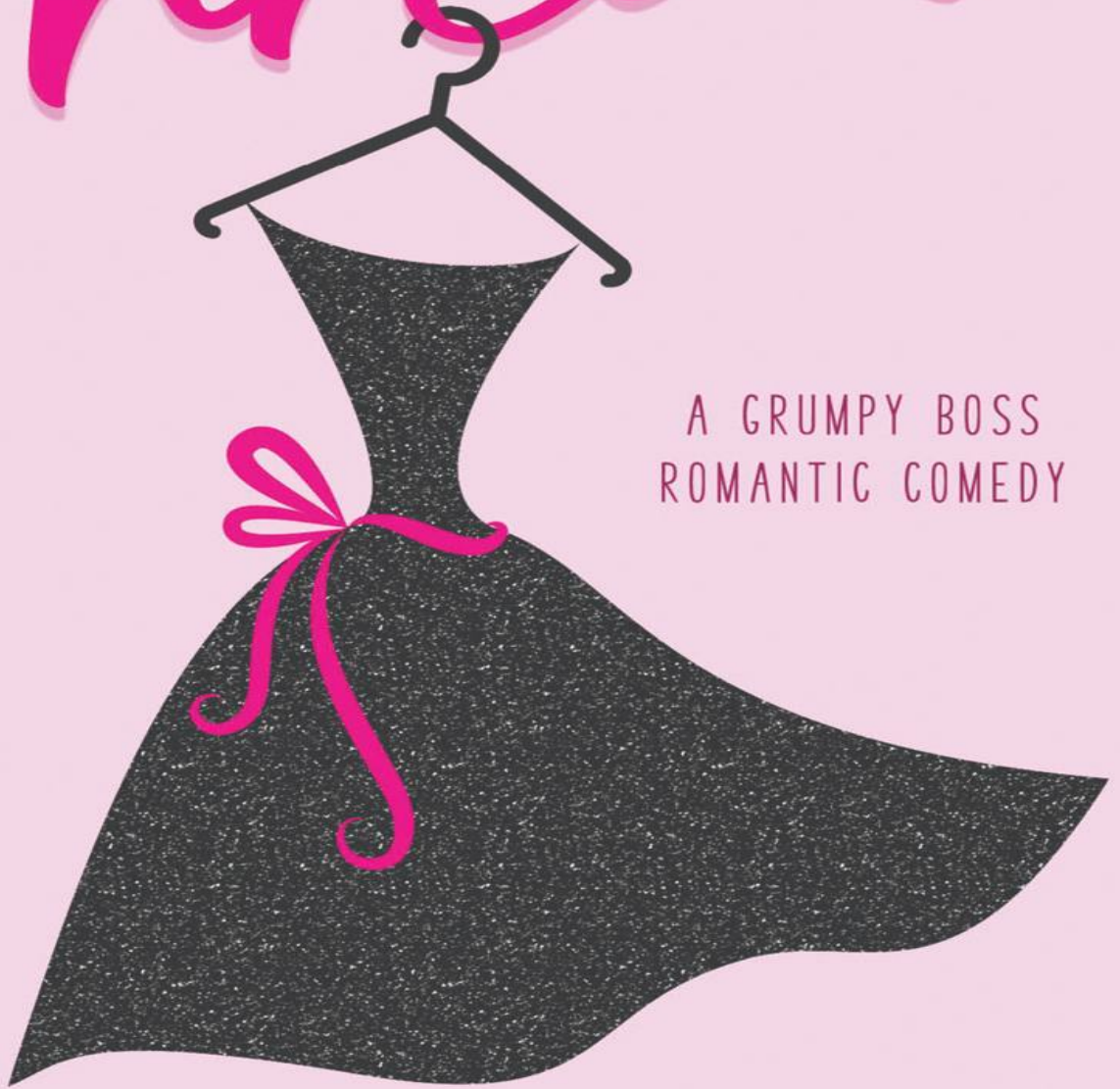


# By a Thread



A GRUMPY BOSS  
ROMANTIC COMEDY

BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF *THINGS WE NEVER GOT OVER*

LUCY SCORE

# **BYATHREAD**

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A GRUMPY BOSS ROMANTIC COMEDY

# LUCY SCORE

That's What She Said Publishing, Inc.



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Alternate Cover

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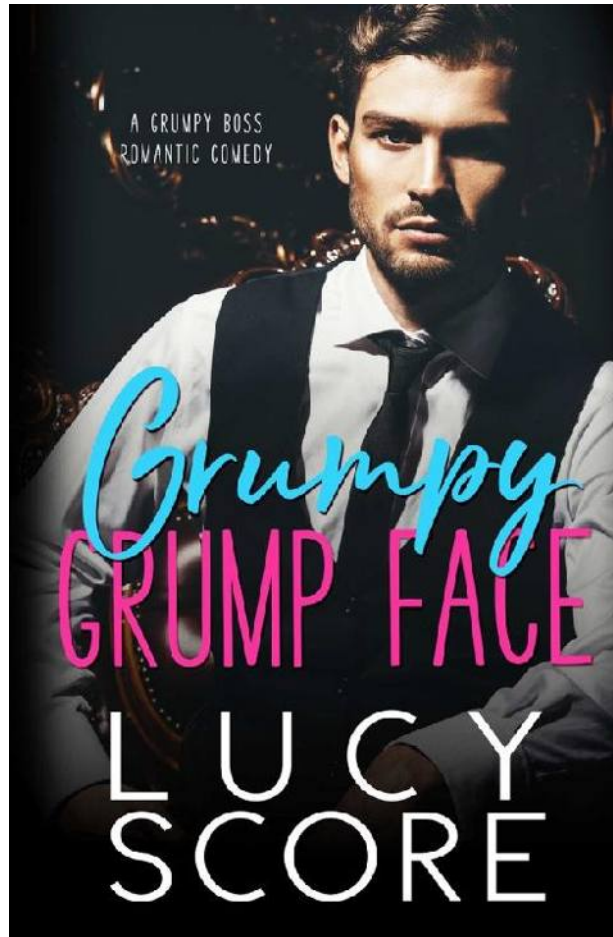
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## AlternateCover

By a Thread was without a title for several months and I (hilariously) referred to it as Grumpy Grump Face. The fake title stuck. So here's a fake cover for the fake title for the real readers who insisted I keep GGF.





*To you. For trusting me with your heart and your book budget.*

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**DOMINIC**

A junior editor chirped in my ear about canary yellow sundresses and Cuban photoshoots while the January wind worked its icy fingers through my layers. I navigated the curb buried under foot-tall piles of what used to be snow. Now it was gray slush frozen into dirty, depressing clumps.

I identified with those frozen clumps.

There was a guy, homeless by the looks of his ripped-up sneakers and worn coat, huddled into the corner of an abandoned storefront. He had a dog wrapped in one of those cheap fleece blankets department stores practically gave away at Christmas.

*Goddammit. I hated when they had dogs.*

I'd never had one myself, but I had fond memories of my high school girlfriend's black lab, Fonzie. My *only* fond memory from that particular relationship.

I tilted my head in the guy's direction, and my driver, Nelson, gave me a nod. He knew the drill. It wasn't out of the kindness of my heart. I had neither kindness nor a heart.

I considered it atonement for being an asshole.

Nelson ducked behind the rear of the SUV and opened the hatch. He did the shopping and "distribution" while I funded the ongoing operation.

When I came back, the guy would have a new coat, a pocket full of gift cards, and directions to the nearest shelters and hotels that allowed animals. And that furry little mutt, looking up at his human with blind adoration, would be in some warm, ridiculous dog sweater.

I headed toward the damn pizza place that my mother had insisted upon. Coming all the way to the Village from Midtown on a bone-chilling Tuesday evening was not *my* idea of fun.

But making me do things I didn't want to do was my *mother's* idea of fun.

If there was anyone in the world for whom I'd willingly do shit I didn't want to do, it was Dalessandra Russo. She'd had a rough year. I could give her greasy pizza and my uninterrupted attention before having Nelson haul my ass home to the Upper West Side, where I most likely would glare at a computer screen for another three hours before calling it a night.

*Alone.*

Saving a family name and rescuing a family business didn't exactly leave a lot of time for extracurricular activities. I wondered if I should get a dog.

My coat flapped in the frigid wind as I stalked toward the restaurant's dingy orange sign, and the art director chimed in with her thoughts on designer pieces for the May cover.

Winter in Manhattan was depressing. I was not a sweaters-and-hot-chocolate kind of guy. I skied because that's what you did when you were born into a wealthy family. But instead of ski slopes, I preferred to spend two weeks in the Caribbean every January.

At least I had in my old life.

I yanked open the steamy glass door of George's Village Pizza. A little bell tinkled above me, announcing my arrival. The heat hit me first. Then the scents of garlic and fresh-baked bread, and maybe I didn't hate that Mom had dragged my ass down here.

"What are your thoughts, Mr. Russo?" the junior editor asked.

I hated being called Mr. Russo. I also hated the fact that I couldn't yell at anyone about it. That was the worst part. Not being able to let out the temper that had been building for over a year.

My attention was caught by curves and curls.

The woman straightened away from the table closest to the door, stuffing the cash tip into her flour-sprinkled apron. Her eyes locked onto mine, and I felt something... interesting. Like the ghost of recognition. Like *she* was the one I was here to meet.

But we were strangers.

"That sounds fine," I hedged into the phone.

“I can put together a board for you,” the junior editor offered helpfully.

“I’d appreciate that,” I said, relieved that she’d offered and I hadn’t had to ask this time.

They were all finally getting used to the idea that I needed to *see* things together before I could tell if they worked or not. I hoped that they were also getting used to the idea that I wasn’t my fucking father.

Curves and curls was a server, according to the GVP polo she wore over a long sleeve thermal. Her jeans were generics. Sneakers were at least two years out of functionality, but she’d done something artistic with Sharpies to the white space on them. She was inches shorter and miles curvier than most of the women I’d spent time with recently.

In the last year, I’d become immune to leggy, waif-like models in their early twenties. Which, to be honest, was about damn time considering that I was forty-four. There was something arresting about the woman eyeing me and now pointing to the No Cell Phones sign posted on the corkboard just inside the door.

Interesting face. Softer, rounder than those diamond-edge cheekbones that graced the pages of the magazine. Full lips, wide brown eyes that looked warm. Like honey. Her hair, more brown and chestnut there, was jaw-length and styled in lazy, loose waves that made me think of putting my hands in it while she breathed my name under me.

I couldn’t stop staring at her.

“I’ll have it for you first thing in the morning,” the junior editor promised.

I couldn’t remember the editor’s name—because I was an ass—but I did remember her earnest, eager-to-please face. She was the kind of employee who would stay at the office until midnight without complaining if asked.

“By noon tomorrow is fine,” I told her, enjoying the glare Sex Hair was sending me as I continued to ignore the sign.

Sex Hair cleared her throat theatrically and, reaching around me, tapped the flyer fiercely. A trio of cheap, colorful beaded bracelets wrapped around her wrist. I smelled the bright, happy tang of lemons as she leaned in.

“Take it outside, buddy,” she said in a throaty, no-nonsense voice.

*Buddy?*

Clearly, she wasn’t intimidated by an asshole in Hugo Boss with a haircut that cost more than her entire outfit. I basked in her disdain. It was

miles more comfortable for me than the terrified glances and “Right away, Mr. Russo”s I got in the hallways at work.

I covered the mouthpiece of the phone—I hated those earbud things and staunchly refused to use them. “It’s cold. I’ll be a minute,” I told her briskly, leaving no room for debate.

“I didn’t create the weather or the phone policy. Out. Side.” She said it like I was a truculent three-year-old and hooked her thumb toward the door.

“No.” I didn’t sound like a whiny toddler. I sounded like an annoyed, inconvenienced patron who had the right to expect respect.

I uncovered the phone and continued my conversation.

*I was a spiteful son of a bitch.*

“Get off the damn phone, or I’ll make you wish you had,” she warned.

People were starting to look at us. Neither one of us seemed to care.

“Don’t you have tables to wait on?” I asked. “Or do you specialize in shrieking at customers?”

Her eyes were nearly gold under the fluorescent lighting, and I swear she almost smiled.

“Oh, you asked for it, buddy.” She leaned in again, too close for New Yorkers who prized our personal space. The top of her head came to my shoulder.

“Sir, are you here for STD panel results or hemorrhoids?” she shouted in the vicinity of my cell’s microphone.

*You shithead.*

“I’ll call you back,” I said into the phone and disconnected the call.

Sex Hair beamed up at me, all faux charm. “Welcome to George’s Village Pizza. Dining alone tonight, I presume?”

“That was a work call,” I said icily.

“Isn’t that nice that you can hold down a job *and* be that rude?”

It had been too long since I’d squashed a disrespectful underling. I itched to do it now. She looked not only like she could take it but that she might even enjoy it.

“Dominic.”

I glanced over Sex Hair’s shoulder and spotted my mother waving from a green vinyl booth in the corner. She looked amused.

Sex Hair looked back and forth between me and my mother. “Oh, she’s way too good for you,” she announced, slapping a menu to my chest and walking away.

“Mom,” I greeted her, leaning in to kiss her on one flawless cheek before I slid into the booth opposite her.

“That was quite the entrance,” she said, resting her chin on her palm.

She was the picture of confidence in an off-the-shoulder ivory sweater and red leather skirt. Her hair was its natural sterling silver, cut in a short, hip cap. The haircut—and the chunky emerald on her right middle finger—had been her gift to herself the day after she’d kicked my father out of their Upper East Side townhouse a few decades too late.

My mother was a beautiful woman. She always had been. She’d begun her career at fifteen as a doe-eyed, long-legged socialite-turned-model before deciding she preferred the business side of fashion. Now sixty-nine, she’d long ago abandoned doe eyes in favor of wielding her sharp mind and tongue. She was comfortable being both loved *and* feared in the industry.

“She was incredibly rude,” I insisted, watching as Sex Hair made small talk with a table across the skinny restaurant.

“*You* were incredibly rude,” my mother countered.

“It’s what I do,” I said, snapping open the menu and scanning. I tried to ignore the temper that was bubbling up inside me like a sleeping dragon awakened. I’d spent thirteen months locked down, on my best behavior, and I was starting to crack.

“Don’t start the ‘I’m an asshole’ spiel again.” She sighed and slid her reading glasses back on.

“Sooner or later, you’re going to have to give up on the hope that I’m a human being with a heart of gold underneath it all.”

“Never,” she insisted with a saucy smile.

I gave up. “Why are we here?”

“Because I wanted to spend time with my only son—the light of my life—away from the office.”

Our working relationship was as old as her new haircut.

*It wasn’t coincidence.*

“Sorry,” I said and meant it. “I’ve been busy.”

“Darling.” She said it wryly, and it was warranted.

No one was busier than Dalessandra Russo, former model and current editor-in-chief of *Label*, a fashion magazine that had not only survived the onset of the digital age but spearheaded the transition. Every month, my mother oversaw hundreds of pages of fashion, advertising, interviews, and

advice, not to mention online content, and delivered it all to readers around the world.

If she were photographed in a pair of shoes or sunglasses, they sold out within hours. If she sat front and center at a show, the designer's collection was picked up by every buyer in attendance. She made designers, models, writers, and photographers important, successful. She built careers. Or destroyed them when necessary.

And she hadn't asked for or earned the chaos of the past year.

For that I had to atone as well.

"Sorry," I said again, reaching across the table to squeeze her hand. The emerald winked at me under the fluorescent lights.

"Can I get you a drink?" Rude Sex Hair was back.

"I don't know. *Can* you?" I shot back.

"We're fresh out of the blood of children, Satan. How about something that matches your personality?" She was saying the words nicely. Sweetly even.

"I'll have a—"

"Unsweetened iced tea," she filled in for me.

*Bitter.Boring.Bland.*

"Is this one of those places where you pay people to be assholes to you?" I asked my mother.

"Oh, honey. I'm doing this for free." Sex Hair batted thick lashes in my direction.

I opened my mouth to destroy her.

"He'll have water. Tap is fine," my mother cut in.

"Absolutely. Now, how about dinner?" Sex Hair flashed my mother a genuine grin.

"I've heard rumors of your pizza crusts far and wide," Mom said coyly.

Sex Hair leaned in, a friend sharing secrets. "Every word is true," she said. "It's perfection."

I smelled lemons again.

"In that case, I'll have the personal with green onions and black olives."

"You are a woman of excellent taste," the mouthy server announced. "How about for you, Prince Charming?" she asked.

"Pepperoni. Personal." I closed the menu and held it out without looking at her.

"Very creative," she quipped.

So maybe it wasn't fair of me. She obviously didn't know she was pushing a button. That I still wasn't confident in my ability to *be* creative, to be good at the job my mother needed me to do. But she said it. And I reacted.

"Shouldn't someone your age have a real job by now, Maleficent? Because obviously you're not good at this one."

The entire place went silent. The other patrons froze, gazes fixed on our table. Sex Hair met my eyes for one long beat. God, it felt good to let out some of the fight I'd been bottling up for so long.

"Since you asked so nicely, I'll be sure to give your order *extra* special attention," she promised. The wink she gave me was so insolent, I almost got out of the booth to chase her into the kitchen.

"Don't you dare," Mom said, grabbing my hand before I bolted.

"She can't get away with that. We're paying customers," I told her.

"You are to sit there. Be polite. And eat whatever she sees fit to bring you," Mom ordered.

"Fine. But if she poisons me, I'll sue her and her entire family. Her great-grandchildren will feel my wrath."

My mother sighed theatrically. "Who hurt you, darling?"

It was a joke. But we both knew the answer wasn't funny.



---

**ALLY**

Decorating Charming's pizza was the most fun I'd had in... Ugh. Never mind.

Let's just say life had been a shit show lately. And messing with a grumpy guy—what was it with assholes today anyway?—who looked like he'd waltzed right off the pages of some men's magazine was definitely a highlight. Which said a lot about my current situation.

I didn't have time to worry about the consequences of being stretched too thin. This was the kind of life crisis that you muscled through.

When it was all over, I would book myself a vacation on a beach where the only thing I had to worry about was if my straw was long enough to reach the bottom of my frozen cocktail.

"Table Twelve wants their check, Ollie." George, my boss and the grumpiest Italian grandpa I'd ever met in my life, announced brusquely as if I'd spent the last four hours ignoring diners instead of waiting on them. He hadn't bothered to learn my name when I started three weeks ago. I hadn't bothered to teach him. The guy went through servers like new parents went through baby wipes.

At least the checks were made out correctly by Mrs. George. That's what mattered.

"On it," I told him.

*A mango margarita*, I decided, hefting the plates and pushing through the swinging kitchen doors.

By the time I had that mango margarita in hand, I might be in my sixties instead of a ripe old thirty-nine—thanks for pointing that out, Charming—

but I would fix what needed fixing. There was no other option.

The dining room, though in desperate need of a complete makeover and maybe an industrial scrubbing, was warm and cozy.

*Maybe I could offer to do some after-hours cleaning for a couple extra bucks?*

“Here you go,” I said, sliding the pizzas in front of them.

The woman with the to-die-for leather skirt and I’m-a-badass haircut seemed to approve my topping smiley face on hers. She laughed in that way that born-rich people did. Not too loudly and with absolutely no snorting.

Charming, on the other hand, scowled down at his pizza. He had a face for scowling. That strong jaw was even more defined with his teeth clenching like that. Those icy eyes that couldn’t decide if they were blue or gray narrowed.

*Ugh.* He had those yummy little crinkles at the corners of his eyes.

*Was grumpy and rude suddenly the new hot?* My vagina seemed to think so.

It hadn’t been *that* long since I’d given her some action. But apparently she was into well-dressed douches now. Great. Thank God I was working myself to death for the foreseeable future and wouldn’t have time to explore her new inappropriate preferences.

“Can I get you two anything else right now?” I asked, a paragon of helpfulness.

“That’s it,” Charming said, tossing his napkin on the table and sliding out of the booth. “You and I are going to have a little screaming match about how to treat your customers with respect.”

He stood and closed his long fingers around my wrist.

I knew he felt it, too. That unexpected jolt. Like taking a shot of whiskey or sticking a finger in a light socket. Maybe both at the same time. For one moment of pure insanity, I wondered if he intended to take me over his knee and if I’d let him.

“Dominic, for the love of God. Behave yourself,” the woman sighed in exasperation.

In answer, he spun his pizza around so his mother could read it.

FU spelled out in greasy pepperoni.

“Is there a problem, *sir*?” I asked with sugary politeness.

“Oh, my,” the woman said, pressing her fingers to her mouth and trying to stifle a laugh. A real one this time.

“It’s not funny,” he snapped.

“It is from where I stand,” I said.

“You are a server. Your job is to act like one and serve,” he said.

*Ass.And.Hole.*

“You’re a human. Your job is to act like one,” I countered. Any other day, I probably would have let it all go. I knew better than to jeopardize a paycheck. But I’d come in after the lunch shift to find the nineteen-year-old server sobbing into paper napkins in the back because a dick in a suit had unloaded his bad day on her.

Freaking George the jerk caught me trying to comfort her and screamed, “There’s no crying in pizza.”

“I want to speak to the manager,” Dick 2 in the suit announced.

“Dominic, must you?” his date sighed.

“Oh, he must,” I said.

I had him pegged. This guy was one of *those* people. He believed that everyone under him existed just to serve him. I bet he had a personal assistant and that he had no idea that they were human. He probably called them at 3 a.m. and made them run to the convenience store for lube or eye of newt.

“I’m so glad you agree,” he said dryly. He was still holding my wrist. That electrifying zing was still sizzling its way through my veins. His eyes narrowed as if he felt it too.

Table Twelve, a couple of early twenty-somethings, looked like they were thinking about dining and dashing. Shifty-eyed and uncomfortable.

“Let me get this table their check, and then we can continue our battle royale,” I offered, yanking my hand free.

“Sit back down,” Charming’s lady friend insisted, pulling him back into the booth. “You’re causing a scene.”

I left them, grabbed the check for Twelve, and made serious eye contact with them while I thanked them profusely for coming in. It wasn’t going to be a good tip. I had an instinct about these things since waitressing and bartending had become my main source of income. But at least they weren’t going to walk out on the check.

“I can take that for you now if you’re ready,” I offered.

The guy reluctantly pulled out a wallet on a chain and opened it. “Keep the change,” he squeaked.

*Two dollars.* It was probably all they could afford, and I totally got that. But I needed to find real work... like six months ago.

"Thanks, guys," I said brightly and shoved the money in my apron.

Charming was sitting, arms folded, staring down at his untouched FU pizza while his date daintily cut hers into bite-sized pieces.

"George, Table Eight wants to talk to you."

"Now what the fuck did you do?" he snarled, dropping his fork in the double helping of pasta primavera he'd made himself. He acted as if I'd been nothing but a troublemaker, and I considered making him his own pizza. I wondered if the twelve-inch pie was big enough for "dumbass" spelled out in sausage.

"The guy was being a jerk," I told him, knowing full well George wouldn't care. He'd side with the ass. Asses liked other asses.

He hefted his bulk off the rickety stool that was going to give up the fight against his 300 pounds any day now. At five and a half feet tall, he was a grumpy beach ball of a human being. "Let's go. Be fucking polite," he said, wiping his hands on the sauce-stained apron. George lumbered through the swinging doors, and I followed.

"Thank you for coming to George's Village Pizza. I'm George," he said, all olive oily charm now. The guy was a dick to his employees, his vendors, hell, even his wife. But to a diner with a fat wallet? George was almost sort of friendly. "I understand there's a problem."

Without saying a word, Charming spun his pizza plate around.

George's eyes narrowed.

"Is this supposed to be some kinda joke, Ollie?"

Great. I could see the vein in his neck.

That wasn't a good sign. I'd seen it twice before. Once when he'd fired his delivery driver for stopping to help direct traffic at an accident scene and again when a server had slipped on a grease spill in the back and sprained her wrist. He fired her on the spot and said if she tried to collect workers' comp he'd burn down her mother's house.

The server was his niece. Her mother was George's sister.

I shrugged. "Maybe that's just how the pepperonis arranged themselves."

"This kind of service is unacceptable," Charming insisted.

"Of course. Of course," George agreed, all apologies. "And I promise you the situation will be rectified."