



**TANGLING
WITH THE**

Boss

A NIGHT TO REMEMBER BOOK THREE

CASSIE MINT

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Tangling with the Boss

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One

Hazel



Quitting this job is a last resort. Just to be clear. I don't take the amazing pay or the generous benefits for granted, and I *know* the people can't possibly be any nicer at my next office. Grapevine is as good as it gets.

But I can't stand it any longer. Can't go on this way. I'm weak, okay?

If I spend another year in love with the boss here, pining after him while he barely tolerates my presence, I'll go mad.

My fingers tremble as I fold my resignation letter, the paper still warm from the printer. Heartbeat thumping in my ears, I slide the letter inside a snowy white envelope.

It's fine. So fine! This is totally fine.

I'm not tucking my bleeding heart away in this envelope. Not losing a piece of myself. That's ridiculous.

But when Leo Corbin bellows for me from inside his office, that thunderous voice rattling the walls, I jump up with a squeak, my cheeks flaming. Like I'm doing something wrong out here, something sneaky.

"Hazel? Hazel! Get in here."

Seriously, why do I love this man? He's such an ogre sometimes. Huffing out a breath, I snatch up the envelope and edge around my desk, mentally rehearsing the moment that I'll give it to him.

Just place it on his desk and run away. Be a coward! That's why it's in writing, yeah?

We're on the top floor of this building, just the two of us alone up here. My desk is out in the antechamber, where I can halt visitors and save Leo from ninety-nine percent of the conversations he would otherwise hate. His office, meanwhile, if you ever get a peek inside it, is all huge, sparkling windows and abstract paintings and views of the city stretching away in all directions. His fortress of solitude.

There's only one wall between us. Only one door.

But lately, it feels like a vast chasm. One that I can't get across, no matter how hard I try.

Because I desperately want to be welcome in that room—and preferably balanced on the boss's knee. But meanwhile, he sees me as just as much of a pest as everyone else, and it *hurts*. It makes my chest ache.

Hoo, boy. Okay. Tugging my purple dress straight and firming my shoulders, I rap on the boss's door.

"Come in," he rumbles, and I swear to god—the vibrations from his voice tingle through my feet. My palm is sweaty on the door handle, but I fumble it open and slip inside to where the ceiling is higher somehow, the sunlight brighter.

Leo watches me from beneath lowered eyebrows. His dark hair looks thick and tuggable; his eyes are piercing blue.

And he's scowling.

Always scowling at me.

"Everything ready for tonight?" Leo Corbin is a man of few words, and he leaps straight to the point. Shaking off my spiraling thoughts, I fix a bright smile on my face.

"Yes! Everything's ready. The caterers and the band will set up this afternoon."

He grunts again. That's Leo for 'good', though you wouldn't know it from his grumpy frown and firm jaw. If anyone ever gets this man to crack a smile, the fabric of reality might tear apart.

"Tonight needs to go well, Hazel." The boss rubs his jaw, glowering out of the window. "I'm not throwing another fucking party. This is it. Make it count."

“Roger that.”

As if I’m half-assing this event! The Grapevine ten year anniversary party has haunted my freaking dreams for months. More than once, I’ve woken up sweating in the night, reciting guest lists and drink options. I’ve been *on* it. This event is my masterpiece.

But Leo doesn’t care about that. If anything, he seems crankier than usual, slumped in his chair and tugging on his collar, so his morning meeting with our star composer must not have gone well. The way his shoulders bunch up is a dead giveaway. I can read this man’s moods like a weather report.

And this is bad timing. The boss is rattled already.

But this envelope feels like it weighs one hundred pounds. I *need* to set it down. Need to get this over with.

“What’s that?” Leo is doing that one-eyed squinty thing he does when he’s got a headache brewing, and I’m already itching to run and fetch him a painkiller and a cool glass of water. Hate when he’s in pain. But my feet are glued to the floorboards, my stomach twisting into knots as Leo drags the envelope across his desk and rips it open with a scowl. “You already brought the mail...”

He trails off, frown deepening as he reads.

Silence fills the office, swelling between us and cutting off my air supply.

Oh, god. Oh, *god*.

Can’t breathe. Can’t think.

And this is awful. Easily one of the top ten worst moments of my life, and I’ve had some doozies. In fifth grade, I tried to dye my blonde hair pink with a box kit and botched it so badly, half my hair fell out. Everyone at school called me Gollum.

“I’ll work my notice period—”

Leo cuts off my squeaky voice. “You’re not leaving, Hazel.”

Well... I am. That’s what my resignation letter says, right there in black ink. But sometimes the boss needs a minute to process bad news, so I suck in a huge breath and keep going. He’ll catch up, and then he’ll probably be glad.

No more perky assistant trying to cheer him up on gloomy mornings! No more elevator rides with me chatting his ear off about my weekend baking disasters! No more *me*!

Leo will see. This is for the best.

He'll get the serious, silent assistant of his dreams, and I'll get a chance to nurse my poor, bruised heart far away from his scowls.

"My new role starts on the fifteenth. If you would be willing to write me a reference before then, that would be—"

"New role?" Leo blinks and sits up straighter. His desk chair creaks under his impressive bulk. "You have a new job lined up? This is serious?"

Lord, give me patience. This man is experiencing a shock.

"Yes," I tell him gently. "I'm starting a new job on the fifteenth."

He's already shaking his dark head. "No, you're not." His big hand twitches around my letter, crumpling it into a ball. "You're not leaving, Hazel. This is not happening."

When I burst out laughing, Leo looks at me like I've gone insane—and maybe I have. The jitters have taken over my body, and there's a weird ringing noise in my ears. None of this is going like I expected, but I have to push through, because the second I leave this room, my jelly legs will give out. I'll collapse into a sad puddle on the floor.

"You don't even like me, boss."

He blanches, shaking his head.

And I wait for the words to come—any words, anything nice at all, because if Leo asks me in this moment to stay, if he says he actually likes me, I'll do it. I'll cave.

But he gives me nothing. Nada. Zip.

The big, scary boss opens and closes his mouth like a goldfish. The man I'm desperately in love with can't deny that he finds me annoying.

Oof. New low.

And meanwhile, a crack splinters through my chest, pain searing my insides. See, this is why I'm leaving. It's self preservation, that's all, because I deserve to find a man who *likes* me. A man who's thrilled by my bouncy attitude and who can't get enough of my chatter. Hell, even just a boss who'll tolerate my presence without wincing.

So although this hurts even worse than I thought it would, although it feels like I'm sawing off a limb, I need to stay strong. Need to hold out for something healthier. Something *sweet*.

For starters: a man who sees me as more than a planner on legs. An *annoying* planner at that.

“You let me handle tonight’s party.” If we didn’t have this giant desk between us, I’d pat Leo’s shoulder. He looks shell-shocked. “You focus on that reference, okay? And I’ll set up interviews for my replacement. Don’t worry, I know your wish list by now: someone who won’t speak unless they’re spoken to, and who doesn’t believe in Flapjack Fridays.”

AKA: not me.

“Hazel,” Leo says.

“And I know you hate interviewing, but I promise this will all be over in no time. The fifteenth will come so fast and then you’ll forget I was ever here, I swear! This transition will happen in a blur.”

“*Hazel.*” The boss sprawls back in his chair, breathing hard, face chalky-pale. If I didn’t know better, I’d call for a doctor, because he looks *ill*. Does he really hate change that much? He coped okay when we repainted the lobby. “I mean it,” he says. “You can’t leave.”

Master of the universe. That’s who Leo Corbin is in this building; that’s who he’s been to me for the last four years. The all-powerful master of all he surveys... including me.

When he gives orders, we hop to it.

When he asks questions, we rush to answer.

No one tells him no. What Leo wants, he gets, and that conditioning is *strong*. It takes every ounce of my willpower to raise my chin and meet his gaze square-on.

“This is happening,” I say, and if my voice is shaky as hell... it still counts as a victory. I’m standing my ground, damn it! I’m protecting my wrung-out heart! “I’m sorry, but it’s not open for discussion. Some things aren’t.”

And it’s not the best parting shot, but I turn on my heel anyway—because one more minute in this room will make me fray into a thousand pieces.

Two

Leo



The door clicks shut behind my assistant, and I stare at the handle with dry eyes. Waiting for it to jiggle. Waiting for Hazel to burst back in here and declare this is all a terrible joke—that this is the long-awaited sequel to the April Fool’s Day cream tart made of shaving cream that she left on my desk last year. Yet another example of her god-awful sense of humor.

The clock ticks on the wall.

Swallowing hard, I wait.

But... nothing. The door handle is still, and there are no sounds from the next room. No muffled giggles as Hazel relays her prank on the phone, and no creak of floorboards as she eavesdrops outside the door.

Nothing. She’s just... gone.

She dropped that bombshell, blew my goddamn life apart, then just... left.

Jesus Christ. Has she really found another job? Is that true?

Gusting out a ragged breath, I lurch to my feet and out from behind my desk, then pace back and forth in front of the windows, wracking my brain to make sense of this. Trying to sort through the wreckage.

Back and forth, I march. Back and forth.

Sunshine sparkles through the windows, warming the air, and my office smells like rug-cleaner and fresh paper. This room is more familiar to me than

any other in the world, and yet everything now seems off-kilter. Wrong.

Were the walls always that eggshell color?

Is that *really* my desk?

And my trusted assistant didn't really just quit... did she?

Because it doesn't add up. I pay Hazel stacks more than any other assistant in the city, and her benefits package is even better than mine. She gets everything, damn it, every possible perk that money can buy, and that's still not enough?

Growling, I rake both hands through my hair and tug. My headache squeezes my skull, and unease roils in my belly.

Because I *know* Hazel likes her work, and she loves her colleagues. She's always babbling on about them, telling me stories about this accountant who had a baby, that designer who's getting married, the janitor who's learning to knit. Every tedious detail. Hazel loves Grapevine.

She knows my employees better than I do. She wouldn't leave them without good reason.

There's something I'm not seeing here. Something must have chased her away. But what?

Striding to my desk, I snatch the phone from its cradle—and freeze. Because this is where habit tells me to bark at my assistant, yelling at her to get in here and fix the problem. This is where Hazel bounces in with her swishy blonde ponytail and her big doe eyes, practically fizzing with excitement at being given a task.

Christ, it's like she was raised by golden retrievers. *No one* can be that perky—it's not natural. And yet... she is.

But perky or not, this isn't something Hazel can fix for me. Hazel *is* the damn problem.

She can't leave me.

This cannot happen.

When I throw myself back into my desk chair, it's because my legs won't hold my weight any longer. My muscles have stopped working, and my chest is icing over from the inside, and god, what is happening to me? What the hell is this nightmare? Why do my insides feel all wrong?

I'll double her pay.

Triple it.

I'll—Hazel can have this office, and I'll take her desk out there. Anything if it means keeping her close. My hand shakes as I press the intercom button, summoning her back, but there's no response. No creaking floor out there, no crackle of her sweet voice down the phone. She's not there.

I bury my face in my shaking hands.

Of all the blows I could weather, of all the losses I could take, this is not one of them.

This. Cannot. Happen.

* * *

There are three important meetings scheduled for today, and I cancel all of them. I'd cancel the party too if Hazel hadn't worked so hard on it for months, but I won't do that to her. Besides, it will only hurt my cause.

There's a private bathroom attached to my office, and I lock myself in there for the next hour, drowning myself under a long, hot shower. The steam fills my straining lungs and the heat soothes my taut muscles, but nothing seems to touch the ice spreading through my chest. It's a lost cause. *I'm* a lost cause.

I towel dry, thinking of Hazel.

Get dressed, thinking of Hazel.

Push back my damp hair and stare dead-eyed at the foggy mirror, searching for something, *anything*, that might tempt a woman like her to stay.

Stay—as my assistant, obviously. Nothing more. I won't kid myself that a pure ray of sunshine like Hazel would ever want... *that...* from a moody asshole like me.

Because what do I even have to offer her? Muscles and money and a special signed agreement with HR? That won't work. Hazel is a commitment type of girl. A *relationship* girl, and that is something I am ill-equipped for.

Doesn't matter. I'm getting off topic.

By the time I emerge in a cloud of soap-scented steam, Hazel's muffled voice floats through my office door once again. My numb legs carry me across the room, through the doorway to the antechamber and over to her desk, where I stand and loom over her, arms folded. My icy heart slams against my ribs.

“One second,” Hazel says, covering the mouthpiece of her phone. She peers up at me, eyebrows pinching together. “Hey, boss. Is your hair wet?”

Yes. So?

I needed a scalding hot shower to reanimate my corpse. It happens.

“We’re going out this afternoon.” Away from these weird eggshell walls, closing in on me. Away from the empty, pointless future looming ahead, barren of all joy and flapjack crumbs. “Wrap up whatever you need to finish here.”

Hazel gapes. “But the party—”

“We’ll get there in time for the set up. What’s your address? Get someone to deliver your dress and whatever else you need to my apartment. You can get ready there.”

“But I—”

“This is time sensitive, Hazel.” Her notice period is two weeks, after all. Only two weeks. And in the meantime, I can’t let her out of my sight—not if I want to be able to breathe. “If you want a good reference from me, I still expect your best work while you’re here. That includes this afternoon.”

An angry flush creeps up my assistant’s throat, but she forces a smile onto her face. How many times has she done that for me before? Pretended everything is fine? Shit. Why didn’t I pay attention? If I’d known she was unhappy, I could have fixed this mess long ago.

A tinny voice echoes down the phone, and Hazel jumps. “I’ll be ready,” she tells me, then turns back to her phone call. “Oh, I know! Aren’t suppliers the worst?”

That’s my cue to leave her be, to let her wrap up in her own time, but I don’t move an inch. Don’t think I can willingly leave Hazel’s side until she agrees to stay. My body won’t allow it.

When it’s clear I’m not leaving, Hazel rolls her eyes and wraps up the call. The phone clicks back into its cradle, then she sighs up at me. Shrugs.

“I’m done here. Where are we going?”

“It’s a surprise.”

To both of us. Haven’t thought that far ahead yet.

All I know is: I need Hazel by my side to feel okay.

Three

Hazel



Leo Corbin has never taken me out on errands before. He's not the type to want company, you know? Too surly. He's more of a big, cranky storm cloud that drifts down the street, with people leaping to get out of his way. At least, that's how *I* think of him.

So it's weird seeing other people react to my boss, especially out here in the real world. After four years at Grapevine, bringing him coffees and soothing his prickly temper, I'm so used to seeing him through his employees' eyes.

The stern, brooding boss. Handsome but icy. *Unapproachable*.

Turns out there's another way to see him.

Because out here on the bright, sunshine-drenched sidewalk, Leo can't walk ten meters without someone batting their eyelashes at him, smiling a come-hither smile, or shamelessly raking him with their gaze. Even dogs strain on their leashes, trying to get closer to the giant, dark-haired man with a permanent scowl.

At his side, I am invisible. Hurrying to keep up with his long strides, and trying desperately to ignore the prickles of jealousy every time someone checks my boss out. Even the dogs.

And I get it, okay? Leo is gorgeous. A stone-cold ten. He's tall, broad-shouldered, and severe in that way that gives me full-body shivers, so I can't

judge. I'm a card-carrying member of the Leo Corbin Simp Society—and yet if one more random pedestrian bites their lower lip at my boss, I am going to vomit on his pristine white shirt.

“Ugh.” Call me petty, but after the most shameless eye-fucking yet, I can't help scoffing. “That redhead practically drooled on her shoes.”

“Mm?” Leo glances down at me, distracted. “What are you talking about?”

“Her.” My thumb jabs over my shoulder. Leo frowns behind us, nonplussed, then takes my elbow to guide me around a crack in the sidewalk. His hand print tingles against my bare arm. “That woman wanted to climb you like a tree, boss.”

He harrumphs, turning his back on her. “I'm not open for climbing.”

That should *not* make me so warm and gooey.

It's a beautiful day for heartbreak. The sidewalks bustle with people, and the golden sun warms the tops of our heads. The air is fresh, green leaves whisper on the trees that line this street, and after a while the rumble of distant traffic vibrates into my stiff muscles and soothes their knots. My chest loosens, and I breathe deeply.

I can do this.

I can let this man go.

I can walk away from the only all-consuming crush I've ever had; the only case of deep, unrequited love in my adult life. I've got this!

It's good that I'm leaving. There's no need to feel so hollow, like someone's scraped out my insides with a rusty spoon. There's no need to steal glances at my silent, solemn boss, fretting over whether he's taking the news well. Of course he's okay! Why wouldn't he be?

This is the right thing to do.

This is healthy. Smart.

So why do tears burn in the back of my eyes whenever I think about leaving Leo? Why does picturing another assistant behind my desk make me feel sick? Why does the thought of serving another boss, day in and day out, make me want to veer off this sidewalk into traffic?

“Hay fever?” my boss clips out, frowning straight ahead.

“Yeah,” I lie, sniffing and dabbing my eyes with my wrist. “It's, um. It's all this pollen.”

Leo sighs and takes my elbow again, tugging me into a small, cool store. “If

I'd known, I'd have picked somewhere else," he says. "Tell me if you need to leave." It takes three long seconds of blinking around us before I realize what he's talking about.

Because: flowers.

Tubs and tubs of flowers, all freshly cut and fragrant. This whole store is an explosion of color, with delicate petals, green leaves, and the scent of damp soil. My heart climbs into my throat as I peer around us, struck dumb by this magical cave.

It's so beautiful in here, and I *love* flowers. What kind of monster doesn't?

But what on earth is Leo Corbin, hater of all gifts, doing in a florist's shop? And why am *I* here, called out on this urgent errand?

Ooooh no.

My stomach twists. There is one obvious reason.

A woman in a sky-blue apron bustles out of a backroom before I can ask, wiping her hands on a dishtowel. She's in her forties, with a kind mouth and generous curves, and black hair scraped back into a low bun.

Her gaze sweeps over Leo first, then me, and her eyes crinkle with pleasure.

"Oh, I love appointments like these," the florist says, striding forward. Her name badge says '*Hi! I'm Renata.*' "Half the time, these men don't care a fig what their girlfriend's favorite flower is. They just want me to pick so they get the brownie points, as though I can guess from nothing! But bringing you here—that's much better." She winks at me, and heat floods my cheeks. "You've got a good one here. Make sure you hang onto him."

"Oh... no..."

This is so embarrassing.

"The full experience, please," Leo says, flashing a dark card before placing it on the sales counter. His cheeks are as pale as ever, with no hint of a blush, so I guess this isn't awkward as hell for *him*. Must be nice.

"Is this for the party tonight?" I whisper as Renata marches to a display of roses, humming over the thorny stems. They rustle in the bucket as she picks out the prime flowers. "Because I planned decorations. It's all taken care of, I swear."

But hopefully that's it. Hopefully this man is not about to trample on my heart like a big, clumsy carthorse.

Leo fiddles with his shirt cuff. “No, it’s not that.”

“Then why—?”

Pale blue eyes turn on me, rooting me to the spot. “Can’t a man buy flowers?”

“But—”

“I can,” he interrupts, dark eyebrows spearing down. “I can buy whatever the hell I like. And for the next two weeks, you still work for me, Hazel. Correct? You’ll still do what I say. And the task I want you to complete is to pick out your favorite flowers.”

My hands ball into fists. This jerk! I swear to god.

“I’m waiting,” Leo says.

Waiting. Scowling. Planting his feet and folding his arms, like he’s ready to wait me out for hours if necessary. Like months could pass and the seasons could change outside this store, and he’d still be here, glaring down at me. Ugh.

Fine. Fine! I whirl around and stare blindly at a bucket of tulips.

“It would help if I knew what your woman is like so I can pick.” Renata makes a small noise of dismay, but I can’t look in her direction. Can’t stand to see the disappointment—or worse, pity—in her eyes. “Or Renata could tell you. She has more experience with this than I do.”

There’s a long pause. Leo coughs once, then steps closer to my back. “Hazel... the flowers are for you.”

Sunshine spreads through my veins, even as my brain throbs with confusion.

“So they’re a goodbye gift?”

When I turn back, Leo is scowling at a tub of yellow dahlias, his stern mouth twisted in distaste. He straightens when I look at him, and then we’re staring at each other. Lost.

The air changes. Gets thicker.

My hairline tingles.

But I won’t overthink this. So many times over the last few years, I’ve kidded myself that the boss and I have shared these *moments*. Invisible sparks crackling between our fingertips when our hands accidentally brushed; a swooping feeling whenever we’re alone in the elevator, like we’re dropping down, down, down to the earth’s core. All those times our eyes locked and it felt like time stood still.

I’ve told myself so many pretty stories; replayed those moments over and

over in my head, until I lost track of what was a daydream and what was real.

“It’s not goodbye.” Leo speaks first, throwing down the words like a challenge. His chest puffs up, like we’re fighters squaring up in the ring. “Because you’re not leaving.”

Ha. “You can tell yourself that if you like. And while you’re at it, you can order the world to stop turning. I’ll still be gone in two weeks.”

Leo scowls at me, and for once in my life, I scowl back. The expression feels weird on my face, because I’m always the perky one. The happy-go-lucky girl next door. The ball of sunshine who cheers everybody else up, and makes sure people are happy and comfortable.

Not right now. Right now, my forehead is creased, and my eyes burn with frustration, and my cheeks are red-hot. I’m a first-time glarer, but I’m giving it my all.

“Pick your favorites,” Leo mutters at last, turning away. “We’re not leaving until you do.” Then my boss stomps back outside, the door slamming shut behind him, and stands guard at the window, his back to the glass.

Silence stretches for the space of three heartbeats, before Renata sniffs and shakes herself.

“Well,” the florist says. “Men, eh? Can’t live with them, but can’t get rid of them either. It’s the basis of my whole business.”

That’s what I’m afraid of.

Four

Leo



Hazel chooses a simple bouquet of white daisies from the florist, then a small box of toffee-nut cookies from the bakery next door. After those two modest gifts, she point blank refuses to accept another thing from me, and insists on heading to the rooftop to help set up tonight's party.

Whatever. I don't care.

There never were any *errands*. I had no plans except spoiling her all day. Nothing else matters except keeping my assistant within arm's reach, and changing her mind about quitting—and sure, I'd rather do that while buying her a diamond necklace or hand-feeding her chocolate dipped strawberries, but we can lug around sun loungers on my building's rooftop if Hazel prefers.

After an hour of fussing with the furniture, she props her hands on her hips, breathing hard. Long flyaway hairs have frizzed out of her blonde ponytail, and her skin is dewy with sweat where it's not covered by her purple dress. All around us, sun loungers have been dragged into clusters of two or three, safely away from the swimming pool's edge.

Static crackles across the rooftop as the band sets up their sound system over on the pop-up stage. It's a hot, sticky day, and we're on top of a skyscraper, held up to the sun's fiercest rays. Is Hazel drinking enough water? Does she need sunscreen?

“Should we fence it off somehow?”

Dabbing her wrist against her forehead, Hazel squints at the pool, with its sparkling turquoise water lapping the tiles. It would be so good to slip into that cool water right now. To soothe my heated skin, and feel the anguished pounding of my heart vibrate the water, and burn off this turmoil with fifty hard laps, barely coming up for air. Especially if Hazel came in with me.

Imagine it. That blonde ponytail trailing across the surface; those slippery wet legs twining around my waist...

“What if someone falls in?” she says.

“That’s called natural selection.”

“Leo!”

For god’s sake. “Would you fence off a fountain?” I point out. “Or a lakeside?”

“Well, no. But—”

“There are no children invited tonight. No high risk guests. And let’s say you roped the pool off—a rope wouldn’t stop anyone falling in, would it?”

“I guess...”

She’s still stewing, her big eyes fraught. That worried pinch between her eyebrows won’t go away. My thumb itches to smooth it, then trace the length of her pert nose. Since when am I so desperate to touch her?

“I could hire a lifeguard,” I hear myself offer. “Someone to blend in and hang around the sun loungers. There’s still time.”

Hazel beams up at me like I’m her hero. And fuck, *this* is the gift that finally warms her up to me? Not the flowers or the cookies. This is the trick to punching down the wall she’s built between us?

A rent-by-the-hour lifeguard. This woman makes no sense.

“It’s done.”

My footsteps echo against the rooftop tiles, and I tug my phone out of my pocket, weirdly shaken by that whole interaction. By that *smile*.

Because what if I’m going about this all wrong? What if there’s something else Hazel wants from me that I’m not giving? Planting myself in a patch of shade, I close my eyes and let the breeze wash over my cheeks. My frozen heart is still numb inside me, the ice creeping through my chest.

One painful beat rattles my ribs. Two. Three.

Then I snap back into action and start typing on my phone, finding a last minute lifeguard. There's still time to figure Hazel out. Still time to fix this.

There has to be.

* * *

"What do you want from me, exactly?"

The question makes Hazel jump where she's loading up a refrigerator behind one of the pop-up bars. Crates of beer and wine bottles rest on the bar top, and Hazel lines their labels up neatly as she fills the chilled shelves. "What do you mean?" she asks, ducking her head. Her ponytail swishes over one shoulder.

Isn't it obvious? So far, guess work has gotten me nowhere. That means I need to go on the attack. After all, I didn't build a thriving business by being timid.

The sky all around us is stained pink, and the puffs of cloud are lit golden by the sunset. We've been working at this for hours already, stopping only for a rushed late lunch of deli sandwiches. The guests will arrive soon, and I'll grit my teeth and smile through the whole night, and then Hazel can finally forget about this nonsense and focus on what is important: staying with me.

"You need to tell me how I can stop you from quitting."

"I already have quit," Hazel points out, lining up another beer bottle with a soft clink. "It's done." And she doesn't need to set up these bars, doesn't need to help with every single task, but my assistant actually *likes* being helpful. She told me once that it soothes her nerves.

Do her nerves need soothing right now?

Well, they can join the damn club.

"There must be something." Rounding the bar to start loading a second refrigerator, I steal measuring glances at Hazel as she works. She *seems* fine. A little flushed, maybe, but then we've been in the sun all afternoon, and I'm keeping an eye on that. Already made her sip her way through two big water bottles. Already made her apply sunscreen as I stood over her, glowering whenever she missed a spot. "You liked the lifeguard thing."

Hazel hums, lifting a Pinot Grigio from the crate and scanning the label.

“You’ve got me there, boss. I do like it when people don’t drown.”

She’s missing the point.

“You liked that more than the flowers, I mean. And you didn’t want a raise.”

I already tried that approach—plus more paid vacation, a fancier desk chair, and a membership at the fancy wellness spa three blocks from the office. All afternoon, I’ve been calling offers across the rooftop. Nothing. Not even a nibble.

My girl-scout of an assistant cannot be tempted.

Soon to be *ex*-assistant.

Shit.

My frozen chest feels like it might cave in, but I wrestle the panic back down. That won’t help. Nothing will help until I’ve solved this problem.

“It’s a simple enough request.” My tone is too harsh, my words too clipped, and I should handle this better but I can’t. Not when she’s threatening to suck all the meaning from my life. “Just tell me what you want from me, damn it.”

Because if Hazel’s not behind that desk, what’s the point of going to the office at all? If I’m not working to give her the best possible salary and package, what’s the point of Grapevine? What’s the point of *me*?

If Hazel is not near, will my heart even fucking beat?

“There’s nothing I want from you,” Hazel says, mechanically filling the refrigerator shelves, but the back of my neck prickles. Something about the measured tone of her voice gives her away: she’s lying! The beautiful wretch.

“Anything,” I say, squaring up to her in the narrow bar space. “Anything at all. Name it and it’s yours.”

Hazel’s lips press together in a thin line. And she keeps working, keeps lining up booze bottles like it’s the most important task on earth, but I catch her elbow the next time she straightens up and hold her in place.

“Tell me.”

String lights wink from the temporary roof above us. This whole rooftop has been transformed into a sea of twinkling lights, and they sparkle in my assistant’s honey-brown eyes.

She juts her chin. “No. I mean—I can’t. There’s nothing.”

“Tell me,” I say again, squeezing her arm softly. Her bare skin is warm and soft beneath my palm, and the way my body reacts to the contact, you’d think I’d

stripped Hazel bare and spread her beneath me.

My gut clenches.

My pulse throbs in my throat.

My temperature climbs and my throat bobs, swallowing nothing.

Want her. *Need her.*

“I don’t... I mean, there’s not...”

My assistant trails off, her chest rising and falling beneath that purple dress. We’re closer, somehow. Gravitating nearer. My hand is on her bare arm, and her flyaway hairs dance on the breeze, and those soulful eyes flick down to my mouth and stay there.

Slam. Slam. Slam.

If my heart beats any harder, it’ll punch clean through my rib cage.

Hazel is still looking at my mouth.

Is that—does she want—?

“What if I kissed you?” My voice is hoarse, but I make the offer. Need to know. “What then? Would you stay?”

All the other sounds of the rooftop—the clatter and calls of the catering staff, the slosh of the pool, the flap of gazebos in the breeze—it all fades away to nothing.

Hazel’s gaze shoots up to mine. Her pupils are blown.

And my common sense screams in the back of my head, begging me to think this through, but I smother that voice with an imaginary pillow. Not now, damn it.

Body thrumming, I close the distance between us. Her dress brushes against my shirt, and Hazel lets out a soft whimper.

This can’t be real.

But when I bend my head, going slow, she doesn’t back away. No: Hazel pushes onto her toes and flings both arms around my neck, like she’s been longing for this for years. Like it’s been exhausting her tiny frame, trying to hold all this passion back.

Her mouth finds mine. Our lips brush, and our breath mingles in the twilight, and it’s like a punch in the gut.

Need curls through me, buckling my knees and stealing my air. Don’t care if swarms of hired staff can see us here; don’t care if they gossip. Don’t care about

anything except the maddening woman in my arms.

Cupping the sides of Hazel's throat, I slant our heads and kiss her again, harder. *Harder*. Long and deep and desperate, tongues sliding, teeth nipping, and I've never felt anything like this before in my whole lonely life.

She's just so fucking *sweet*. Warm and perfect, like a mug of hot cocoa, with her needy whimpers and her clinging arms and the way she arches against me, silently begging for more. It's so much more than I bargained for and so much less than I need, and I've lost track of the sky above and the ground below. Lost track of everything except Hazel's lips on mine.

What was the plan here, again? How will this work?

"*Mmph*." She gives as good as she gets, kissing me eagerly. As though I'm a man she could truly desire; as if this is shaking her world apart too. But that can't be right, because of all people, Hazel knows what I'm truly like.

The moods. The surliness.

The way I'm incapable of love. After all, my parents hated each other and me. I never learned the right way to do any of this nonsense.

And sure, I *want* Hazel. That's been clear from the moment I met her four years ago, when the sun rose in my gloomy universe. And yes, my body craves hers in a way that I've never wanted anyone else, but it's deeper than that—like she settles my soul, or something.

But that's impossible.

And this is only one kiss—to make her stay.

One kiss.

God.

Tearing my mouth away feels wrong. *Wrong*. It's all wrong to take my hands away and step back; all wrong to feel cool dusk air wash over my front. Everything about this is wrong, and nothing is right in the world unless our hands are on each other.

"We should get ready for the party," I mutter.

A few minutes alone will give me a chance to scrape up my last surviving brain cells.

"S-sure. Okay." Cheeks pink, Hazel wobbles out of the pop-up bar. She doesn't look back at me.

Five

Hazel



My boss makes zero sense. One minute, he's gazing at me hungrily, yanking me to his front, and kissing me until my head spins. Making all my heartsick daydreams of the last four years, all those imaginary kisses that played like a movie reel in my head, pale in comparison to the real thing. Drowning me in perfect, overwhelming details.

Like his heat.

His *hunger*.

The hard planes of his chest and the little growls in the back of his throat, and the way he kissed along my jaw, breathing in the scent of my skin like he wanted me to fill his lungs.

Then... this. We're back to cold, professional distance between us again, like nothing ever happened. Like it meant nothing. If I didn't know better, I'd think I hallucinated the whole freaking thing—except my lips are kiss-swollen, and there's a telltale slickness between my legs that will not stop tormenting me as I walk. Thoughts blurry, I dodge a server carrying a stack of trays and stumble across the rooftop. The band is warming up, random notes humming on the breeze.

Gotta get inside.

Gotta change for tonight.

And hell, I'm going to need a long, cold shower first to get my head on straight; to calm the ache in my lower belly and my feverish pulse and all the silly, foolish voices whispering in my head that *he wants me, he wants me, Leo actually wants me.*

Leo Corbin does not want me.

Leo Corbin does not do relationships. Period.

And if he ever broke that rule, it would never be for me. I annoy him too much, driving him to distraction with my perkiness first thing in the morning. He's grumbled about how unbearable I am more times than I could ever count—and I try really, really hard not to count.

But... unbearable, am I?

That kiss didn't *feel* like he found me unbearable. Not for those few perfect minutes, at least. No: it felt like Leo Corbin was ready to sling me over his shoulder and carry me across the city rooftops, King Kong style.

Back inside the building, my spare key lets me into the boss's penthouse apartment. I've been here dozens of times before, running errands for Leo, but my heart has never raced like this as I step inside. My skin has never flushed hot, like I'm doing something wrong.

I'm not.

I'm *not*.

Leo is the one who told me to get ready here, and I remind myself of that fact over and over as I gobble down two of my toffee-nut cookies in the kitchen in place of dinner, shower in his bathroom, dress in his bedroom, and keep my gaze fixed on anything except the bed. Still, it's impossible to miss the faint spicy scent of his aftershave. What color are Leo's bed sheets?

No! I will not look.

If I do, I'll probably rope myself to the headboard and beg my boss to ravish me just once for old times' sake. Sane, normal assistants don't do that.

So, nope. Not crossing any lines in here, thank you, brain. Instead I tiptoe back to the safety of the living area and slide on my strappy high heels with a wince.

Ouch. I stand up straight and shake out my arms. My feet throb like crazy, and it's already been a long day, but I'm sure that my silvery heels and pink cocktail dress do nothing to hide that fact. At least I've redone my ponytail,

smoothing down those stray, frizzy hairs, and dabbed some gloss on my lips.

The key sliding into the lock gives me barely any warning. The door swings open, and Leo strides inside, barreling into the kitchen.

He's still in his work clothes from earlier, the white shirt open at the collar and rumpled by our kiss—and duh, of course he hasn't changed yet. I've been hogging his apartment.

Leo's black hair is wind-ruffled, and dark shadows cling beneath his icy blue eyes. He looks wan as he chugs a glass of water; today is taking a toll on him too.

Is he okay?

Wish I could cancel this party. Even though it's selfish, even though I've put in months and months of stressful work, I'd love nothing more right now than to close that door and block out the rest of the world. To hole up in this penthouse with the boss and let him persuade me again to stay with a kiss; to switch on his fancy remote-control fireplace and curl up together on the sofa for more... negotiations.

Because Leo kissed me.

He *kissed* me.

Doesn't make any sense.

But my stupid heart doesn't care about logic and boring stuff like that—it's too busy doing cartwheels around my chest.

"You look..." Leo trails off with a frown, placing his empty glass down with a thud.

My excitable heart sinks, finally simmering down, and I pluck at the pink fabric. It *seemed* fine when I checked myself in the bathroom mirror, but maybe this outfit is all wrong. "Oh. Okay. I could change back into the purple dress from earlier?"

"What?" Leo's frown deepens, then he jerks his head from side to side. "No! That's not what I—no. You look nice. That's what I was going to say."

"Nice," I mumble. "Thank you."

And I'm not digging for compliments, I swear, this man just scrambles my brain with a fork whenever he's near. But Leo huffs and folds his arms, leaning back against the counter like I'm being difficult.

"Beautiful. You look beautiful, Hazel. Alright? Is that what you wanted to hear?"

Um. No? No one wants compliments through gritted teeth.

“I’ll head up to the roof,” I say, all business. No point wallowing, is there? And arguing sure won’t make things better. Besides, I’ll be gone in two short weeks, and these tiny stabs of disappointment won’t hurt me anymore. “You change and follow, then we can greet the guests as they arrive.”

“Wait, Hazel.”

“Mm?” Tugging my dress straight, I won’t meet the boss’s eye. Why should I? He kissed me, then bit my head off. Life is too damn short for this nonsense, and that is why I’m leaving.

“Will you stay?” Leo presses, gripping the counter hard, and it’s so freaking rich of him to ask me that now, right after grumping at me over nothing.

“No.”

The boss puffs up, outraged. “But I kissed you. We agreed—”

“*We* didn’t agree on anything. You tried something and it didn’t work. Nice attempt, though.” My heels clack on the floor as I march past, and jeez, I hate playing hardball like this. Hate walking away when I can feel the misery pouring off him in waves, but what else can I do?

This man could crush my heart without a second thought—and he doesn’t even want it. He wants me to stay as his assistant, nothing more, and he’s willing to toy with my feelings to win his prize.

I should be madder than this. I should stomp and yell.

Instead, I’m just tired.

“Follow me up when you’re ready.”

* * *

For the next few hours, Leo Corbin is my handsome, brooding shadow.

He stands so close our arms brush as we greet the guests arriving on the rooftop; he fetches me drinks and canapes, fussing over whether I’m hydrated. When my shoe strap comes undone on the way to check on the band, it’s Leo who kneels down and fixes it, those blunt fingertips brushing over my bare ankle and making me tingle.

Mind games.

That’s what this is.

Just another ploy by my wily boss to make me want to stay with him, fetching his coffees and scheduling his meetings for as long as we both shall live. Another attempt to wear me down, crumbling my will power with sweet gestures and rumbled kind words.

No! It cannot work.

I *can't* stay.

"Would you like to dance?" Leo asks as I hover at the edge of the dance floor, checking for dropped glasses or any other trip hazards. Nothing. The staff are doing a great job tonight, but I can't seem to unclench, no matter how reliable they are.

This party is my responsibility. And now it'll be the thing everyone here remembers me for—if they remember me at all.

A lump sticks in my throat. I blink up at Leo, confused. "What?"

"A dance." He takes my hand, his expression more patient than I have ever seen, and tows me gently into the crowd. "You've watched enough people having fun, Hazel. Now you should try it."

"But I... but we..." My legs are clumsy as I trip after the boss, and when he turns to face me, I practically fall against his chest. "Okay, fine."

Curious glances flick toward us from all directions—because Leo Corbin does not dance. He does not engage with mere mortals. And yet here he is, lifting my arms around his neck before placing his hands on my waist, the heat of them searing through the thin fabric of my dress. Here he is, turning us in steady circles as the band plays a smooth song, staring down at me with those frosty blue eyes.

Leo's mouth curves up on one side. Holy shit, is that a smile?

"You needn't look so terrified, Hazel. I won't step on your feet."

"Only metaphorically."

His laugh is rumbly and so nice.

"Stay," Leo murmurs, squeezing my waist with his big, gentle hands. "Stay with me."

"No."

Emotions war on his face, battling for dominance, and I watch them play across his features, fascinated.

I'm used to Bored Leo. Irritated Leo. Focused Leo. Hangry Leo.

Not Emotionally Tortured Leo.

“Tell me why,” he demands.

My fingers scrunch against his lapels. “I can’t.”

“Can’t stay? Or can’t tell me why?”

“Both.”

The boss puffs out a breath, but he doesn’t scold me or storm off, even though this conversation must be maddening for him. Instead, he moves us closer, hands gripping possessively at my sides.

My tummy quivers.

My heartbeat pulses between my legs.

Thumbs trace along my sides, tickling me through my thin dress.

Stars wink overhead, and laughter and chatter buzz beneath the music. The rooftop is thronged with guests, everyone bright-eyed and excited to be here, on the mysterious boss’s rooftop. Seeing his pool, eating his canapes, drinking from his open bars. Leo Corbin is secretly a generous man—people just don’t notice that fact when he’s glaring at them.

“Will you tell me before you leave?” Dread curls through the boss’s low voice, his expression pained.

“Yes,” I promise.

I can do that much. After everything Leo Corbin has given me, surely I owe him the truth.

One final confession, one rip of the band aid, and then we’ll draw a line under this whole messy affair.

Six

Leo



Hazel stays on the rooftop until the last guest has been poured into the car service we've provided for tonight. She thanks the band personally and helps coil their cables. She helps the staff to pick up stray glasses and empty beer bottles, then fills crates with dirty dishware ready to go down to the catering van. Hell, she'd probably ride there tonight and single-handedly load all their dishwashers if she could.

"Oh no you don't." Snagging her wrist as Hazel moves to follow the last hired staff off the roof, I hold her back. "You're done for tonight, sweetheart. Take those shoes off."

She's been hobbling for the last hour when she thinks no one is watching. Well, joke's on Hazel, because I'm *always* watching, and she can't hide her aching feet from me.

My assistant rolls her eyes, but when I kneel and gesture for her foot, she leans on my shoulder and offers one leg.

Such graceful arched feet. Such feminine toes, the nails painted pink.

Christ. Am I suddenly a foot man? This woman has ruined me.

"You did way too much tonight." Scolding Hazel will make me feel better. Teasing the fiddly little straps undone, I slide off one high heel then the other, placing them carefully on the roof.

The stone is still warm, radiating the heat of the day, even as the wind whips across the empty rooftop and ruffles Hazel's dress and hair. Without the crowds and the gazebos to get in the way, the wind moans and pushes her tiny frame so hard she stumbles.

That's enough of that. Straightening up, I take Hazel's hand and tug her across the rooftop to the pool. Cool water will make those toes feel better—and if she sits, she'll be sheltered from the worst of the wind.

"Do you think everyone had a good time tonight?" Her voice is thin and tired, and she clings to my hand like a lifeline as I lead her to the pool. So goddamn sweet. Always worrying about other people, always thinking about her coworkers and friends, while Hazel has worked herself into the ground for this party.

"Yes. Sit on the edge and put your feet in the water."

A hiss escapes her as her feet break the surface, but once she's settled, Hazel tips her head back with a blissed-out sigh. "That's better."

"I'm very wise." Dragging a sun lounger closer, I sit down and stare at the back of my assistant's blonde head. Her long ponytail dangles between her shoulder blades, ruffled by the breeze. What I'd give to wrap that rope of hair around my fist...

"Modest, too."

When I crack a smile, my face aches from the unfamiliar motion. My insides are plummeting, falling into nothingness.

Would Hazel ever care for me too?

Could she ever... *love* me?

What if I worked every day to earn her love and loyalty? What if I turned all the fierce dedication and focus that I used to build Grapevine onto my assistant, building something new between us? Something real?

My frozen heart thumps harder, prickling back to life.

Yeah. I could do that.

I *want* to do that.

What else is life about if not Hazel? Why have I been so stubborn? So blind? Sure, I'm a clueless jackass when it comes to matters of the heart, but I've got a brain, haven't I? I can learn.

For her, I'll learn anything.

“Hazel,” I say quietly. She hums, eyes still closed and face tilted to the stars. “Will you tell me now? Will you tell me why you won’t stay?”

Just like that, the peace flees her expression. Her forehead pinches, and her shoulders go stiff, and Hazel’s mouth presses together in a tight line. And I’m opening my mouth to coax her, to make those shoulders relax, when my assistant pushes off the side of the pool and plunges into the water fully dressed.

“Hazel!”

I lunge up, panic choking my throat. Shit! Can she swim? What if that dress tangles around her legs? What if she’s too tired after a long day in the sun?

Doesn’t matter. I’m already charging forward, diving in after her fully clothed. Already thrashing through the ghostly water, lights glowing from the sides of the pool, desperate to reach her.

A small body. Pink fabric twisting in the water. An elbow in my gut.

We break the surface, both gasping for breath.

“What—*Leo*—what the hell is wrong with you?” Hazel fights out of my arms and turns on me, soaked and furious. Her eye makeup has smudged, and her pink dress clings to every inch of her pint-sized body. “I’m not drowning, you ass.”

My mouth opens and closes as I gape at her, enraged.

“You jumped in! Who does that? Of course I panicked!”

How am I the bad guy here? I just ruined a perfectly good tux to rescue my assistant and now I’m the villain. Make sense of that.

“Well, I can swim, thank you.”

I will not splash her; will not dunk her beautiful head under. I am not five years old.

“Good to know. I’m glad this wasn’t a *dangerously* insane thing to do, just unhinged. You know, if you’re that afraid to answer my question, you can say so. There’s no need to drown yourself to escape a simple, adult conversation—”

Water splashes over me in a small wave, and I wipe my eyes, spluttering. My assistant glares at me, furiously treading water. “Oh, shut up. It’s not that easy and you know it.”

I *know* it? What the hell do I know?

“You splashed me,” I say like an idiot. Hazel huffs and does it again. “I—you—stop splashing me! Come here, you little witch.”

With all the times I pictured myself wrestling with Hazel, this scenario never came up: both of us fully dressed in my private pool, our evening wear soaked to our skin, bickering and grappling as water sloshes over the sides. Overhead, a cloud drifts across the moon like it's shielding it from our nonsense, but I've never felt so alive.

She's a wriggly little thing. All elbows and knees, with zero shame about trying to catch me in the junk. And I'd give her some space, would be more careful about crossing this line, except my assistant is giggling like a maniac, splashing and kicking and—Jesus—*biting*. Booming out a laugh, I wrestle her around until she's facing me, bare legs wrapped around my hips.

Hazel pokes out her tongue. My fingers flex on her waist.

It's inevitable, really.

We slam together like two wild beasts, kissing savagely, still half wrestling. And I'm bigger than her but she's nimble and slight, and more to the point, a single brush of her lips melts my brain. I'm helpless to do anything except stagger to the pool's edge, leaning back against the tiles while Hazel claws at me, kissing and nipping, yanking on my sodden clothes.

"You—are—such a jerk!"

I know.

I know I am, and she's an angel. She's *my* angel, and she's wet and warm and twined around me like ivy, kissing me like she never wants to stop. Neither do I.

"This," Hazel says, panting between kisses, "is why I can't stay. *This* is what I want, it's what I've wanted from you for years, and it's killing me. I need to leave. Can't you see that?"

My hands slide down to her ass and squeeze. So perfect. So sweet. "You're not going anywhere."

There's an enraged growl, then Hazel kisses me again, sucking hard on my bottom lip. And I thought I was already as hard as a man can get after all that wrestling, but hey, guess I'm wrong, because lust arrows through my gut and my cock stiffens so much it could drill through the pool wall.

"You don't want me!" she says against my lips.

Yanking her ass closer, I drag her over my hardness, riding her up and down my length. "You sure about that?"

Because of course I want her. Hazel is my lifeblood.

She's the heart in my chest and the air I breathe. She's everything good and warm and right in the world, and maybe it took me a while to see, but I'm done being an idiot about this. Done fighting this.

And I am never, ever letting her go.

"You're staying," I tell her, trailing kisses down her neck and sucking a mark onto her delicate skin. She whimpers, clutching closer to my shoulders, her hips still riding my length of her own accord. "Not as my assistant, though I'd like that too. God knows my days are empty without you. No, Hazel. You're staying with *me*."

Her breath catches. "Leo."

"I was an idiot not to see it. An idiot to fight this thing. But I'm done screwing this up, and I'll spend the rest of our lives making this up to you, sweetheart. Convincing you to stay with me every single day."

Now I'm running out of words, running out of brain cells, but thankfully Hazel moans and kisses me again, hard. My heart flares hot, searing my insides, melting the last of the ice inside me, and thank god. Thank god.

A small hand travels down my front and tugs at my belt.

"Prove it," Hazel says. "Make me yours."

Seven

Hazel



My boss lifts me out of the pool first, moonlight glinting in the shower of water droplets. The wind roams over my wet skin, goosebumps prickling from the cold, but I don't have time to shiver before Leo is here too, tugging me to the sun lounger then wrestling my soaked dress over my head.

"Damn thing," he mutters as he does it, black hair dripping in his eyes, and god, he's so beautiful under the stars. Like some ancient Roman god rather than my cranky boss in a sodden tux.

The dress lands with a splat.

Then I'm crowded back, guided down onto the lounger, and Leo strips off his own clothes before crawling on top of me, every movement ruthlessly efficient.

His body heat is delicious. So overwhelming and warm. Leo is the perfect muscly blanket to chase away the chill, and when he kisses me again, deep and soulful, I could burst with joy.

This is happening.

This is happening!

I've loved him for so long, *pined* for him for so long, and I never thought... never dreamed...

Hang on.

“Do you still find me annoying?” I ask as my boss peels down the left cup of my bra, sucking the hard bead of my nipple into his mouth. He grunts, tongue swirling, and that coil of heat travels all the way down my body to twist between my legs.

Leo pulls back long enough to nuzzle my small boob. “Obviously not. Wait, no—I never found you annoying. Why would you think that?”

He frowns at me, genuinely troubled, and I sputter out a laugh, weaving my fingers through his damp hair. “Because of all the things you said and did.”

Another scowl—but this one comes with fiery heat in his eyes. “I’ll show you what I think of you, Hazel.”

And Leo kneels up and grabs two fistfuls of my blue lace panties. He tears them apart in one go, muscles shifting, like he’s ripping wet tissue paper and not thick, soaked lace, then tosses both scraps over his shoulder into the darkness.

Leo pauses and raises an eyebrow at me. I gape.

“Underwear is expensive, you jerk!”

“I’ll buy you new ones,” is all Leo says, pushing my thighs apart. “A new pair every day if you let me tear them off you.”

Oh god, I will, won’t I? My body moves easily under his touch, legs flopping open, completely compliant, because I am a giant weenie who loves her boss’s secret caveman side. He could touch me with a fingertip and I’d move. He could tear every scrap of clothing off me and I’d still assume the position: face down, ass up, quivering with eagerness.

Ah, well. Dignity is overrated.

When Leo’s scowl zeroes in between my legs, fixing there, I bite down on my lip hard. Every self-conscious atom in my body screams at me to close my legs, to hide away from his inspection, but Leo’s breathing gets heavier, his nostrils flare, and I don’t want to shatter this moment.

Want to see what he’ll do.

How he’ll lay claim to me.

“This,” Leo says at last, grating out the words. Fingertips coast along my slit, spreading my slickness and tickling me until I squirm. “This. This is mine. *You’re* mine, Hazel.”

“Okay.”

My wobbly agreement brings out a shark’s smile.

Then he's leaning down, shifting around, shouldering his way between my legs; pausing to kiss my hip, my stomach, my belly button, my thigh. Leo peppers my whole body with kisses, including my awkward angles and every dimpled, squishy bit, before his breath finally mists across my most sensitive area.

"You're so sweet, Hazel." Leo sounds dazed, staring between my legs, stroking and rubbing and watching me arch and gasp. "So perfectly sweet. Bet you taste it too. Like sugar on my tongue."

The flat of Leo's tongue strokes me from ass to clit. It's a thorough, shameless, *claiming* lick, and my head tips back on a gasp.

Holy. Shit.

Hot breaths puff against my inner thighs, and my boss is licking, sucking, nibbling, spreading me wider on this sun lounger and *devouring* me like I'm his own personal feast. And maybe I don't taste like literal sugar, but Leo Corbin does not seem to mind—not if those pleased, hungry grunts are anything to go by.

Wet heat swirls over my clit.

It all feels so freaking good my eyes cross.

And thank god this is a private rooftop, because if someone else came up here, if they found us like this... I'm not sure I could stop.

"Mine," Leo rumbles, his words vibrating against my clit. Another deep lick. "You're *mine*."

No arguments here.

I've been his for four years. All those coffees I brought, all those times I smiled at his cranky face as he stepped off the elevator, all those phone calls I fielded and appointments I booked...

I did it all with so much love.

"Hazel." The sun lounger rasps across the stone tiles as Leo forces us back an inch. My boss presses a very hot, very solid, very *real* kiss on my hip. "My perfect girl. Fuck, I need you. Need you right now. Roll over."

Giddy with desire, my limbs all loose and clumsy, I flop over and scramble to my hands and knees. *Yes*. Want this so badly.

"Next time, we'll do this in a bed." A strong hand smooths down my spine, making my tense muscles go all melty. Arching my back, I smile like a goofball

at the silent, sparkling pool. He said 'next time', right? "It'll be romantic. I'll do this properly, Hazel, I swear, but right now..."

Leo's other hand twists my ponytail, wrapping it around his hand once, twice, three times. The sharp tug tilts my head back, scalp prickling, and molten heat swirls between my legs. I gasp up at the stars, so ready, so thrilled.

Oh god, I *need* him.

"Do it. Please, Leo, do it. Oh my gosh. Don't make me wait."

I'm babbling, my mouth running ahead of my fevered brain, but I don't care. I'm happy to beg Leo Corbin if he'll give me what I need: if he'll take this maddening, tickly, *hollow* feeling away and stretch me full.

"Relax," he says, his tone so gentle even as he strokes my spine again, touch masterful and firm. "Let me in, sweetheart."

Something blunt notches at my entrance.

Wriggling my thighs wider, I force myself to breathe.

Eight

Leo



Hazel is trembling. Her muscles shudder under my palm as I stroke her back, and her thighs twitch as she spreads her legs wider. Steady breaths float up from the sun lounger—she’s counting inhales and exhales—and I’d stop, I’d call this whole thing off, panicking that she’s stressed, if she weren’t so desperately slick and needy. The evidence glints in the starlight.

She *wants* this.

My perfect little assistant wants me as badly as I want her. Those hips tilt up for me, urging me to take her already, and when my shaft nudges against her entrance, she lets out a strangled moan.

“You’re sure?”

Because I’d never hurt her. I’m going to love this woman until the day I die, and there’s no rush; we don’t need to do this tonight. I could dress Hazel again, take her inside, bundle her into a hot shower and order takeout to stop her stomach from rumbling. That works for me too. It would still be the best night of my life.

But: “*Please*,” Hazel begs, ass wiggling from side to side, coaxing me on. Taunting me. “Please, Leo. I need you.”

Ah, hell.

When I grab her peachy ass with one hand, when I press the first inch inside

her, Hazel is tighter and hotter than I ever dreamed. She's a slick little furnace, strangling my shaft even as her body sucks it deeper, and the *noises* she makes, scrabbling at the sun lounger, testing my hold on her hair...

Jesus Christ.

Those breathy little moans will haunt me to my deathbed.

"M-more," Hazel says, fingertips digging into the lounger so hard they turn bloodless. "*More*, Leo."

Flexing my grip on her ponytail, I grit my teeth and press forward again.

Draw back slightly, then nudge inside.

Out, in.

Back, deeper.

She's *so* tight.

And I'd worry about that, worry that Hazel doesn't really want this, except she's moaning and whimpering like a champ, squirming on my cock, and she's so slick that I glide forward easily enough. Another reason for her tightness presents itself in my brain, the logical conclusion, and my newly awakened heart stutters in my chest.

"Have you done this before, sweetheart?"

I'm half hope, half dread. It would be such a gift, and such a responsibility.

"N-no," Hazel says, throwing her hips back to take another inch of me inside. "But I know I want this. Please."

Her trust spreads through me, sparkling like sunshine.

And—as if I could fucking stop. A helicopter could appear above this rooftop, a whole SWAT team could parachute down, guns drawn and blazing, and I'd be helpless to do anything except keep thrusting, pulling her hair, squeezing her ass. Working my assistant into a quivering puddle.

Only Hazel could stop me now, and she's too busy groaning with pleasure, rocking back on my length. Pulling firmly on her ponytail, I arch her back even further, drawing her like a bow. Drops of water from the pool gleam on her back, tinted silver in the darkness.

"You're perfect." The words grit out of me, and I find a rhythm now, thrusting into my assistant from behind. The sun lounger creaks beneath us, and the wind whips across the rooftop, but there's no one to witness this but the stars. "You're so fucking perfect, Hazel. Look at you, taking my cock. You were

built for this. Built for me.”

Hazel spasms around my length, getting impossibly slicker.

“Leo,” she sighs. “Leo.”

Teeth gritted, blood boiling, I reach around and rub her clit. Hazel bucks and moans, so wild and free, and I plant a foot on the rooftop to keep from toppling off the damn sun lounger.

She won’t shake me that easily. Not until she comes for me, pretty and flushed, and shows me all the noises she can make.

It doesn’t take long. A few deep thrusts, hips angled to hit all the sensitive spots inside her, with a few firm circles of her clit. Just like that, Hazel throws back her head and cries out, loud and fractured, as her channel clamps down, fluttering around my cock.

The *heat* of her. Jesus Christ.

I come so hard it’s almost painful. Fill her up, painting her insides with spurt after hot spurt, cramming her body full of my seed, and it’s so darkly satisfying, staking this claim. Who knew I’d be such a caveman with my girl?

“Oh,” Hazel says, collapsing forward on wobbly arms. I stay inside her, throbbing. “Oh my *god*.”

Yeah.

That was—something else.

How long until we can go again?

* * *

Two years later

I’d be lying if I said I didn’t like the sight of Hazel under my desk, but today, it’s not quite right.

We’ve done this a hundred times before. My perky, always helpful wife simply *loves* abandoning her own desk to crawl under mine and help me relax, and who am I to stop her? Only the luckiest bastard on earth, that’s who. I know a small miracle when I see it, and I have never, ever stopped my wife from going under there before. I’m not crazy.

But it’s different now that she’s pregnant. Hazel’s not too far along; her

bump is barely visible, but she's already moving a little awkwardly, and shit, what if her back aches while she's down there? What if her knees hurt? What if—

“Up.” Throwing my chair back, I scoop my wife beneath her armpits and lift her out from under my desk. “Up you come. You're not going under there today.”

Hazel huffs, smacking at my hands, but she lets me sit her on top of my desk without too much of a fight. She folds her arms and hits me with a glare.

“Just because I'm pregnant doesn't mean that I'm helpless, Leo.”

“I know that.”

Obviously. But if Hazel thinks I'm going to let my pregnant wife crawl on the ground for me, she is so incredibly wrong. That game is fun—usually.

But I'm not in the mood to watch Hazel crawl these days. I'm in the mood to spread my wife's legs and worship her as she deserves.

“Look at that frown.” I tut, nudging her knees apart, and Hazel grumps but allows it. There's a flash of pink lace as her legs widen. “I thought *I* was the cranky one.”

And yet here I am, smiling so hard my cheeks ache, and there's my usually-bubbly wife—pouting because I won't let her get sore knees. It's a topsy-turvy day, but I love it.

This feels right.

Everything feels right with Hazel.

Sliding that ring on her finger; choosing a new home to start a family; coming to work together every day. All perfect. Even the small, mundane stuff like grocery shopping and arguing over which movie to watch—it all feels good with Hazel. Whenever I'm with her, I have this bone-deep certainty that I'm in the right place at the right time.

“You'll have a new assistant soon.” Those arms tighten over Hazel's chest, and her lips tighten. “You'll be here with her, and I'll be...”

Lunging forward, I catch my wife with a deep, searing kiss, my heart thundering against my ribs. She kisses me back just as desperately, clinging to my shoulders, as I reach beneath her skirt and pull her panties aside.

“You're jealous,” I pant, tearing my mouth away and pressing a finger inside her. Hazel arches and groans, already so wet for me. “You're actually jealous. That's most ridiculous thing I've ever heard. Hazel, I don't *see* other women. Not

like that. Honestly, I never did. I only see you, I fucking orbit around you, and every day that we're apart I'll be counting down the minutes until I'm home with you again."

She flings her arms around my neck, riding my hand. I've got two fingers inside her now, and she's so ready. So eager. "Really? You promise?"

How can she not *know*?

"You'll pick my assistant." Trailing kisses down her throat, I suck a bruise onto her skin, because Hazel's not the only territorial one here. Every time another man so much as looks at her, I growl, so I understand. "Pick an old grandmother. Pick a man. I don't care, not for a goddamn second, and if it makes you feel better—"

"It... it does. I mean, I *do* trust you." Hazel gasps as I shove my hips between her thighs, fumbling at my belt. She tugs on my waist, urging me closer. "I do trust you, Leo, I swear. It's just all these crazy hormones... this pregnancy brain..."

"It's done." Problem solved, and I don't care if it's a reasonable demand or not. My wife can demand the moon on a platter. "You'll pick my assistant, and you'll burst in here whenever you like, and I'll rush home to you at the end of the day. And I'll *show* you how ridiculous it is for you to worry. How gone I am for you."

We crash together in a blur of half-shed clothes and fevered kisses. The curve of Hazel's stomach presses against my front, and my heart pangs in my chest.

She *is* mine. Hazel's mine, and I'm hers, and this baby will swell our family to three members. I can't wait.

"Let me show you what you do to me," I say, notching at her entrance. "Let me prove it."

And my perfect wife takes me inside with a sigh.

* * *

Thanks for reading *Tangling with the Boss*! I hope you loved it. :)

For more HEAs at the office, check out the *Grumps Unleashed* series, starting

with [Grump Gone Wild](#). *I'm fake-dating the man of my dreams. But these feelings? They're all too real.*

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!

Cassie xxx

Teaser: Grump Gone Wild

My boss pops the question on a rainy Thursday after lunch.

Not *the* question, obviously. That would be too perfect, too dreamlike—and pretty weird, since for all the years I’ve worked for him, despite my ginormous crush, Sebastian Bamford has only ever seen me as his zany assistant.

No, the beautiful genius summons me into his top floor office with a few curt words through the intercom, then waits behind his huge desk, jaw clenched. “Felicity.”

Despite my nudging, he’s only ever called me Fliss twice in our whole acquaintance. Once at the company holiday party two years ago, when he greeted me solemnly by the pop up bar. I remember it vividly, not just because of the name thing, but because he wore a black knitted sweater instead of his usual suit, and his cheeks were pink from walking down the frosty street. *Swoon.*

The second time was when I had three days off work with a stomach flu. Sebastian called me at home on the third day, to ‘check whether I needed anything’. Really, I think he suspected I was playing hooky.

Um, as if.

Not because I care so much about emails and appointments and refilling the water cooler cups, to be clear. But to willingly lose a day with Sebastian Bamford? The sexy, bossy nerd of my dreams? Are you crazy?

“I have a strange request.” He’s staring out of the huge windows. Raindrops patter against the glass, then streak down and blur the city skyline. Downtown looks like one giant smudge.

“Okay. What is it, sir?”

His mouth flattens, and he keeps scowling outside. I wait, shifting from foot to foot, but... nothing.

Alrighty.

I’m used to my boss’s moods, so I distract myself with mental notes. Like: that potted plant in the corner needs water. And Sebastian has that video conference at two, the one with the German team. Should I double-check the

translator? Wait, I did that already. But should I triple-check?

“It’s not work-related,” he says.

I bite the inside of my cheek, suddenly laser-focused. The air hums through the AC. “I’m very discreet, sir. You can trust me.”

Trust me... Confide in me... Maybe love me back one day...

Are you listening, universe? Just putting it out there.

“It’s delicate,” Sebastian says.

He’s killing me here. “I’m sure I can handle it.”

Because seriously, whatever it is, I’ve got this. Picking up his dry cleaning? Booking a doctor’s appointment? Lying to his awful family for him? I’m there, no sweat, because I’ve been gone for my boss since day one. G-O-N-E. Head over heels for this beautiful grump, with his neat bronze hair and his tortoiseshell glasses and his perfectly pressed suits. I love him so much, it gives me indigestion.

When he rumbles orders at me in that deep voice—it’s like he’s reading me a sonnet. When he ignores me in the elevator, I swoon.

Gray eyes find mine, and shivers race down my spine. My face heats, despite the cool air flowing through a vent on the wall. This building should have a warning right above the entrance—*Caution: Boss may cause dizziness.*

“I have no right to ask you this, Felicity.” He’s so solemn; so pained. The rain-dulled daylight barely reaches his desk, and he’s lit by the golden glow of a table lamp. “If you say no, it won’t affect your work at all. Is that understood?”

Color me intrigued... though for the record, I’d do virtually anything for this man, including commit petty crimes. For Sebastian Bamford, my morals are scanty as hell.

He’s just so *noble*. And hardworking and stern and delicious. Every second I’m near him, my fingers itch to yank on his tie. I want to climb into his lap and kiss him so hard I knock his glasses askew.

“Understood. What is it, sir?”

A muscle leaps in his jaw. Sebastian frowns over my shoulder into space, and the lamplight glints against his bronze hair. “I have a family event next weekend,” he says slowly. “An important one, and... I need a date.”

Oh my god. Oh my god.

Eeee!

I'm beaming wide, already floating up near the ceiling when he adds: "I'd like you to pretend to be my girlfriend. It would be fake, obviously. You'd get overtime."

I crash back down to the floor.

Overtime? He wants to pay me for this?

...*Fake?*

"It's purely business," Sebastian says, still frowning over my shoulder. When he finally looks at me, concern darts through his gray eyes. Guess my dismay is splashed all over my face. "I can hire someone else," he adds quickly. "I don't want to make you uncomfortable, Felicity. But I have neither the time nor the inclination to find a real date, and... well, you know my family."

After our four years together, I certainly do. They're a pack of designer-suited jackals.

Whenever my grouchy sweetheart of a boss goes down the coast for family events, he always comes back looking worn down by life and five years older. At this rate, he'll be a crumbly old man before I've hit thirty, and who wants that?

"I'll do it," I say. Never mind my bruised heart; I will rescue this buttoned-down grump from his nefarious relatives. "But I'm... you know..."

I wave a hand up and down my body. My boss's mouth twists, and his gaze rakes me from head to toe, cataloging my many flaws.

The crinkly, too-bright clothes, covered with a fine layer of cat hair; the bruise on my knee from roller derby. My messy hair that always escapes from whatever bun or braid I put it in. Take your pick.

Is he gonna change his mind? My fingers pluck at my purple skirt, and I swallow hard. Maybe he'll take it back and ask someone more suitable. Because let's be honest: if Sebastian wants to impress his snooty family, I'm the last girl in the world he should choose.

"No," Sebastian declares, stern eyes fixed on an ink stain on my cuff. "I need it to be you, Felicity. I'll coach you."

Oh, great. Learning all the ways I don't measure up for this man? Sounds like pure torture.

Because the Bamfords are old money. Country clubs and race horses and private vineyards—*that* kind of money. And I have raspberry streaks in my hair and a tattoo of my ancient cat Rusty on my wrist. My bus pass has seen more

action than my credit card.

“Awesome,” I say.

But as I slink out of his office, my bruised heart dragging along the carpet, I try to see the positive side.

And that is: a weekend event with my boss. Hours and hours together away from the office. A sneak peek at his origins, and the chance to give the evil eye to his awful relatives. Sounds fun.

And who knows? Maybe pretending to date me will open Sebastian’s eyes! Maybe he’ll scoop me over his shoulder like a bespectacled Tarzan and carry me into the sunset.

Yeah, right. Girls like me don’t land dreamboats like this. We nurse our forbidden crushes, then go home alone and snuggle with our stinky old cats.

Hope Rusty is ready to be the little spoon when I get home. Today’s been a doozy.

* * *

Check out [Grump Gone Wild!](#)

xxx



Cassie Mint

About the Author

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

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