails off with a shaky breath, suddenly curling forward. Her forehead thumps against my collarbone, and I keep rubbing, thrusting, driving her higher and higher.

She’s so perfect.

So perfect it hurts.

And when Maisie’s teeth dig into my shoulder, when she cries out into my unbuttoned shirt—I know I’ve got her. Her body locks up, trembling and jerking, pulsing tighter around my shaft. On and on, it strangles me.

*There.*

She’s mine. Claimed.

Thank god.

Wedging myself deep, I press her ass close—and let go with a groan. Fill her with spurt after spurt of wet warmth, as sparks crackle up my spine.

It’s primal, filling her up like this. So necessary.

And it *aches*. Feels like I’ve been kicked in the gut.

“Oh my god,” Maisie mumbles eventually, clinging to my shoulders. She draws back and glances down between us, expression hazy. “Does this table wipe down?”

That’s what she’s worried about? After we just cracked our chests wide open; after I went inside her bare? *That’s* her biggest worry? Maybe I’ve

done some things right after all.

For the first time in recent memory, I throw back my head and laugh.

\* \* \*

*Two years later*

I find my wife on the roof terrace, slathering sunscreen on her pale limbs. A sky blue bikini covers her secret places—but barely. Thank god our rooftop is high and sheltered, away from prying eyes.

“Want a hand?”

Maisie startles at the sound of my voice, then beams as I stroll closer. With my hands in my pockets, shirt sleeves rolled, I’m done working for the day. Who in his right mind would work late and miss *this*, with Maisie’s bare, freckled skin on display, her legs stretched out in the afternoon sunshine?

It’s late summer but the heat is holding on, baking the sidewalk down below. The city is lazy and loose. I used to hate this time of year, used to rail against how everyone took their eyes off the ball, but look at me now.

I have new priorities. Obviously.

There’s Maisie, first and foremost, the center of my galaxy—and now the bump curving her small belly.

That bump is slathered with sunscreen, dotted with freckles. So perfect. I sink on to the empty sun lounger at my wife’s side, pluck the bottle out of her hands and squeeze a dollop of sunscreen into my palm.

“Hello, love.”

I start at her feet and work my way up, rubbing and teasing as I go. Maisie melts back against the lounger with a sigh, her head pillowed on a



pink towel, happy to put me in charge.

We have a lot of practice with this. Our main language has always been touch—it's how we declare our love and devotion, over and over again. How we renew our promises each day. Even from the very first time we met, our bodies understood what took our minds a while longer.

“Don't stay in the sun for too long,” I warn, kneading her right thigh.

“Bossy,” Maisie says, her lips curving in a smile.

She likes it. Likes me fussing over her, making sure she's well fed and hydrated and gets plenty of sleep. Plenty of other things, too. Speaking of which...

I hook her bikini, dragging it down over her hips. Maisie lifts her ass to help, then spreads her thighs. She's already glistening.

Yeah. It's a good thing no one can see us on this terrace, that no one else gets to see Maisie like this, else I'd have to destroy a few lives. Have to chase them out of the city. And haven't you heard? Hudson Katz has mellowed these days.

For his wife. And only his wife.

No need to get carried away.

\* \* \*

Thanks for reading Whole Lotta Grump! I hope you loved it. :)

For more delicious pining, check out [Fixer Upper](#). *I came home from war with a fistful of medals and a limp. Didn't expect to find an angel sunbathing on my deck.*

And for a bonus instalove story, grab your copy of [Ride or Die](#). *She's sweet and innocent—and that's like catnip in this strip club. It's okay, though. I won't let the pretty bartender out of my sight.*

Happy reading!

xxx

# Teaser: Fixer Upper

When my big brother passed away five months ago, a part of me died too. Isn't that cliched? It's true, though, because Luis was my only family. My *person*. My safe place. Ever since he failed to come home, the same question has swirled round and round in my head, keeping me from a full night's sleep.

*What the hell do I do now?*

Without my big brother, without my family, without someone to visit for the holidays and someone to call and check in on just because? With this constant dull ache, gnawing at my ribs, and this void cracked open inside me? Seriously, what do I do?

I have all this love for him still. So much love, I'm drowning in it. I'm full to the brim with longing and anger and bitterness that Luis ever left me at all, that he had to go and be a hero and leave me behind, and god, I feel shitty for that.

So, yeah. I'm twenty two years old, and already a grief-ridden basket case. What the hell do I do now?

Apparently, my answer was: quit my job and leave my hometown behind. Pack up my things in my beat-up old car, and force the poor vehicle up those winding mountain paths until we got *here*.

Here, where Luis and I spent all those summers. Here, where I thought maybe I could feel close to him again.

It didn't work. I didn't feel closer to my big brother, just lonelier than ever—until a few hours ago. Until Cade.

As soon as I realized he knew my brother, something knit together inside me. Even when I thought he was kicking me out of the lakehouse, I couldn't help but feel so freaking *glad*. Here was this walking, talking evidence that Luis did exist; that he touched the wider world; that other people miss him too.

And Cade is grieving for my brother, that much is clear. It's right there in the harsh lines on his face and the rigid set to his jaw. It's in the gravelly tone of his voice and the way he winces whenever he says Luis's name. He's wound tight: a taut, knotted ball of hurt.

My kindred spirit.

I never want this man to leave.

That said, night falls before it really hits me what I've done: I've invited a strange man, someone I've never met before today, to stay in the cabin with me tonight. There are separate rooms, sure, a wall between my bedroom and the living space, but it's still *small*. We're still firmly in each other's space, and this is such a leap of trust.

I'm not scared, though. Not at all. Maybe it's crazy, but even though Cade is a stranger to me, even though we've never met before today, some bone-deep instinct tells me I'm safe with this man.

He's soothing. A balm for my raw, battered soul.

And honestly, once the sun sinks and animals cry out in the mountains, I'm *glad* he's here. With his strong muscles and calm demeanor, I'm more relaxed than I've been in a while, and though he tries to give me space after our simple dinner, I can't help seeking him out on the deck. Being around him is such a rush, and I want another hit.

Cade has stretched out on the wooden boards, his arms pillowed beneath his head as he gazes up at the waxy moon. His long dark hair is tied back, and thick stubble shadows his jaw. Seeing his lithe, powerful body stretched out like that, at ease and utterly confident, it's easy to imagine him making himself at home in any landscape. Mountains or desert or arctic wastes. Adapting to any challenge.

“You look comfy.”

Cade grins up at me in the darkness, starlight casting his features in a silvery glow. Those eyes look extra blue in this light. His biceps bulge from the way he's folded his arms, and a tattoo wraps around one elbow, disappearing into the sleeve of his gray shirt. “I've slept in worse places, believe me.”

“Yeah, I bet.” My knees crack as I lower to sit cross-legged beside him, the wooden boards scraping at my bare legs. Even up in the mountains, it's a warm night. Hot and sticky. “Will you tell me about it?”

It's a big ask, I know—Luis was always so tight-lipped about his career. He'd sugarcoat everything when I asked him about it, not wanting to burden me with the ugly stuff, the inevitable harder things, until I just wanted to shake his shoulders and scream that he wasn't fooling anyone.

I saw the shadows he brought home with him on leave. I *saw* them.

But I've brought two beers out onto the deck with me tonight. An offering. Beads of condensation cling to the glass bottles, and it's just as well, because my mouth goes dry every time I look at this man. My brother's best friend.

Cade sits up with a deep sigh, taking a beer with quiet thanks. “You mean tell you about Luis?”

I lift one shoulder. “About all of it.”

Because sure, I want to hear every last scrap of information about my brother, probably over and over again until Cade's sick of repeating it. But my curiosity goes a lot further than that when it comes to this man. I want to hear all about *him*, too.

The veteran tilts his head, considering me. Shadows seem to gather on one side of his neck, and I realize with a jolt that it's because the skin is rough there. Warped and scarred. How did I not notice before?

"Some of them aren't happy stories."

I can't help it: I let out a snort. "No kidding."

Cade's mouth twitches. And when he lifts his beer silently, I clink our bottles together, a warm, gooey sensation spreading through my insides before I've even had a single sip.

Because I know before he even begins to speak, his low voice rumbling beside the lake, that Cade won't sugarcoat or dodge. He won't spare me anything.

Sure enough: "I got these scars in an explosion three months ago. Saw you notice them just now. Well, we were in a convoy, moving diplomats between cities, and Luis was already gone by then. I was so fucking raw from that..."

I raise my bottle, taking a long sip of cool beer, and feel Cade's story settle over me like a blanket. Like a steady hand on my shoulder.

This is what it feels like: that miraculous thing that I've never had before, not fully. Not even with my big brother, not with his overprotective instincts getting in the way.

Mutual trust. Laying yourself open for another person.

I tip my head up to the stars, breathe deeply, and listen.

...*At last.*

\* \* \*

Check out [Fixer Upper!](#)

xxx



*Cassie Mint*



# About the Author

Cassie writes outrageous, OTT instalove with tons of sugar and spice. She loves cookie dough, summer barbecues, and her gorgeous cat Missy.

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