



**ENJOY THIS
EXCERPT OF**



From the very beginning of our ten-month massage training program, I was smitten with Samuel. I wasn't the only one; the entire class loved him for his easygoing nature and infectious enthusiasm for everything, from fixed-gear bikes to pickling recipes, the way he goofed off to lift our spirits as we all drooped by hour five of instruction.

Samuel was dyslexic, and identifying anatomy terms like "posterior" and "anterior" made his brain swirl. This was where I shined, spouting out anatomical positions like I was singing "Head, Shoulders, Knees, and Toes." Samuel needed to get a solid grip on these terms, so he could fully understand what was ticking just below the surface of the skin, not to mention pass our certification exam. For weeks, I'd been tutoring him after class, basking in the extra doses of him, realizing that I'd been as deficient in daily sunniness as a Vermonter in vitamin D.



"This," I said, "is plantar flexion and adduction." I stood barefoot on the hardwood floor. Our massage school was spacious, housed in an old, revitalized mill where workers once made buttons, and then paper, and then plastic crates, and then nothing. I rolled onto the outside ridge of my foot.

He grinned. I grinned.

"You have the loveliest smile," he said.

I swatted at him. "Focus." On the inside, I lit up. Was it possible he was smitten with me too?

One day, the two of us were paired up to give each other practice massages. This was routine, practicing on a partner.

Having a crush on your partner was not.

It was the first time I'd be physically touching him. And he me.

Besides Cher's hugs, my parents' arm squeezes, and now these practice



massages, I hadn't really been touched since I broke up with my last boyfriend, Alan, over a year ago. Not that he had been a barrel of affection.

All of this meant that I was jumpy and nervous as Samuel and I negotiated entering our therapy room, who would go first, who would lay hands on whom, feeling each other's bodies, albeit through a layer of clothing. Keeping our clothes on didn't make things much less awkward, since sweat had visibly dampened the underarms of my T-shirt. I insisted he lie down first, face in the cradle, as I windmilled my arms around and fanned underneath my armpits.

Then, finally, I began the slow, methodic work of plying muscles apart. I smoothed the fabric of his shirt as if I were preparing a tablecloth, and then I trailed my hands from his shoulders to his lower back, where I pressed with the heels of my hands. He wasn't doughy, but he was a little



squishable, with ample love handles and some extra pounds padding his broad shoulders, which relaxed me. He was also fit from hiking and cycling, and his butt, I couldn't help noticing, was kind of perfect. I fought the urge to run my hands over the back of his neck and up into his messy crop of dark curled hair.

I leaned my face closer and inhaled, smelling the citronella bug spray he used, plus a hint of licorice: Tom's of Maine toothpaste. The wholesome concoction made me swoon: Samuel was earthy-crunchy lite, a step above making his own baking soda toothpaste, thank god, a man who, as far as I could tell, still believed in wearing deodorant.

Kneading the lower trapezius, I took another gulp of his intoxicating scent, my face so close to his curls that I could have nudged one with my nose.

Then I smelled something else.

I paused my hands over his body and wrinkled my nose,



incredulous.

“Did you just fart?” I said—accusing my actual crush of farting. But the stench was undeniable.

Samuel mumbled something I couldn't understand.

“Huh?” I turned my ear to him, wanting to pinch my nose.

He lifted his head an inch and turned it to the side. “I think that was you.” He set his face back in the hole.

“That was not me,” I said.

Facedown, he nodded his head yes.

“It was not!”

He picked up his head again, turned to the side, and whispered, “You're excused.” “Oh my god, you know it wasn't me.” I jabbed my thumb into his arm.

Samuel tried unsuccessfully to stifle his laugh, shaking the entire massage table on its skinny legs. I teetered, repressing a giggle. Samuel roared, and he pushed himself



back into child's pose. He softly beat his fist into the massage table as he laughed.

"That position is going to make you fart more," I said. My laugh gave way, a dam bursting, which kept him going.

"It smells," I said through breaths.

Samuel nodded his head, barely able to speak. "It's lingering," he finally managed.

"Oww." I moved my lips, stretching my jaw. "My mouth hurts from laughing."

"My stomach muscles!" Samuel clutched his belly. We chuckled, winding down, and I became aware of how quiet the room was without the laughter. He lay down again but propped himself up on his elbows. We smiled at each other.

"Let me do you," Samuel said.

"What?"

"Do you," Samuel repeated and then reddened. "Massage you. It's your turn."

"We're probably out of time." I tugged at a corner



of the sheet.

“We have ten minutes. Let’s do this.”

Samuel hopped down from the table, not caring that his hair was matted down on one side. I hemmed and hawed, moving slowly, paralyzed by sudden shyness. It was one thing for me to massage him, but for him to massage me? True, we were professionals, but the act felt unbearably intimate.

He eyed the clock.

“We now have nine minutes. You’re taking away my practice time. I’m beginning to think you’re not serious about this training.”

I hoisted myself up onto the massage table, placing my face in the cradle. We both forgot to change the face cradle cover, and my mouth grazed where his mouth had been, my face resting against the still-warm paper, as if the two of us were slowly dancing cheek to cheek.

“Let me know if this pressure is okay,” Samuel said. He softly



planted both palms on the sides of my spine in the wide-open prairie of my lower back, his fingers outstretched as if he were tracing his hands to make a kindergarten drawing of a turkey. He took a deep breath, and I softened as he exhaled. He glided his right hand up my spine, pressing the heel of his hand as he went, and then pulled his right hand back down as the left hand moved up, like a lever and pulley.

Every time my shirt began to bunch and ride up, he tugged it back down, covering any inch of exposed skin. Moving from the base of my spine, he pressed his thumbs inch by inch up the vertebrae. I'd never been touched like this—there was nothing sexual about it, but there was a deep caring, a quiet listening to my body and a response from his hands.

My shyness melted into the table, dispersed into the air like burnt sage, and I was devoted to



to every movement he made, tracking his hands but simultaneously untethered from my thoughts. It felt so good. So eyes-roll-back-into-my-head good. So sigh-out-loud good. And not just because he was skillful but because he was taking the time to get to know me. It was as though I was being discovered and understood all at once.

Those nine minutes sailed by, and when I pushed up from the table, Samuel stared at me in awe, as if he, too, had been found. Or found me, the person he'd been looking for. As if he wanted to whisper, It's you.

