



JESSICA GLEASON

MADISON MURPHY

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SAMPLE CHAPTER

1

IT'S OFFICIAL.

Madison Murphy unknowingly kissed her lackadaisical Wisconsin lifestyle goodbye. She'd lost her laid-back privileges somewhere between banging her blind date and waking up naked on the living room floor next to a stack of uncooked meat. Confused and terrified, she shuddered on the less than clean floor of her home, a pool of meat juices seeping into her wooden floors and a large pile of what looked like cat puke drying near her head. Confused and ashamed, Madison didn't understand her odd situation. But, after a day of heaving hairballs, she began to connect the dots. Her terrible date had infected her with some unfortunate affliction. She was too embarrassed to see a doctor, but noticed her appetite, temper, and appearance had changed.

Madison always struggled with her body. Even when she was skinny by Western standards, she'd look in the mirror to see an overweight weirdo. Over time she'd gained weight and her body image only worsened. She developed an off-putting self-deprecating sense of humor to shield herself from the

world. It didn't matter if she lost a few pounds or wore a flattering dress, she only saw a pudgy monster. Since her unfortunate blind date, her body image had taken a nose dive right off a cliff. She'd gained the ability to change into a stupid Siberian tiger at a moment's notice—as if that was a useful skill. Maybe a fire-breathing dragon or a cute little pixie fairy ...

But a Siberian tiger?

Not so much, especially in Wisconsin.

Tigers aren't exactly running around in the wild in the Midwestern United States. Perhaps if she'd woken up as a deer she could have fit in. Though, her chances of getting an arrow through the gullet would have probably risen tenfold.

Madison had always felt othered, out of place. The ability to turn into a gigantic kitty cat every time she got upset certainly didn't help her learn to love herself or teach her to fit in. She'd taken a while to come to terms with her situation and instead of embracing a phenomenal new ability, she hated it with a fiery passion. One body was tough for her; two felt impossible.

Her temper flared as she realized she could never leave the house again. Maybe were she a milder-mannered individual, she could run out for sundries every now and again; but for anxious hot-tempered Madison, it was a no go. Her anxiety seemed to trigger her new feline form and she didn't exactly need people turning their heads and staring because she was hacking up a hairball every fifteen minutes. She got enough rude stares for her love handles and milkshake thighs and was already self-conscious before the whole "big cat" debacle. Her new ability pretty much guaranteed full shut-in status.

Perhaps she could just pack things up and go to Vegas in search of Siegfried and Roy. They could probably put a fat tiger to work. Or maybe she could meet up with a down-on-his-luck street magician and they could start their climb to the top. He wouldn't even need to learn any magic for the trick to be a success. Vegas sounded too hot and dry for her, but it might be a viable option. She thought the sweating might even help her shed a few pounds.

After dismissing her dreams of a Vegas residency, Madison shook her head and fought for a moment of sanity. Her tiger form had an affinity for ruining her belongings. She was now the proud owner of some newly shredded curtains and an empty fish tank. Despite brushing her teeth several times, she was still suffering from neon tetra fish burps which made her feel guilty about eating Huey, Dewie, and Louie. She assumed her colorful fish hadn't appreciated being a late-night snack.

Nothing about a blind date had seemed interesting and she wished, more than anything, that she'd trusted her gut instincts and stayed home. She looked in the mirror, noting the bags under her eyes, her body reacting from the lack of sleep. She tried convincing herself that turning into a cat was a vivid nightmare. A lucid dream would have been better than being a shape-shifting weirdo. Perhaps her situation was a complete break from reality. It was amazing that the nice men in white coats hadn't hauled her off to the comforts of a round rubber room. Nothing made sense anymore. While she'd never been thrilled with the world, this felt devastatingly wrong.

As she sat, stewing in her misery, someone tentatively knocked on her door. She looked up and yelled, "No one's home. Go away."

But her doorknob jiggled open and Harold stepped through.

"I need to start locking my damn door. Leave. Now. I don't want to see you."

He ignored her, closed the door behind him, and waddled over to a worn recliner before plopping down.

Madison's stomach growled as she folded herself forward, trying to tamp down the pain. She clutched the arm rest of her worn couch while sweat beaded on her forehead. Her disheveled home, usually littered with doom piles and stacks of unread books, looked as if the police had come in and tossed the place overnight. As the wave of pain subsided, she straightened and looked at the object of her hatred. Her affliction had grown more intense since her estranged one-night stand, Harold, had walked through the door.

She glared at the man sitting in her favorite chair. This was all his fault; she'd suspected as much, but his appearance confirmed it. His dismissive, quizzical expression only made her want to slap him. That was, until she gagged on another hairball. Her old stomach ulcers were much better than hairballs, but she didn't really have a choice in that matter anymore.

He had been a Friday night pity fuck. Whether he was the one who had taken pity on her or she was the one that had taken pity on him was inconsequential. She was lonely and horny and he didn't object to getting naked with her.

She should have listened to her mother. "Don't be ridiculously easy all the time," and "You better be able to deal with the consequences of your actions!"

Not that anyone could have anticipated this particular situation; but those words swirled around in her head in her mother's sing-songy "I told you so" tone. Damn her mother for actually giving her some good advice.

"Madison, are you even listening to me?" He shouldn't even be there. The stout balding man was quite possibly the most annoying person—thing—she had ever met.

She stopped rocking on the couch for a moment and looked his way. Lost in her head and wondering if he had actually said something, she spoke. "You know, I don't feel like seeing you right now. I'm quite busy, so if you could possibly show yourself out and jump off a cliff that would be great." She gestured toward the front door. "See? Door. Over there. One foot in front of the other."

"Madison, I think I need to talk to you about some things," he said, clearly unsure of himself and staring at her with wide puppy-dog eyes. "Do you think you could just listen to me for a couple minutes? I promise I'll leave you alone and never come back as long as you let me explain what's happening to you. It's crucial."

She stifled a cough, hoping the hairball had passed. While she's puzzled out parts of her new affliction, she didn't really understand what happened or how she came into this unfortunate

state-of-being. She could endure his presence for a few minutes. Perhaps he had some sort of solution or cure for her current predicament.

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Her overly plucky neighbor and reluctant friend, Sarah, had set Madison up on a blind date, much to her chagrin. Sarah was always sticking her nose where it didn't belong, poking her head into Madison's chronically unlocked apartment and trying to play matchmaker. She'd declined Sarah's efforts over and over and eventually Sarah had put her foot down. She made it clear that non-cooperation was not an option lest Madison be made to submit to something much more mortifying than a blind date.

Sarah strolled along with Madison to the café where she was to meet up with Harold. She didn't trust Madison to actually go on her own—good instincts on Sarah's part.

Harold. Who was called Harold anymore? Really ... this one was going to be a bigger winner than the last one. *Harold is a stupid name—why do I let her drag me into these stupid situations? Harold. Gross!*

Madison had done her best to feign interest in Harold "The Tax Attorney." It was unlikely that she appeared at all convincing, but who would be when forced into a date with schlubby Harold?

The injustice of it all!

By the time they arrived at the café, she was agitated, jaw clenched, and wanting to run. Sarah shoved Madison inside and pointed to the unattractive bald man sitting in the corner.

Great, just great! He was worse than anticipated. *Way to go Sarah ... Do I seem that desperate?*

"Madison, you go in there right now, or else!" she ordered.

"Dude, isn't it bad enough having to see what type of man you think I should be going on a date with? Do I *have* to eat with him?"

"Yes, you moron! You're going, and there's nothing you can do about it. Don't be so shallow. Harold is nice." Sarah

snorted with a sense of finality before shoving Madison further into the café, then barricading the door, her small stature never stopping her from a big dramatic gesture.

Madison's eye twitched while she glared at Sarah through the glass before turning around and heading for Mr. Not-Even-Good-Enough-For-Right-Now.

She knew she wasn't all that great to look at. She'd eaten a few too many cupcakes, and it showed right around her twenty-five year old mid-section, but the fact she was chubby didn't mean she should be set up with people like Harold. Maybe someone in the goofy but charismatic category, like Zach Braff or even Kevin James—that seemed right.

She made her way over to Harold's table and sat herself down with a self-righteous thump. "Hey, Harry. Madison. Nice to meet you. How about heading to the bar for some drinks, my treat?"

Harold, taken aback by her abrupt arrival, nodded and the two made a beeline for the door. He followed in her wake all the way down the street to the nearest bar, an Irish themed dive bar whose walls were decorated with old license plates and neon beer signs. It was dark and quiet, and the alcohol was cheap.

"I do actually prefer Harold," he uttered in a voice barely above a whisper.

Of course he did. He was lacking in the confidence department and seeing him, she understood why. Madison wanted to think she was sophisticated and could love a person for their strengths, but she always fell back on a shallow assessment of looks. It made her feel hypocritical, but she did it every time she met someone new. She thought she'd work on it later when she was older and more mature.

Still, Harold wasn't without his charms. Once he loosened up, he was almost witty and after a few drinks his blurred form was near attractive. They played bar dice and Madison laughed at his lame jokes until she was good and hammered. As the night wound down and the sparse patrons stumbled out of the bar, she decided it would be a fabulous idea for good ole'

hazy Harry to come home with her. “So, Harry, how about going back to my place?”

Without waiting for his response, she grabbed him by the hand, paid the tab, then ushered him out the door. They caught a cab to her place, buttons popping and hands wandering across each other’s bodies on the ride home. The cab driver probably didn’t appreciate their sloppy amorous touching, but he never interjected.

Alcohol was apparently a dangerous thing for Miss Madison Murphy.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

JESSICA GLEASON is a lover of horror and fantasy in their various shapes and forms and can usually be found penning gory tales deep into the night. She enjoys painting monsters with acrylics and singing a mean hair metal karaoke. Her daytime persona teaches college English and Communications in the American Midwest.

Her other releases include *Playing Hooky* (Unnerving Books), and *The Dangerous Miss Ventriloquist* and *The Fabulous Miss Fortune* (Evil Cookie Publishing).

For information on her projects, follow her on Instagram (@j.g.writes), where she hosts a monthly horror writer challenge, #WeWriteHorror and her website, jgwrites.carrd.co.