



**GRUMP
GONE
BAD**

CASSIE MINT

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First published by Black Cherry Publishing 2023

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First edition

ISBN: 978-1-915735-25-6

Cover art by Angela Haddon Book Cover Design

This book was professionally typeset on Reedsy

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BLACK CHERRY
PUBLISHING

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One

Priya



Something's off the second I step into the office.

There are well-dressed people all around, chatting and flirting and stressing about deadlines as they march across the lobby. That's normal enough. The old fashioned cage elevator grinds its way to the top floor with a series of crunches and bangs, and that's damnably normal too.

The Landry & Co offices are sunlit and bustling, with more foliage than a tropical rainforest, and even before 8am the whole building thrums with energy.

Normal. All normal.

But the back of my neck prickles.

Something's off.

Adjusting my grip on a cardboard tray of coffees, I offer the pair of junior architects in the elevator with me a polite smile. They're both fresh out of college, the man wearing a pinstripe suit and sneakers, the woman in a silk t-shirt and blazer. Cool but professional. I'm outclassed in my faded purple sheath dress.

They ignore me, chatting about the big pitch next Friday. Assistants are invisible like that—we only pop into existence when someone needs us. I'll see these jerks later when they want a peek at the boss's schedule.

Numbers flicker past on the little screen. The elevator cranks to a halt on floor eighteen to let out the rude newbies, then I'm alone, juddering into the heavens.

With no one to witness me, I yawn so wide my jaw cracks. My roommate's cat kept me awake last night crying for his mom. She's off on some messed up trip with her boss, fake dating for his family and pretending they don't have real feelings for each other, and I'm left playing cat nanny for the long weekend.

I don't mind really. Rusty's a cute little fuzzball.

But I got *no* sleep last night, and now a headache curdles behind my right eye.

Bang. Crunch. The elevator struggles all the way to the top floor, and I exit on wobbly legs. I've told Mr Landry a million times that the elevator is scary and weird, but he insists that it brings a vintage feel to the building.

Oh, and it's perfectly safe. Definitely an afterthought.

Architects. Honestly.

It's always quieter on the top floor, all the frenetic energy kept below. I stroll through the hushed corridor, past my own neat desk where it stands guard, all the way into the boss's office.

“Coffee,” I call like every morning. This way I start the day as a savior; a caffeine-bearing angel. It’s worth the two minute detour on my walk here.

Mr Landry glances up behind his desk and nods. “Thank you, Priya.” He’s wearing his usual Friday suit—charcoal gray with a sage green shirt—and his dark hair is pushed back from his forehead. All normal.

But I slam to a halt, cardboard tray creaking in my grip, my heart suddenly pounding at one hundred miles an hour.

Because even though he looks exactly the same, even though he wears the same clothes and knows my name, that man is *not* my boss. I’d stake my life on it. What the hell is going on?

The man behind the desk notices my freak-out. He tilts his head and smiles, slow and devilish.

I stumble back a step.

* * *

“Well, that lasted,” the man makes a show of checking his watch, “less than five seconds. A triumph.”

“Wh-who are you?” The coffees wobble in my hand. I should put them down, should spare the *real* Mr Landry’s priceless rug, but the nearest flat surface is the boss’s desk and you couldn’t pay me to step closer to the strange man.

The man who looks like a carbon copy of my boss. Same square jaw, same piercing blue eyes. Did he find a

doppelganger somewhere in the city? Or does he have...

“A twin,” I mumble, answering my own question. God, I’m slow first thing in the morning. Even though it’s rude, I pluck one of the coffees from the tray and swig from it, scalding my tongue.

“Tom never mentioned me?”

I shake my head, still guzzling coffee like my life depends on it. It’s hot and sweet and milky, and I need it more than air. The headache flares brighter in my temple.

“I’m filling in for a few days. Keeping up appearances.”

Who does this? What the hell? What about the huge pitch next week?

“He said that you do eighty percent of his work anyway, and the rest he’ll send over email. You should breathe, by the way.”

I lower the half-empty coffee cup, wheezing and queasy. I’ve always known my boss can be a flake—god knows I’ve made up plenty of excuses on days when he skips meetings to go kite surfing—but this is a new low.

The replacement Mr Landry watches me from behind the desk, pale eyes intense. He’s so *still*. With floor-to-ceiling plants behind him, he’s like a panther in the foliage.

“No one will buy it,” I say, waving a trembling hand at—*at him*. “It’s so obvious.”

Another flickering smile. “Actually, you’re the only person who’s ever told us apart. Even our mother can’t do it. Isn’t that interesting, Priya? How exactly can you tell?”

“It’s...” Well. If I’m honest with myself, here’s what it is:

The butterflies in my stomach. The way my skin heats when this man looks at me. The way every nerve ending in my body crackled to life when I saw him, an electric current zinging through my veins. It’s the way something deep inside me *recognized* him, called out to him, but obviously I can’t say any of that.

“Your posture,” I say instead, and it sounds so lame. “You sit differently. And you’re more still.”

“Huh.” My fake boss shifts in his chair, the leather creaking. “What if I fidget? Is that more convincing?”

How should I know? It’s still painfully obvious to me.

Because I’ve worked for Tom Landry for three years, and my pulse has never once fluttered in his presence. My mouth has never gone dry at the sight of his hands. But a single glance at his twin brother, and I’m sweating through my dress.

“Excuse me,” I rasp, and flee back to my own desk, slamming the office door shut behind me.

I took the second coffee, but I’m not even sorry. I need it way more than he does.

Two

Emmett



This is fascinating. Leaning back in my brother's chair, legs stretched out beneath the desk, I allow myself a grin. The sunshine is warm where it spills through the huge glass windows, and a puff of cloud drifts across the blue sky.

A week, Tom said. A week of stalking around this building and letting myself be seen, and in return he'd owe me a favor and a bottle of fine whiskey. And I've done this plenty of times before—passed myself off as Tom and tried not to die of boredom—but it's never thrilled me like this.

She could tell. Immediately, as soon as Priya stepped into the room, she could tell.

How? What's so special about Tom's assistant?

Sure, she spends hours with him in this building every week, but our own family members can't tell us apart. Nor our teachers at school, or our friends and girlfriends back in college. *That* made for a few awkward encounters, let me tell you.

"Priya Dhawan." I say her name slowly, rolling it around my tongue like I could taste it. Tom mentioned her, of course,

but he didn't give many details. Didn't mention her wide-eyed beauty, or the way her husky voice makes every sentence sound like pillow talk. Did he leave that out on purpose? Trying to throw me off the trail?

Maybe they're together. He wouldn't be the first boss to sleep with an assistant, and surely not the last. I push to my feet, grin fading.

The puff of cloud drifts in front of the sun, dimming the morning sky for one heartbeat. I push through the door.

Priya's at her desk, her knee jiggling under the table. Her silky dark hair is tied in a high ponytail, the ends dancing as she vibrates with tension. How many coffees has she had this morning? All that caffeine, then this shock... I round the desk and peer into her dazed face.

Smooth tawny skin and a flush on her cheeks. Thick, arching eyebrows over brown, soulful eyes.

Beautiful.

And I signed up for a standard-regulation twin swap: no harm done. I will not be responsible for this young woman's heart attack.

A few steps to the water cooler. There's a gurgling rush of bubbles; an interminable wait. I return and place the cup by her hand, saying, "Drink this, please."

Priya huffs, staring past me down the corridor, but she takes the cup. It wobbles on its path to her mouth—lips pursed

and painted a dark red color that would stain my shirt collar in the best way.

Her throat works as she swallows. The cup taps against the wooden desk, empty after three gulps. “Where is Mr Landry?”

I am also Mr Landry, but fine. “Tom’s upstate.”

“Why—?”

“Personal reasons.” I wince, remembering my suspicion from a moment ago, because if Priya and Tom are sleeping together, she will not like why he’s gone. “Does it matter?”

Are you together? That’s what I really want to know. It started as idle curiosity, but the longer I stare at this woman, the more the question needles my insides. She’s too good for him, surely. Too regal, too smart. Even now, in the midst of this shock, her shoulders are back and she regards me with steady calm.

My twin brother is a lot of things, but a decent boyfriend is not one of them. Never has been. It’s a sore spot between us; the cause of several fights back in college, punches thrown on the quad for honor’s sake. And *this* woman...

Well, she’s a winning lottery ticket. I’ve only known her for a few minutes, and even I see that. He’d better not mess her around, or I swear to god, I’ll toss him around this office. Don’t care if we’re years too old for that shit.

“You’re angry,” Priya observes, folding her hands on the desk. Her fingernails are short and neat, painted indigo blue. “Why?”

Because my brother's an asshole, and she apparently knows him better than our own relatives. Surely they're sleeping together.

The thought spreads through my insides like acid, eating away at my organs and bones. What is wrong with me? Why do I care?

"Maybe I'm tired of foolish questions." Inhaling sharply, I rub my chest. What is that slicing pain? "It's Emmett, by the way. Since you didn't ask."

"Charmed," Priya says, her voice so flat, and Christ, I'm messing this up in the worst way. Blaming the one innocent person in this scenario; lashing out like a wounded animal because there's a slim chance my brother has seen her naked.

So what if he has? It's none of my business.

Fuck.

"I'll keep out of your way." It's harder than it should be to walk back to the office doorway—like wading through water. "Tom's got his cell if you have a work-related question. Don't bother him otherwise."

Her irritated scoff follows me into the office. I close the door, then lean against it with my palms pressed flat. Guilt and shame squeeze my throat.

What the hell have I gotten myself into? A week with that woman? With her reproachful glances and her disappointed sighs?

Sounds like purgatory. I fish my phone out of my pocket with a shaking hand, but Tom's dial tone is busy. Figures. Guess I'm not the only one ready to curse him out.

Closing my eyes, I wait for my heartbeats to slow. Priya's faint voice drifts through the door, hardening each time she says my name.

* * *

When I finally get through to Tom on the desk phone, he's already laughing. "Dude," he says, like he's still a college student and not a CEO in his late thirties, "Priya busted you so hard. I wish I could've seen your face. It's Jenna McCay all over again."

Jenna was Tom's steady girlfriend in the first year of college. He made me go on a date with her in his place for one night—a few hours at the cinema—and I spent the whole evening wracked with guilt, desperately trying to keep ten inches of space between us at all times. I confessed as soon as the movie ended and we spilled out into the night air, and Jenna slapped me so hard that her hand print glowed on my cheek.

Who could blame her? That was not a proud moment for me. My idiot nineteen year old self deserved that slap, just like Tom deserved Jenna dumping him like old leftovers. She could do far better.

"It's nothing like Jenna McCay." I tug on the collar of Tom's shirt, grimacing at the abstract painting on his office

wall. How can he stand these monkey suits? I can't breathe. "We agreed back then: no more personal situations. And you and Priya aren't personally involved."

I wait, heart pounding, desperate for his confirmation, but Tom doesn't take the bait. He says, "Priya's scary when she's mad, isn't she?"

No. Not really. The young woman out there is dignified—poised when everyone around her is behaving like a jackass. But I can see why Tom finds that unsettling.

Still, I won't hear it. "Don't talk shit about Priya."

He splutters. "I'm not! She's the best assistant I've ever had."

And..? *And..?*

I swear to god, if I don't get a straight answer soon, I'm going to gnaw through the wood of Tom's fancy desk. "Are you sleeping with her?"

Screw it. I need to know.

He laughs again, loud and bright, like it's the funniest thing he's ever heard. I sink back in the chair, my pulse finally slowing, and stop tugging on my collar. Tom sure doesn't sound like a man who just got rumbled.

Thank god.

"No," my brother says at last, "I am not sleeping with Priya. For one thing, she's my assistant, and for another, she's not my type."

Not his type? That makes no sense. Beautiful and resilient and smart aren't his type? With this fresh insight into my brother's taste, I respect him a little less... even as I'm glad for it.

The phone crackles as he changes ear. "She's not into us either."

Us? "What do you mean?"

"She's never looked at me twice. And I hate to break this to you, Emmett, but we have the same face."

The same eminently slappable face.

Right.

"Keep your hands off my assistant," Tom says, mock-stern. "It's the weekend tomorrow, then only a few days more. Just... hide in the office and do DIY or whatever. Let her run the show, she's more than capable."

My fingers itch for my tool kit. Now that he's suggested it, it's all I want. "You got anything up here that needs fixing?"

"The faucet leaks in my bathroom. And one of the lights in the corridor flickers. Hold up, I'll send you a list."

Yeah. Okay. Fixing things for a few days—I can do that. Sounds almost calming.

And I can keep my hands off Priya Dhawan for a week.

Definitely.

Three

Priya



“**Y**ou’re tense.” My roommate Maisie comes to stand behind the sofa, prodding at my bunched-up shoulders. “These muscles are rock hard.”

Rusty purrs on my lap, drooling on my pajama pants. It’s a Sunday morning, and the two of us are watching cartoons until his mom comes home. Our other roommate, Fliss, should be back today, and then I’m off cat duty.

I’m trying not to be sad about that.

Because I know Rusty’s not my pet, but I *need* him right now. My work life has turned upside down, and I’m wrestling with the world’s most unwelcome crush. Rusty’s my only comfort.

“Want a back rub?”

Maisie’s a massage therapist. And not just any massage therapist—the owner of the most sought-after healing hands in the city. She has this magic aura, this incredible sense of calm, and it’s no wonder that her schedule books out months in advance. Even chatting with her for a few minutes lowers my blood pressure.

“That would be amazing. Are you sure you don’t mind?”

It’s her job, after all. She’s off duty. The last thing I’d want to do with *my* weekend is file reports and send emails, especially when my boss is such a grade A jerk.

But Maisie’s a sweetheart. A black-haired, freckle-faced sweetheart. “Shuffle up,” she says.

Rusty squeaks as I wriggle along the sofa, his claws gripping my thighs. I turn my back to my roommate and she settles behind me, the sofa cushions sinking under our shared weight.

Cartoons flicker on the TV, the volume low. The morning sunshine spills golden through the window.

“We should clean before Fliss comes back,” I say.

Maisie hums, her small hands gliding over my shoulders. “Don’t worry about that right now. You’re always so *on*, Priya.”

Is that a bad thing? It’s how I’m so good at my job; how I got high grades in school. How I keep the vast, swirling chaos of the universe at bay.

Piercing blue eyes drift through my mind, and I suppress a shiver. Guess some things can’t be controlled after all.

And... what is Emmett Landry doing right now? Is he still pretending to be his brother? Or will he be himself again over the weekend?

“My boss switched places with his twin brother.” The words blurt out of me, barely louder than the TV. And I know I promised discretion, but god, if I don’t tell somebody I’ll explode.

Plus Maisie would never spill the beans, not even about something as wild as this. There’s a massage therapist code of silence, or something.

“There was a different Mr Landry at the office on Friday. He’ll be there next week too. No one else can tell them apart, but I can.”

Maisie’s quiet for a long moment, her thumbs digging into a knot by my shoulder blade. Then: “Wow. That’s nuts. Okay, I see now why you’re all scrunchy.”

“Right?” A long breath gusts out of me, and honestly, hearing Maisie say that is almost as relaxing as the massage. I’m not overreacting. This *is* bananas. “His name’s Emmett. He spent the whole day on Friday banging around tools in the boss’s office. I think maybe he’s a builder.”

That would explain his broad shoulders and those scarred hands. The more I think about it, the more I see the differences between the two men. Is everyone else blind?

For example: my boss has a strict gym regimen and the toned, deliberate muscles to prove it. He also gets secret manicures once a month. I know, because I book them.

Whereas Emmett has that brawny, organic strength that comes from moving a bunch of heavy stuff, day in, day out,

and calluses on his hands. Maybe he's less magazine-worthy, a bit rougher around the edges, but it sure gets *me* all hot and bothered.

"You just tensed up again. What are you thinking?" Maisie kneads my shoulders, and I melt again under her magic hands. With my fingers playing through Rusty's fur, we've got a cute little massage train here.

"Okay... don't judge me."

"Never." Her reply is quick and sure, and that's why I love this girl. "I know you, Priya. You can tell me anything."

My mouth twists, and I tickle Rusty's brown belly. He bats at my wrist, but those claws stay sheathed. Such a gentle, sticky little angel.

"I've never... had a crush like this."

Maisie works a knot between my ribs. "On your boss?"

"No, on his brother. The imposter." And saying it out loud is so ridiculous, so humiliating, that I rush to fill Maisie's thoughtful silence. "I know it's nothing. But it's like I'm hyper-attuned to his presence. We only spent one day near each other, but my ears were straining for his every move through the walls. And whenever he came into the room, my skin prickled, and I could barely sit still. Obviously it's pheromones or something. And one-sided. And a terrible idea. And if anything happened and then someone caught us, they'd think I was messing around with my boss. And if my *real* boss found out, he'd freak out and fire me. And Emmett barely

spoke to me anyway, and when he did he was a jerk, so it doesn't matter."

"Hmm," Maisie says. "Hmm."

Rusty gnaws on my thumb knuckle without biting down. His breath smells like fish.

"Did he seem interested in you too?" she asks.

My mouth twists as I consider that question. Did my fake boss seem unsettled by me at all? He certainly found plenty of excuses to come and visit me at my desk, never mind our rough start. And when I took his lunch through at midday, he lit up like a sunrise.

But that could be, you know. His standard reaction to a free sandwich.

"I'm not sure," I hedge. "Maybe?"

Hopefully.

"You don't have many crushes," my roommate says at last. Her hands are warm on my back through my pajama shirt, and I gaze out of the sunny window, eyes unfocused. Ivy climbs the brick building opposite, all fuzzy and green in my haze.

"Nope," I say. Try never. This is new territory for me.

I've never laid awake at night before like I have this weekend, one man's wicked smile fixed in my brain. I've never tossed and turned and whimpered under my breath, desperate for those specific callused hands to run all over my bare body.

I've never longed to hear a deep, gravelly voice say my name one more time, the ache splitting open my chest.

Clearly, I've lost my mind. I don't even know the man. Not really.

Even if it feels like, on some soul-deep level, I do.

"These feelings are garbage." I rub the line of Rusty's nose. "How do people stand it?"

"I wouldn't know," Maisie says, soft and amused. "But when I find my own world-ending crush, I'll give you an answer."

"Well, hurry up," I grumble. "I'm dying here."

Even her laugh is soothing. "It'll be okay, Priya. It's only a few more days, and then you'll probably never have to see this man again."

Was that supposed to make me feel better? Because it really, really doesn't.

* * *

Monday morning brings the sharp tang of fresh paint. I wander into Mr Landry's office, coffee tray gripped in one hand, and my mouth drops open.

It's... a building site. Literally. Dust sheets cover the furniture; a paint-splattered step ladder stands by the window. A tangle of wires dangles down where a light fitting used to be, and Mr Landry's priceless rug is rolled up by the wall.

“Oh my god.” My hand sweats around my satchel strap. The coffees wobble in my hand. “What have you done?”

Emmett glances at me over his shoulder. He’s inspecting the green wall of foliage behind the boss’s desk. “Are these plants delicate?” he asks. “Will they die if I take them down for a few hours?”

How the hell should I know? I’m an assistant, not a freaking gardener—and clearly my expression tells him so, because Emmett shrugs and turns back to the plants. His strong fingers delve through the leaves, inspecting the metal frame they’re fixed to.

“Don’t take them down,” I grit out when I find my voice again. “Mr Landry loves that wall. He says it’s his calling card. He’s been pushing this green design initiative, because he says it’s the future, and Mr Landry—”

“Perhaps you should call him Tom.” My fake boss’s voice is sour. He addresses the leaves. “To save confusion.”

Seriously? “It’s not that complicated. Mr Landry is my boss, and *you*,” I gesture around the ruined office with the coffee tray, “are the man giving me an ulcer.” Partly for work reasons, and partly... not. It’s not only anger heating my cheeks. Somehow, in between all the sex dreams, I forgot how striking he is. “You know he’ll blame me for this, right? I’m supposed to keep everything in order.”

“He won’t blame you,” Emmett says, stepping back and folding his arms. When he glances at me over his shoulder again, I’m hit with the shock of those ice blue eyes. “Tom

knows I can't sit on my hands for a week. If he wants me to take his place, I need a project while I'm here."

God. I press my knuckles against my temple. "If anyone comes up here looking for the boss and sees you like this—"

"Like what?" Emmett grins. "Oh, you mean this?" Strong fingers pluck at his gray t-shirt, splattered with dozens of paint colors. Long gone are Friday's pinstripes, replaced with old cotton and faded jeans. "Don't worry, I've got Tom's precious suit in the en suite. I need it for some bullshit video conference later. If anyone comes looking, you stall them and I'll change."

"That won't explain your office! And where are you going to sit for that conference? This room is a wreck!"

Emmett smiles wider. "We'll figure it out."

Oh my god. He's enjoying this, isn't he? Relishing the chaos he's created. This man is my exact opposite in every way.

Because I'm a rule follower. A good girl. I never miss a deadline, and I always arrive ten minutes early for my appointments. I walk the same route to work, use the same laundry detergent, and watch the same TV shows, day in and day out.

This man is a controlled explosion. He's a detonation on legs.

Long, muscled legs that look great in paint-splattered jeans. Gah.

“Just... promise me you can fix everything. You’ll put it back as it was.”

Emmett turns on his heel and strides over, his big body suddenly filling my vision. Warm palms land on my shoulders, kneading the muscles there, and the coffee tray trembles between us. Gosh, he’s tall.

“I promise,” he says, those blue eyes so close, “that I will fix everything. And though it won’t look exactly the same, it will be a million times better. I won’t let you get in trouble for this, okay? Trust me, Priya.”

And I’ve lost it. Because... I do trust him. I do. And with those hands on me, with that steady, fond smile like he’s known me for years, the tightness in my chest loosens. My lungs work again, drawing down gulps of paint-scented air.

Did he think about me over the weekend at all?

That’s a crazy thing to wonder—and now he’s watching me patiently, waiting for a response.

I nod, biting my lip.

Emmett’s gaze flicks down. “Is that second coffee for me?”

“You don’t deserve it.” The cup scrapes against the cardboard tray, and I hand it over. His fingers brush mine as the cup changes hands. “Be careful, it’s hot.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

When I stumble back a step, I'm so flustered. What was I doing when I came up here? What's on my To Do list for today? I can't think straight. My brain's too full with Emmett Landry and the smattering of dark chest hairs peeking above his stretched-out t-shirt neckline. The fabric looks soft, brushing against the planes of his chest.

Does that hair trail down his belly? Why do I like that thought so much?

And why oh why did my body save its big sexual awakening for this man? So unfair.

"Um. I'll send around an email saying you're in meetings all day and that you don't want to be disturbed."

"Sounds good."

"And I guess I'll order your lunch later?"

Emmett's smile is crooked. "Fancy. Thanks, Priya."

My cheeks are on fire as I hightail it out of there. He's my boss's *brother*, damn it.

One thing is for sure: this will not end well.

Four

Emmett



“**W**e can’t keep pulling this shit.” It’s Tuesday evening, the sky tinged lilac as the sun sets, and I’m walking home along the river path. My shoulders strain against another of Tom’s tailored suits, and his pair of buffed leather brogues creak with every step. They rub my heels, and the soles are thinner than sheet metal.

It felt awful shucking my painting gear and putting on Tom’s clothes before leaving the office. Like putting on a straitjacket. How can he bear it?

Tom sighs in my ear, static crackling through the phone, and it’s so familiar. I’m more acquainted with my brother’s noises than my own.

“It’s not a big deal. We’ve been swapping places our whole lives, Em.”

Exactly. Not often, especially the last decade, but often enough. When does it end?

Besides—it’s always me filling in for Tom, never the other way around. Me sitting in his college classes, taking notes; me visiting our mom twice in one day when she was sick last year,

wearing different clothes each time so the heartbreak of an absent son wouldn't make her feel any worse. I wasn't proud of that lie, but at least she lit up at Tom's 'visit'.

I'm tired of cleaning up my brother's messes. Tired of giving into his appeals so easily, always ready to take the fall. I'm eight minutes older, but sometimes it feels more like eight years.

I'm the one who has the hard conversations. The one who weathers the public judgment when Tom goes astray. And I'm sick of it. I'm too old for this shit.

"People will notice eventually. Priya won't be the only one who knows."

Tom's voice hardens. "Why do you say that? Did she threaten to tell someone?"

Ducks flap across the water, quacking and splashing, and I slam to a halt, the heel of one palm digging into my forehead. My head aches like hell. And lord knows I'm not an angry man in general—I'm quicker to laugh than to yell—but if my brother was standing in front of me right now, I might wring his useless neck.

How dare he talk like that? Like *Priya* is the problem? Like she's a bug to be squashed?

She's the only noble one out of all three of us. How did this asshole ever build an architecture firm?

"This has nothing to do with Priya," I say, my throat tight. "She's been discreet. Helpful, even." In truth, she's been the

only bright spot in this whole mess, her presence a reward I don't deserve. "I'm talking about the fact that I'm a grown man and I'm playing dress up in my brother's clothes."

A snort. "Well, at least it's an improvement. You could hardly run Landry & Co in your ancient flannel."

"*Tom.*" He's not listening. He never listens to things he doesn't want to hear, but I want it on the record anyway. "This is the last time, okay? Don't ask me again, because I'll say no. I shouldn't have agreed this time. I only said yes because of... you know."

There's a beat of silence. I start walking again, little stones crunching beneath my feet. Long, thick reeds cling to the riverbank, and unknown critters rustle in them as I pass. Insects buzz as the red sun sinks lower.

It's a warm night. Where does Priya live? Does she change when she gets home? What are her comfy clothes like? She seems so professional at work, so buttoned-up.

I'd love to see her laze around in sweats, hair up and face bare of makeup. Preferably no bra, but that's my inner pervert talking.

"I'm sorry, Em." My brother is quieter now. Chastened. "I know I shouldn't have asked. You've got your own life, your own business, and I've got no right to expect this of you."

My steps slow. I'm less agitated, strolling again, listening to my brother dredge up the words he owes.

“I’ll give Priya a raise when I’m back,” he says, and that’s more like it. “Some kind of promotion, too. It’s long overdue anyway.”

“Good.” I feel lighter already. This has been a worthwhile call. “You do that, Tom.”

“And I’ll visit Mom. I’ll get my shit together. It’s just—it’s been a weird few weeks, you know?”

Yeah, I get it. Because I know where Tom is right now, while I’m pretending to be him in the run-up to his firm’s big bid. I know only the most major revelation could drag him away at such a crucial time. He loves Landry & Co, and when he’s passionate about something, he doesn’t flake. Not when it counts.

“How’s the baby?” The secret baby, born to a mother he hooked up with one time and forgot. The son he didn’t realize he was about to have until a few days ago. Every time I think about my surprise nephew, I thank my lucky stars that I’ve never sowed my wild oats like my brother has. They called him Tom Cat in college for a reason.

“Squishy,” he says. “I’ll send you a picture.”

“Please.”

A cool breeze ruffles the reeds and sends ripples across the water. My footsteps echo.

“Thank god there’s only one of him,” Tom says.

I shudder, thinking of all the ways we were demons as kids. Clattering around and screaming, always playing pranks

on our mom. “Tell me about it.”

“It makes you think, you know? I’ve been wondering a lot over the last few days, trying to figure out what I’ve been doing with my life and why.”

“Yeah.” Surprise progeny will do that to a man, or so I’d imagine. “Just... take care of the baby. Take care of the mother. Everything else will fall into place.”

Tom hums, and he sounds so melancholy and tired. Like a man who’s felt the world rock under his feet. “Damn, Emmett. When did you get so wise?”

“In the eight minutes before you turned up.” Tom laughs, and my heart aches in answer. This man has been my closest companion through life, even when he’s driven me up the wall, and now a little mite has come along to take my place as number one. It’s ridiculous of me, but I’m already lonely.

Well, Tom had better do right by them, or he’ll have me to answer to.

“Be good to them, Tom Cat.”

“I will.”

* * *

The next morning, Priya finds me in a philosophical mood, arms folded over my chest as I stare out of Tom’s office window. It’s one of those days where the weather can’t make its mind up, sunny one moment, spitting with rain the next. Shafts of sunlight spear through dark clouds.

I glower at the rooftops, and I guess this is why some people call me a grump. I'm not a yeller, but I've got resting grouch face.

“Wow,” Priya says, bringing our morning coffees. She zig-zags a careful path through the dust sheets, tools and tins of paint. Tendrils of steam curl from the coffee lids. “Now you look like Mr Landry. That’s the exact look he gets after talking with the city planners.”

It’s hard to imagine Tom being serious at work. He so rarely is with me. But how else would he build a successful company? We all contain different versions of ourselves, I guess.

And I’m not sure which version of me is driving right now, but all I know is I can’t stay in these four walls. I’m gonna crawl out of my skin. “Hey,” I say as Priya gets close. “Want to get out of here?”

Her eyebrows raise as she passes me my coffee. Our fingers brush, like every morning—like we have a tacit agreement to touch. Warmth tickles over my skin.

“Where would we go?” she asks.

It’s my first smile of the morning. My cheeks feel stiff. “There’s a whole, wide world out there, Priya.”

“Don’t be an ass.” She purses her lips and blows through the hole in her coffee lid. That lipstick. God. “Where exactly do you want to go?”

With her? Anywhere. I could sit in a ditch at the side of a highway with this woman and call it a good time. But she's right, I do have somewhere in mind.

Because even if it's only for a few stolen days, I want her to know me. The real Emmett—not the one in Tom's office, in Tom's clothes. We don't have much time left together.

"I could show you what I'm working on. In my *real* job, as Emmett Landry. I think you might like it," I add, and fuck, I'm babbling. Why am I nervous right now? I feel like I'm asking Priya to the world's lamest prom.

It's a casual offer. It doesn't matter if she says no. But when Priya smiles, her eyes crinkling, and nods her agreement, I soar up to the clouds in relief.

"Alright. Put the next person in the food chain in charge, then meet me in the lobby. Act normal."

She snorts, and when she shakes her head, the sunshine shimmers against her dark brown hair. "*You* act normal. Mr Landry never grins like that, Emmett. You'll give us away."

"No chance." I sip my coffee, and sweet, milky warmth spreads over my tongue. "No one sees me but you, sweetheart."

Five

Priya



I've never once played hooky in my whole life. Why would I? I'm a goody-two-shoes; Prim Priya with her flawless record and her boring, lonely life.

Not anymore. Not with Emmett here to turn me bad. I'm fizzing with excitement as we march down the street, his strides twice as long as mine, our shoes splashing through shallow puddles.

Who cares about the bid on Friday? That's for the architects to worry about. My whole job is to assist a man who's not here.

"Where's your car?"

Emmett said we'd drive out of the city.

"Truck. And it's parked at my place. You don't mind a twenty minute walk, do you?"

Nope, I do not. Not even when the clouds rumble overhead, static crackling in the air, threatening more rain, and especially not once Emmett slows his pace to match mine.

We wander along the river path, chatting about everything and nothing, pointing at the ducks, and he slings his suit jacket over his shoulder. Tugs the top buttons of his shirt free.

It's almost funny how much this man hates office wear. He's so out of place in his brother's life. How can no one else see it?

“Are you a builder?”

Emmett shrugs, jacket dancing. “Meh. Sort of.”

“A house flipper?”

His slow smile makes me so gooey. Hot and flustered and aching for something mysterious. “You're getting warmer.”

“Are you—”

“I'll show you, Priya,” he says, cutting me off. “Patience, young one.”

I'm not *that* young. There must be less than a decade between us. Probably.

Two ducks have a blazing row on the river as we walk past, lunging at each other and quacking. Spots of water glint in the air, and a rope of pond weed splatters against the bank. I brush my fingertips along the reeds, pressing them like piano keys.

When was the last time I felt relaxed like this? *Truly* relaxed, not put in a stupor by Maisie's magic hands?

I don't remember. All I know is I feel more awake today than I have in months—and yet my muscles are loose, my

heartbeat calm. The air smells like damp soil and muddy water.

“I wish you were my real boss.”

Emmett frowns at the path ahead, and oh god, I’ve said the wrong thing. My stomach sinks. Is he annoyed on behalf of his brother?

But all he says is, “You won’t think that when you see my work.”

Doubtful. I’d take any excuse to spend all day with this man. I’d even empty his trash cans and sweep floors, and I hate cleaning.

But I don’t say any of that out loud. There’s a new tension between us now, and I don’t like it. Can’t figure it out, even though I put it there.

My mouth twists as I stare out at the birds.

* * *

Emmett’s truck is big, blue and rumbling, with an empty flatbed and a single leather bench as the front seat. I cling to the handle above the passenger door, trying not to slide into his lap as we round endless sharp bends, climbing our way into the mountains.

We’re less than an hour out of the city, the urban sprawl still visible where it’s sandwiched between the mountains and coast, but already this feels like another world.

The air is pine fresh. The sun's hotter, the wind cold. And Emmett Landry, the man who teased me only this morning, is solemn as he drives the mountain path, chest and arms bulging in his twin brother's shirt.

I stare at his scarred knuckles where they clench the steering wheel, my eyes dry. Where did I go wrong? How did I ruin everything already?

"This is it." It's been so long since we spoke, Emmett's low voice makes me jump. He steers off the path onto a driveway, half hidden among the mossy rocks and trees, and my clammy hand clings harder to the handle as we bounce along a dirt road.

As I watch, Emmett gives a little shake; he shucks his bad mood like his twin brother's tailored jacket. And when he glances at me, he's smiling again. "You ready, Priya?"

"...Yeah." Ready to make some sense of this man. Talk about a weather vane.

The house is hard to spot at first, camouflaged between trees. I lean forward, the leather bench squeaking against my thighs, and squint at shafts of sunlight streaking across pale stone. We trundle closer.

There's a high, arching doorway. Stained glass windows and planters spilling over with flowers. Ivy wraps around the building like a sweater, the house stretching high into the trees, and it's like a secret temple tucked away in the mountainside.

"What on earth?"

Emmett grins properly now, guiding the truck easily over rough patches in the path. He pulls up before the house's stately wooden deck and kills the engine, the truck ticking as it cools.

"It was a chapel back in the day." Called it. "Then a boutique B&B for a while, then a family home. Then it fell into disrepair, and no one's lived here for decades."

No kidding. I can't imagine anyone backing their family car down that rocky path, setting out for soccer practice. But with a little TLC...

"It's pretty isolated out here."

Emmett shrugs, unclipping his seat belt. "It's peaceful, sure. But there's a town a mile or so away. Come on, we'll walk around the outside."

Small twigs and fallen leaves crunch beneath our feet. One sticks to Emmett's borrowed fancy brogues, and he shakes it off, cursing quietly.

Oh, yeah. This guy's at home in heavy work boots and worn jeans, not these suits. Fanning my cheeks, I peer up at the building as we walk a lap, dragging in greedy lungfuls of crisp mountain air.

Now that we're closer, the signs of neglect are clear. The cracks in the pale stone, colonized with moss and ivy; the missing roof tiles high above. Holes in the deck and a few windows boarded over.

"So you flip old houses?"

“I restore them,” Emmett says, shoulders loose as we stroll through the trees. The trunks crowd around the house, but it’s not threatening. More like they’re keeping company. Like Emmett said, it’s peaceful. “Sometimes to buy and sell. Sometimes hired by a property owner. The point is the restoration—for me, anyway.”

Birds chatter overhead. There’s a flurry of wings; the soft thump of a berry dropped on the ground.

Imagine living in a place like this. No wonder they built a chapel here once upon a time—with the sun slanting through the branches, it feels holy.

“So your brother builds new things, and you restore the old.”

Emmett puffs out a laugh. “Guess so. Never thought about it that way. Seems like even when I’m trying to do my own thing, I’m still a twin.”

And he sounds almost mournful, so that’s my excuse for why my hand slips into his, our fingers knotting together. My insides quiver at my own daring, but Emmett is calm as he holds my hand, like it’s the most natural thing in the world. “I didn’t mean it like that. This has nothing to do with your brother.”

“*The Mr Landry.*”

“The one and only,” I agree. I could never call this man something so stuffy.

A shoulder nudge. “Then who am I, sweetheart?”

“You’re Emmett.” My cheeks are burning, my throat tight. Our words are light, casual, but it feels like I’m confessing something. “Simple as that. You don’t need to be anyone else.”

He hums, squeezing my fingers. “I like that.”

So do I. I love everything about this day trip—our stolen hours together, tucked away in the mountains.

I wish it could never end.

Inside, it smells like sawdust and old stone. It’s cool in the shadows, but baking hot where the sun shines through stained glass, spilling across the floor like tossed jewels. Emmett leads me carefully across the floorboards, pointing out where it’s safe to walk, and he clings tightly enough to my hand that even if I did fall through the floor, I’d dangle like a kite on a string.

“It’s beautiful,” I say.

Emmett rubs my knuckles with his thumb. “You don’t have to whisper,” he says, speaking louder than me. “It hasn’t been a chapel for a long time.”

I chew on my bottom lip, gazing around as we troop through empty rooms and past tree-filled windows. He’s right. It’s not a chapel now—it’s an empty shell. A home waiting to be fixed up by Emmett’s capable hands, then filled with laughter and music and cooking smells, some lucky family making it their own.

Eventually, I can’t hold it in. I throw up my spare hand, then let it smack against my thigh. “Okay, I’ll say it. This is

my dream house.”

Emmett stills, and peers at me closely. “Oh? Is that true?” His pale blue eyes hold me transfixed, and I gulp. We’re standing so near to each other, still holding hands.

“Yeah.” I sound strangled, but only because he’s gazing at me like that. Warming me down to my toes. “I mean... the trees, the mountains, the history here... what’s not to love?”

“But wouldn’t you miss the city?”

I half shrug. “Maybe. But you said there’s a town close by, right? And anyway, I spend most of my free time in the city parks anyway.”

Of course, I’d have to work remotely. Or find a new job. But would that really be such a loss?

Wait, why am I thinking about this so seriously? I could never, ever afford a place like this. It’s vision board material, not an actual plan.

“You’ll have to send me pictures when it’s done,” I say, peering up at the high ceiling with its wrought iron chandelier. “Before you sell it.”

Emmett grunts and lets go of my hand. He plunges both hands through his hair, wandering away a few steps before turning back to me.

Ice blue eyes pin me in place.

It’s the way he’s looked at me in my dreams every night. The way he’s stared at me over and over in the office the last

few days, hungry and contemplative, like he knows he should look away but he can't. Like he feels the same inexplicable draw that I do.

We should avoid each other. It's the smart thing to do.

We don't.

We won't.

But it's a few days together. That's all we need to get through. A few days of playing pretend, acting like he's the real Mr Landry, like we're boss and assistant, and he's not the man who's tailor-made to make my body hum.

Seriously. What *is* it about him? Why do my insides melt as soon as Emmett glances in my direction? Why do my cheeks burn, and my hands shake, and my breaths get quick and shallow whenever he's near?

It's not fear. I've never trusted a man more, even though we've barely met.

No, it's far more troubling than that. I can barely let myself think it.

Unfortunately, Emmett is not nearly so shy.

"Those are your come-hither eyes." His smile is rueful, then it drops away. He draws in a deep, shuddering breath, chest lifting, and when he exhales and frowns at the wall, he looks lost.

Come-hither eyes? Am I really that obvious? I'm not *trying* to send out signals here, I just...

I want him.

So badly.

Would it be so wrong?

“Fuck,” Emmett mutters, pinching the bridge of his nose. He shakes his head and turns away, striding across the empty room, then wheels right back around, expression raw.

I go still, trembling with anticipation for whatever he’ll do next—like he really is a panther and I’m a giddy little rabbit who’ll let him pounce.

“Tell me something, Priya.” Emmett sounds pissed, and my pulse spikes. Oh god, what’s wrong? “Do you ever look at my brother like that?” He waves a hand at my parted lips; the blush staining my cheeks. My stupid come-hither eyes.

I swallow, heart hammering. Why is he mad? The answer is obvious. “No, I don’t.”

But he doesn’t look convinced, and now it’s my turn to bristle. Does he think I’m lying?

“No,” I say again, “I don’t look at your brother like this. Thanks so much for noticing,” I add, voice sour.

Just what every girl wants. For her crush to point out that she’s a giant, blushing mess for him, and somehow to be mad about it. Where’s the dignity, you know?

“We have the same face,” Emmett says, folding his arms like that’s such a ‘gotcha’ moment. Ass.

“Oh, yeah.” My hands ball into fists. “And that’s all that matters, right? The shape of your nose and the color of your eyes. Never mind about the way you think, or speak, or act. Us girls just want a pretty-looking poster to make out with—character’s got nothing to do with it. Jerk,” I add under my breath, and it’s a weak final word, but it’s all I’ve got.

But Emmett walks closer as I speak, the irritation draining from his face at record speed, and when he stops in front of me, he has the cheek to look pleased. He leans in. “Who said anything about making out, Priya?”

My teeth grind together. He grins.

And when he cups my face, I could howl with relief—or wring his neck. I grip two fistfuls of his borrowed shirt instead, and yank him down another inch to speed things along. “I don’t want your freaking twin. Get it in your head.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

And he’s a jerk, such a jerk, but when his mouth meets mine, his kiss is searing hot. It leaves no room for doubt, no more room for bad feelings. I suck in a shaky breath, my eyes fluttering closed.

Finally.

And... *Emmett*. That’s what I’m left with in the darkness of my closed eyelids: his name thumping through my veins with every heartbeat; his taste on my tongue. The warmth of his body, and the hard planes of his muscles under my hands,

and his soft groans of approval as he kisses me, on and on and on.

His hands are in my hair then on my back, pressing us closer. His tongue is in my mouth, and we're sharing breaths, nipping with teeth, hearts beating in time.

Is this what it's like for everyone? Kissing your crush? I'm molten.

There's an invisible hook low in my belly, twisting tighter and tighter—and when I shift my weight, I'm so slick and swollen between my legs, I don't recognize my own body.

I whimper. Want him so badly.

Emmett breaks away. "Is this okay?" He breathes the question against my neck, a fistful of my hair clenched in one hand. His lips trail over my pulse point, and I forget to answer until he gives me a tiny shake. "Priya. Do you like this?"

My hands seek out his shoulders and cling on for balance. My brain has stalled like a learner driver at a stoplight. "Uh. Yeah. I—yes. Keep going."

Emmett curses quietly, relief clear in his voice, then seals his mouth against mine. Once again, everything is right with the universe.

We kiss for a long time. Until our bodies get creaky from standing; until my throat is dry. Until the sun tracks across the midday sky.

When we finally break apart, I'm a brand new person. Reborn in his arms.

“Holy shit,” Emmett says.

I’d have to agree.

Six

Emmett



This is a delicate situation, and that calls for tact. Subtlety. Not traits I'm known for.

All I really know is: when I buckle Priya into my truck, ignoring her complaints about how she can do it herself, I'm protecting someone precious. The most precious of all.

And... I've changed. In the space of a few hours, I'm a new man.

It's unsettling. As I slide behind the steering wheel, truck dipping under my weight, I'm not sure I like it.

Because I've always been my own person. As a twin, I fought damn hard for that status—took care to build my own life, my own skill set, my own hopes and dreams, *without* my brother's input. It didn't happen overnight. Would've been easier than breathing to stay latched onto Tom, just like when we were boys, but I didn't want that.

I wanted to fly solo.

Now here I am, chest cracked open and aching, driving in silence back down the mountain path as I try to think of ways to keep this woman beyond the few days we have left. Ways I

could mingle our lives together; ways to keep her close. The exact opposite of solo.

It's alien—and so goddamn vulnerable. How do people stand it?

“It's only 3pm,” Priya says, and she sounds as dazed as I feel. How can the earth have moved like that, and it's only 3pm? “Can we go back to Landry & Co? I want to check on things for Friday's bid.”

“Sure.”

I mean, what else am I gonna do with her for the rest of the afternoon? Take her back to my apartment and bury my face between her thighs? Book us flights to Vegas for a quickie wedding? Sounds good, actually.

I'd do it, by the way. I'm all in. Both options work for me, though Priya doesn't seem like a drive-thru nuptials kinda girl.

“We'll have to act normal in the office.” It's like she's giving herself a pep talk and I'm eavesdropping. Slender fingers twist together in her lap, and Priya's given up on clutching the handle by the passenger door, so every time we go around a bend, she rocks against my side. Hm. Is there a curvier route to take down the mountains? One where she'll knock against me more?

“We can't stand too close,” she goes on. “And, um. We need to fix our clothes first. Our hair, too. We look like...”

I bite back a laugh, grinning out at the trees lining the mountain road. The afternoon sun is golden, casting deep

shadows between the trunks.

“Like we snuck out to roll around a hotel for a few hours?”

If only.

Priya blows out a breath. “Exactly. I don’t want anyone to think I’m sleeping with the boss.”

That sobers me up. My smile fades, because I don’t like thinking that either, not even as a rumor. I swear to god: Tom had better keep a polite distance, because Priya is *mine*. His assistant is off limits, now and forever.

“It’ll be fine,” I rasp. “I’ll keep my hands off you in public, I promise.”

“But only in public,” Priya adds.

Hallelujah.

* * *

We get a few weird looks crossing the Landry & Co lobby, but that’s all. Most folks go back to their own business, the women’s heels clacking against the marble tiles, the men’s voices carrying in a low rumble. Priya steps into the elevator first, wrinkling her nose at the creaky cage door, and she’s so fucking cute that it kills me not to drag her against my chest, witnesses be damned.

I don’t, obviously. I’m a man of my word, and I will never break a promise to Priya. What would be the point of me then?

“I hate this elevator,” she mutters as we rise through the building in jerky motions. She smooths her burgundy dress for

the millionth time, but no matter how much she fusses over our clothes, we're both covered in creases.

At least our mouths are less swollen. Priya braided her hair in the truck, and she refastened one of my shirt buttons, too. It was worth getting strangled by this collar to feel her knuckles brush my chest.

I nudge her shoulder. "It's my favorite part. The only old feature left in the building." She huffs, inching closer, and I inhale deeply, trying to get a whiff of her hair. I learned in the mountains: Priya smells like oranges and cloves. "Could use some maintenance, though," I say after an extra loud clang. "Tom probably thinks all old elevators sound like a bag of saucepans dropped down the stairs."

Her lips press together. That's her fighting-a-laugh face, and it's my absolute favorite.

"You're a goddess," I say.

She snorts and elbows me, like I'm kidding around. I'm not.

The top floor is quiet, Tom's office door closed to hide the wreckage inside. It looks worse than it is back there—I'm almost done with the ad hoc renovations, and it's mostly paint smell and dust sheets and clutter. An hour to clean up, tops.

Meanwhile Priya's desk is so neat. There's a potted plant, like this office isn't a jungle already. I stop at the desk corner, flicking a pen.

She brushes past me, rolling her chair out, but I'm not ready to leave her yet. Not ready to be Fake Tom again, hidden away in another room, my longing for her vibrating through the walls.

“A moment please, Miss Dhawan.”

Priya laughs and grips my shoulders as I take her waist, lifting her easily. When I set her down on the desk, the pen I flicked rolls onto the floor. Her legs widen, and soft thighs brush either side of my hips. Her dress rucks up, and I send a silent prayer of thanks to the heavens.

I'm a simple man. I know a blessing when I feel one.

And this time is nothing like those hours back in the mountains. Instead of jewel-toned sunshine and the whisper of trees, we're surrounded by electric light and the faint hum of Priya's computer.

Don't care. *She's* still unearthly, so beautiful with her smooth, tawny skin and brown eyes, her neat braid and wrinkled dress, and fuck. The way I feel about this woman is not normal.

After only a few days, I want to own her and be owned. Want to taste every inch of her skin, and catalog the sounds she makes in bed, and know what she's thinking at every minute of every day, for the rest of our lives.

Did I hit my head on the day we met?

If I did, I don't care.

And even in my own thoughts, I sound like a madman. If I don't keep a lid on this, I'll scare her away.

“Let's discuss your work performance.”

Priya buries her laugh against my throat. “Nooo, this is a terrible idea for a role play.”

“I am your *boss*, Miss Dhawan.”

“You're going to make yourself jealous again, you big goof.”

True. And... she noticed that?

Of course she did. Priya's quiet but observant. She reads people all the time—and I'm so open for her, it must be no work at all. If some people are hard to read, like a classic Russian novel, for Priya, I'm a picture book. I rhyme.

When she tilts her chin up, lips parting, my chest burns with triumph. Her mouth is still a tiny bit puffy from earlier. And kissing her again... it's like we brought the mountain sunshine back with us. Like we're still there together, tucked away from the world, where only the trees can hear us groan.

“Shh,” Priya says as I kiss down her neck, even though *she's* the source of the whimpers. Whatever. I love this little hypocrite.

“Don't worry.” My hands roam up and down her sides, squeezing her waist, cupping her breasts, finding her hips. “We'll hear the elevator all the way from the ground floor.”

I won't risk her. I'd never risk her.

We kiss again until my blood pounds in my veins; until there's nothing but animal urges in my brain. The desk creaks as her legs part wider. Soon enough, my fingertips brush the blue lace of her panties, and Priya tips back her head with a sigh.

She leans her palms on the desk, and watches me beneath heavy lidded eyes. Her hips twitch up, chasing my touch.

“Is this okay?” My heart thunders.

Priya's mouth quirks. “It's more than okay.”

Thank fuck for that.

She's slick when I delve beneath the lace. Warm and wet and soft, her body calling me closer, and her breath catches each time I brush against her clit.

Perfection. Winding her braid around my free hand, I hold her in place with mock sternness, then press one finger inside her.

“Oh.” Priya's eyes flutter, and the blush darkens on her cheeks. Her hips twitch up again, coaxing me deeper. “Oh, that feels...”

I inhale deeply, stroking her inner walls. She's softer than velvet here too. “Good?”

“So good. Oh, wow.”

A man could get used to hearing things like that. I shift closer, adjust my wrist for a better angle, and Priya's computer

screen flickers to life when her thigh knocks the mouse. One finger inside her. Two.

“Emmett,” she gasps, and my name on her lips is pure music.

“Sweetheart.” I graze her clit and stroke deeper at the same time, muffling her cries with a kiss. “Priya. My Priya.”

We’re lost in each other. Lost in this haze.

Maybe that’s why we don’t hear the footsteps in the office behind us, nor the creak of the door handle. Maybe that’s where we go wrong.

“Em?” My brother’s voice is a bucket of cold water down my spine. Priya goes rigid in my arms. My fingers are inside her.

Not now. Shit, not now.

“What are you—what the hell are you doing?” He gets louder. “Wait. Is that my assistant?”

Seven

Priya



Fired for screwing around with my boss's identical stand-in. That's a new one, surely. If I'm going down in disgrace, at least I'm original.

So humiliating. How did I get here? I'm the goody-two-shoes, not the girl who gets fired for hooking up at her desk. What was I thinking?

Well, I *wasn't* thinking. That much is obvious. And now I'm sprawled on our couch in my slobbiest sweatshirt and leggings, trying to numb the static in my head with a nature documentary about penguins.

It's not helping. One penguin got eaten by a shark, and I burst into tears. Even Rusty freaked out, wiping his sticky nose on my arm, trying to make me feel better.

"It's for the best," Maisie says for the dozenth time, her soft voice cutting through the sound of penguins squawking. She's already cooked dinner, talked everything over with me, and coaxed me through a yoga practice. Didn't really help, but god, I love her. "They took you for granted at that place. Now you can go on to better things."

“Ngh,” I grunt. As if ‘better things’ will hire me with this in my reference. The only bosses who’ll want me now are perverts.

It all happened so fast. Getting caught; getting fired. Emmett looked mad enough to tear down the Landry & Co building with his bare hands, but it’s not his company. Not his call.

Emmett. God.

I wrap my arms around the cat on my chest, Rusty’s pinprick claws needling my shoulder through my sweatshirt. He’s fluffy and warm and his breath smells like chicken today. Cute but gross.

What is Emmett doing now? Does he hate me for causing trouble with his brother? Why hasn’t he called? It’s been *hours*. Bleurgh.

Best—then worst—day ever.

These penguins mate for life, the British narrator says, and I fling the nearest cushion at the TV. “Oh yeah? Good for them!”

Rusty meows and jumps down, trotting away to find a less dramatic cuddle. He heads down the hall for Fliss’s bedroom, but since she’s in there with her new man, he’ll be crying at the door for a while.

“It’s only been a few hours,” Maisie says. “Emmett still might—”

She cuts off as our intercom buzzes, then raises an eyebrow at me. Her face is ghostly and delicate among the pile of blankets. Penguins waddle across the ice on screen.

“It’s not him,” I say as I get up. Need to keep my hopes low for my own sanity. “Bet you a dollar it’s not.”

Maisie shrugs, the blankets shifting. “I’ll take that bet.”

I saw Emmett earlier today—got up close and personal with him, learned how he smells and feels, and how he sounds when he presses a finger inside me. But as I tug our apartment door open, for a split second, the handsome man in a black Henley and jeans seems like a stranger.

Then his mouth twists. “Priya,” he says, so soft and mournful, and it’s *him*, it’s my Emmett in his own freaking clothes, and he came after all. He came for me.

I walk into his arms, giddy with relief.

He squeezes me tight, chin resting on my head.

“I talked to Tom. Well, yelled at him, really. You can have your job back if you want it.” Emmett sighs as I shake my head, but he doesn’t argue. How could I ever work there again after what his brother saw? After he already fired me once? “Then he’ll give you a glowing reference, as you deserve.”

I’m not sure about the deserving part, not after today, but I’ll take it. Lord, I will take it. Calm washes over me, and I melt against Emmett’s chest.

“Thank you.” My words are muffled by his shirt. It’s faded black cotton, soft and worn and comfortable, and it’s so

luxurious somehow to see him *out* of those suits. “Thank you so much.”

But Emmett groans, rocking me from side to side. “Don’t thank me, sweetheart, whatever you do. I caused all this mess.”

That’s so unfair! “No, you didn’t. We caused it together.”

Emmett kisses the top of my head. “Can I take you somewhere?”

He can take me to a haunted gas station if he wants to. He can take me to the world’s creepiest motel—I don’t care where we’re going, as long as Emmett’s there.

I nod, cheek squished against his chest. “Do I need to change?”

“No. You’re perfect, Priya.”

Only this man would think so, but then... maybe this man is all I need.

* * *

The ex-chapel in the mountains looks different at night. The stained glass windows look black; the pale stone glows in the moonlight. When we hop down from the truck, slamming the doors, at least the pine-scented air is familiar.

An owl hoots. “Wait here,” Emmett says softly, the breeze whispering through the trees. “Call out if you need me, okay? I’ll be two minutes.”

“Okay.”

Listen: I will *not* be a giant baby. I will not cling to his hand and wail for him not to leave me out here. I am a grown woman, damn it, and I can handle two minutes out at night on my own.

My back rests against the warm truck as Emmett disappears inside. Tipping my head back, I gaze up at the stars overhead: a sky dusted with diamonds. You can see so many more up here than down in the city.

Down in the city, where I got fired today.

“Alright.” Emmett’s voice makes me jump, but his hand slides around mine. He tugs me to the deck, leading me carefully up the steps.

It’s just like this morning, except we grip each other’s hands like a lifeline, all shyness gone, and the safe path through the rooms is lit by candles in little glass jars. Their warm glow spreads up the walls, tiny flames dancing. It smells faintly of smoke now as well as sawdust.

“Why here?” I murmur, though I’m not mad about it—especially when Emmett leads me into the room where he’s piled pillows and blankets and made a big circle of hundreds of candles. When did he get those? Did he come here earlier?

“Because you said it’s your dream house.” Emmett leads me to the blanket nest, then hovers at the edges, suddenly awkward. “So, as of this morning, I’m fixing it up for you. Unless you change your mind and want something else, anyway.” He scratches his chin, stubble rasping. “That’s fine too.”

“Oh my god.” Tears blur my eyes as I tug him down to the blankets. Emmett comes easily, boots thumping against the floorboards. He sits with his knees bent, too big for his own set-up, and he’s so beautiful with his pale blue eyes and dark hair and comfy old clothes.

I straddle his lap. All around us, candles flicker.

There’s that wicked smile.

“So you’ll still have me, Priya?” His palms slide under my clothes, coasting over bare skin, and he chuckles at my full-body shiver. Um, yes I’ll have him. Today and every day for the rest of my life, if I can help it. “Even after I got you fired?”

I draw his bottom lip between my teeth, tugging until he hisses, then soothe it with a kiss. “Even then.”

And our breaths start soft, but they get quick and ragged. Our kisses start sweet, but soon enough, we’re all teeth and tongue. Emmett grips my hips, surging up beneath me with a grunt, and he’s touching me everywhere, tasting my throat, my chest, yanking my sweatshirt over my head and tossing it out of range of the candles.

“Beautiful.” My bra goes next, which is just as well, because dingy white cotton doesn’t look good even in candlelight. Oops. “Ah, fuck, Priya. Your tits could make a grown man weep.”

Is that a good thing? Judging by the reverent way Emmett cups and kneads me, and by his hungry groan when he sucks my nipple into his mouth... yes. It’s a very good thing.

The room spins, and I grip the back of his head, thighs suddenly wobbling beneath me. I'm *aching*, and with every pull of his mouth, the tingling between my legs gets even worse. His mouth is so hot and wet.

Emmett moves to the other nipple, and I bite back a wail of frustration. Feels so *good*, so impossibly good, and it's nowhere near enough.

"Touch me." I grab his wrist and shove his hand between my thighs. There's zero grace in me right now, only the bone deep need to feel this man everywhere. "Emmett, touch me."

He hums against my breast, licking and sucking, but his fingers slide beneath the waistband of my leggings.

Fingertips brush. My hips buck forward. He's teasing me there, grazing me where I need him, but it's not enough. Not enough, damn it! Gripping his hair, I yank his head away.

Emmett sits back, breathing hard. His blue eyes are nearly black, swallowed up by his hungry pupils, and his lips are reddened and shiny. His stubble has burned a path over my skin.

"I was enjoying that," he says, so calm. And that mock sternness, that dominant edge, makes burning need twist through me like a stomach cramp.

"Emmett." My fist lands on his chest, pressing in warning. How is he still clothed? "I swear to god. If you don't fuck me soon, I'll scream."

His grin is blinding, his skin golden in the candlelight glow. Rough hands guide me up, yanking my leggings and underwear down my legs, then he tugs them off my feet.

“What about your clothes?” I ask as Emmett unbuckles his belt and works his jeans open, because he draws out his cock—thick and long and weeping a bead of moisture—then settles back on his palms, job done.

“No,” he says idly, rolling his head back and watching me with a lazy grin. “I think I’ll fuck you like this the first time. You’ve seen me in those monkey suits so many times, Priya—let’s really drive home which twin you’re with.”

Ha. Is he honestly still jealous? Still worried about the twin thing?

“Oh, please.” When I kneel on either side of Emmett’s hips, the blankets cushion the floorboards. He’s so warm and sturdy beneath me—a masterpiece of muscle and bone. “You could wear anything your brother owns, and I’d still know it was you. And vice versa.”

He blows out a breath. “You say the sweetest things.”

A hand in my hair tugs my head to the side. There’s the scrape of teeth on my neck, and a hot stripe of tongue, and I’m so distracted I nearly leap a foot into the air when fingertips find my clit.

“You’re mine.” Each rough circle of his fingers drives me wild, bucking against his hold; each thrashing movement burns my scalp where he grips my hair. But it’s perfect, so

perfect, and when he presses a thick finger inside me, I wail in relief. “That’s it, sweetheart. Tell me you’re mine.”

“I’m yours, Emmett.” His snarl of approval must addle my brain, because I add: “Did you know penguins mate for life?”

Emmett pauses, one finger wedged deep in my body. Outside, the breeze taps against the windows, but at least up here in the mountains, there’s only one witness if I die of embarrassment.

“Oh?” he says at last, thumb swirling over my clit. I buck and grit my teeth, cheeks flaming. “That’s nice. I do too.”

He does?

It’s too late. I’ll be dead of humiliation. My whole life, I’ve been waiting for the right man to have sex with, and now that I’ve found him... oh god. I can’t believe I said that. So lame.

“Priya,” Emmett says, voice thick with humor. “Stop fretting. That was sweet. *You’re* sweet. Now let’s wrap up this meltdown because I really, really need to fuck you.”

Okay, yeah.

I need that too.

“Tell no one,” I warn, rocking my hips to get him moving again.

Emmett kisses my throat, finger crooking inside me. “Who would I tell?”

“I don’t know. Your brother?”

The animal noise that tears out of him—the way his body tenses, hands rougher, voice hard—I know it’s messed up, but it takes my breath away. I cling to his shoulders, so thrilled as he says, “*Never*. He’ll never get a single goddamn detail about you. If he ever even *looks* at you the wrong way—”

“So jealous,” I tease, laughing happily as Emmett draws his finger out and shoves my thighs wider. He guides me to his shaft, jaw rock hard and suddenly so serious.

I don’t mind. I *love* that he wants me this badly, that he’s snapping and snarling, so possessive over me.

That I’m treasured. His.

Despite his tensed muscles and the violence thrumming under his skin, Emmett is gentle as he nudges inside me. “Go slowly,” he clips out as I sink down one inch, then two. “Priya, go slowly.”

Tipping my head back, relishing the sting, I ignore him and sink all the way down onto my man.

Eight

Emmett



“**P**riya!” Her name tears out of me; my hips surge up. She’s taken me by surprise and now I’m fighting with my own body, wrestling down the urge to fill her up. My balls are drawn up tight, and I’m harder than stone. “Jesus Christ.”

She laughs, arms winding around my neck, and grinds against my lap.

My shaft throbs inside her.

“This nearly lasted two seconds.” When I grab a fistful of her hair, Priya smirks. She *wants* to push me; wants to ride out the consequences. Literally. “You’ll pay for that, imp. Not such a good girl now, are you?”

Her teeth are on my throat. Her laugh is warm against my neck. She’s so wild and free like this, so blissfully unselfconscious, working herself over my shaft and crying out in pleasure.

Priya Dhawan is a force of nature. Of course she is.

Can’t believe I get to touch her. To taste her. To do *this*.

For the rest of our lives, I'll prove how much I adore her. But first...

I spank her nipples lightly, more to shock her than to hurt, and as Priya cries out and rides me harder, they flush a deeper brown. A blush stains her chest and throat, and her thighs are damp with sweat, and wherever I touch her, the muscles shiver.

I grip her ass and squeeze. Part her cheeks and fuck her deeper. Move her roughly, guiding her over my lap, belt buckle scraping against the floor—just because I can and I know she likes it, and every stroke into her channel sends red-hot sparks crackling down my spine.

Priya likes me in charge, bossing her around. Nothing fake about it, not right now.

“Mine,” I grunt. “Mine.”

Blankets snag against the floorboards, and my boot heel knocks a candle. It rolls to one side, little flame guttering out, a wisp of smoke dancing away.

“*Mine.*”

It's the only word left in my brain, and I grit it through clenched teeth. My abs ache, and I'm sweating into my clothes, and every roll of Priya's hips makes me want to pound on the floorboards and howl.

“If I'm yours, prove it,” Priya says, so breathless, already grinning. She whoops as I roll us over, laying her back on the blankets then shoving her thighs wide apart.

I hold her there, splayed open. Loom over her like a ravenous beast, the open edges of my jeans dragging against her skin.

“The fuck did you just say?”

She laughs as I thrust deep inside. It chokes off into a moan as I ride her without mercy, muscles flexing, jaw clenched, fighting against my own rueful smile.

She’s so mischievous, under all that good girl poise. So playful. God, I love this woman.

Priya arches against the blankets when I rub her clit. She lets out a string of curses, eyes squeezed shut and head rocking side to side.

And I don’t hold back. I keep riding, keep rubbing. Change angle to hit a spot inside that steals her breath, and then pinch her clit, because why go easy on her? That’s not what she wants from me, not what she needs.

Priya’s mouth drops open in a silent scream.

Yeah. That’s more like it.

The beautiful imp asked for this, and now I’ll wring her out. I’ll feel her come on my cock, and I’ll commit every damn detail to memory. And when Priya walks away from here tonight—bowlegged, if I have my way—she’ll know down to her bones that I’m her man. Me. No goddamn *if* about it.

“Oh my *god*.” Her nails score my back, blunted only by my shirt, and her legs wrap tight around my waist, squeezing.

It puts my wrist at a weird angle, but I keep rubbing.

No mercy.

And... it's like a bomb going off. You know in action movies when there's a huge explosion, and the camera zooms out miles and miles to show a shock wave rippling over long grass? That's what it's like when Priya comes.

Her body locks up, suddenly rigid. She breathes in little pants through her nose. And though her center is completely still, these shock waves coast through the rest of her body, trembling her muscles and making her squeak.

Perfection. I ride her through it all, muscles aching, dragging it out as long as I can, and once she slumps into the blanket nest, I shove deep inside her and let my head rest on her shoulder. I'm breathing hard.

With her palms tracing wobbly circles on my back, my shaft twitches and fills Priya up in long spurts, over and over.

It's the most peaceful I've felt in my whole damn life.

"That tickles," she says against my ear. I turn and kiss her, gentle and deep, and we're sticky and sweaty but I don't care.

I'm telling you: paradise.

This is only the beginning.

* * *

One year later

“Just promise me if you don’t like it, you’ll say so. There are so many other houses, Priya. So many places we could live. I swear to god, I won’t mind if you don’t like this one.”

My wife’s hand on my thigh usually calms me right away, but today is different. I clench the steering wheel, guiding my truck up the mountain path, and send up silent thanks for the pine-fresh breeze washing through the windows to cool my cheeks.

What if she hates it? Or no, I could deal with that, but what if Priya hates it and is too polite to say so? What if I trap the love of my life in a home she hates, out here in the mountains?

“I promise I’ll say something.” For once, my girl is serious, sensing how much her answer means to me. “But Emmett? I’m going to love it.”

We’ll see.

It’s a bright morning as we drive up to the old chapel. The path is smooth, with no more potholes or trenches, and Priya smiles at the stained glass windows, sparkling clean and jewel-toned in the sun.

“Oh my god, look at that deck! I remember this whole place was such a ruin.”

Not anymore. If I’m fixing up a house for my wife, you’d better believe she’s getting the best of everything. Best materials, best workmanship, best intentions. The best of the best.

Tiny twigs crunch beneath my boots as I round the truck. I open Priya's door, helping her down.

“We can go visit the nearest town after this, to make sure you still like it. It's a mile away, but it's a good size for the mountains. And they have a school and a doctor's office a grocery store and all that life crap.”

“Life crap,” Priya repeats, fighting a smile. “Good to know.”

The deck stairs are solid, with a hand-built table and chairs by the rail, the wood stained to weather the outdoors.

That set gave me the devil's own splinters, but it's all worth it when Priya coos over it, one hand cradling her bump through her yellow sundress. “Oh, we could drink coffee out here in the morning! And eat outside in the summer. Maybe there's room for a barbecue...?”

She turns to me, eyes shining with hope.

“Way ahead of you.” Thank god. “It's around the back. And I've started baby-proofing the inside, come and see what you think...”

Already, I'm breathing easier, shoulders relaxed. Priya really does love it, I can tell, so this tour feels less like a horrible test, and more like a privilege. I'm showing my wife the home I built for her and our child.

And if she likes it enough to show her approval in certain physical ways... so be it. I will bear that burden.

Birds chatter in the branches, and the breeze rustles the trees. The sunshine tints pink and purple as we step inside, and it's warmer in here, and so peaceful.

“I built some wood stuff by hand, but I figured you'd want to choose most of the furniture yourself. Curtains and sofas and whatnot.”

Priya's hand finds mine. “Good instinct.”

Leading her through our new home, I really don't mind. Priya picked me, didn't she? So she clearly has excellent taste.

“Can we put up bird feeders?” she asks, watching a woodpecker flit past the window. She already knows the answer to that.

“Priya?” I squeeze her fingers, my chest so warm. “This is our kingdom now. We can do whatever the hell we want.”

* * *

Thanks for reading Grump Gone Bad! I hope you liked it. :)

For Maisie's story, check out [Whole Lotta Grump](#). *He's surly and mean. He makes grown men cower... and I give him massages every week.*

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: Whole Lotta Grump

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 on us 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 fish tank opposite the boss's desk, little fishies 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 make the earth 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 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 stern 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. 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.”

* * *

Check out [Whole Lotta Grump!](#)

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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