

#1 NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

LUCY SCORE

Story
of my
Life

*She's got trouble
written all
over her.*



Story
of my
Life

*To Flavia and Meire for being the best agents and
biggest cheerleaders. I'm so grateful for everything!*

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Vase wine and an ass-kicking.

Hazel

The harried trio of business-suited, triple-espressoed women at the window were enthusiastically plotting the demise of someone named Bernard in audits. Or maybe they were just going to report him to HR. It was hard to hear over the usual coffee shop din.

The two men on my right with matching wedding bands were having a passionate argument about closet space. In the rest of the world, most divorces centered around issues like money, children, and monogamy. In Manhattan, I was willing to bet money that closet space made the top five.

The barista looked like if she got any more bored as she took and filled orders she'd lapse into a coma.

Coma? I wrote on the notebook page. Would a heroine waking up from a coma make a good meet-cute? I frowned and drummed my pen on the table. Not a long coma obviously. There'd be things

like leg hair and dandruff and heinous bad breath to contend with.

Dammit. I covered my mouth with my hand and tried to subtly sniff out whether I'd remembered to brush my teeth that morning. I hadn't. I also hadn't shaved my legs...or showered...or combed my hair...or remembered to buy new deodorant to apply.

Old Hazel had only wandered out of the apartment looking—and smelling—like this on deadlines. Current Hazel scurried around the shadows of the real world like an anti-hygiene mouse pretty much twenty-four seven.

“Ugh. Why is this so hard?” I muttered.

The couple with the closet issue shot me side-eye.

“Ha. That's what she said?” I offered.

The side-eyes turned into expressive raised eyebrows and an unspoken agreement to vacate the table next to the batty lady immediately.

“It's okay. I'm an author. I'm supposed to talk to myself in public,” I explained hastily as they gathered their coffees and made their way to the door, ducking out into the sweltering August humidity.

I groaned and clapped my hands to my cheeks, squishing them together to make a fish face. The gentleman in the Lenny Kravitz tank top who looked like he was running his own Genius Bar glanced up over his Ben Franklin glasses.

I released my face and offered what I hoped was a human smile. He went back to his two cell phones and iPad while I wiped my palms on my shorts. My skin was that gross, impossible combination of greasy and flaky at the same time. When was the last time I'd completed my full skin-care routine instead of just dunking my head under the faucet? Hell, when was the last time I'd completed anything?

Well, I'd absolutely murdered the pad thai takeout last night. That counted, right?

I scanned the café for some hint of the inspiration or motivation that had once made me a productive adult. But it was nowhere to be

found. On a sigh, I scribbled out *coma* as well as *enemies-to-enemies* and *canoes*. That last one had been overheard from a spry retired Irish couple that looked as if they'd just walked out of an REI store. They'd ordered matchas and gluten-free scones before marching out in their coordinating hiking boots.

The clock on the wall deemed it quitting time. I'd been here for three hours with nothing to show for it but an empty iced coffee with my name on it. I was eighty percent sure it had been my subconscious that made the barista sound like she had yelled, "Iced vanilla latte for Hasbeen."

On the kind of groan that past-their-prime people make when getting out of chairs at home, I stood up. I'd been festering in my apartment for too long if I couldn't remember the difference between "privacy of one's own home" and "in the presence of others" noises. I gathered my authority accessories—notebook, pen, laptop, and phone—and headed out into the heat.

I felt my hair double in size before I reached the end of the block and was reaching up to smash it back down when I was shoulder-checked by a five-foot-six, bespoke Ralph Lauren-wearing guy shouting a series of escalating threats into his phone.

Zoey would have labeled him a finance bro and tossed some insult at him. She was also the woman who was definitely going to murder me when she found out I still had nothing. No chapters, no outline, no ideas. I was living in some kind of horrible *Groundhog Day* scenario where every day was the same as before. Unlike Bill Murray, I'd yet to find a purpose.

I made it back to my apartment, but my neighbor whose name I didn't know must not have heard my plea to hold the elevator over the yapping of her two Yorkies. I managed to plod my way up the four flights to my apartment and let myself in.

The state of my home reflected the state of my head. More specifically, it was a disastrous jumble of trash. The once "charming"

and “pristine” Upper East Side two-bedroom looked like a swamp person had just hosted the ribbon cutting for a garbage dump flea market.

“It’s official. I’m one of those people who loses their mind and starts hoarding soy sauce packets and junk mail,” I said to nobody.

Mail and paperwork were stacked in haphazard piles on every visible flat surface. Books spilled off the heavy walnut shelves and onto the floor in disorganized mounds. The microscopic kitchen was barely recognizable under about eight layers of dirty dishes and old take-out containers. The walls with the busy wallpaper I’d once found so charming held nothing but framed accolades and memories of old lives long gone.

I perked up temporarily. “Maybe the heroine’s a hoarder? Ugh. No. Not sexy and not even hygienic.”

Old Hazel never would have let it get this bad. There were a lot of things the old me would have done differently. But she was dead and buried. RIP, me.

I headed into the bedroom to change out of my “leaving home” gym shorts and into my “how many holes in the crotch is too many” shorts. It was time to get back to work...or at least spend another chunk of time berating myself for becoming the saddest rom-com novelist in the world.



I groaned at the knock at my door. “What part of *contactless delivery* don’t you get?” I muttered as I pried my butt off the couch. The toe of my slipper caught on the coffee table leg, sending a waterfall of unopened mail to the floor.

I reached for the tie of my bathrobe, only to find it missing. So I wrapped the lapels over my braless, T-shirt-clad boobs and opened the door.

“You look like absolute shit.”

The curly-haired woman in the red power suit was wielding judgment, not my Chinese food.

I let my robe fall open and crossed my arms. “What are you doing here, Zoey? I’m very busy and important.”

My uninvited guest brushed past me and strolled inside on fabulous four-inch heels, bringing with her a faint cloud of expensive perfume. Zoey Moody, fashion-obsessed literary agent and my best friend since the third grade, knew how to make an entrance.

I closed the door and sagged against it. Usually I met Zoey at her place or in establishments that served alcohol, which left me free to live like Oscar the Grouch.

“Busy doing what? Rotting?” she asked, picking up a greasy pizza box that rested atop a carefully balanced mountain of unwashed plates.

I snatched it out of her hands and tried to cram it into the kitchen trash can only to have the overflowing contents reject the new addition. “I’m not rotting. I’m...plotting,” I lied.

“You’ve been plotting for a year.”

I gave up and tossed the box on the floor next to the trash. “You know who thinks writing a book is easy? People who have never written one.”

“I know. Authors are delicate flowers of creativity who need constant care and watering. Blah blah blah. Well, guess what? Agents need stuff too. Like I need my clients to answer their damn phones. Do you even know where yours is?”

“It’s over there.” I gestured vaguely at the entirety of my apartment.

Zoey pinned me with a frown and pursed red lips. “When’s the last time you went out to dinner? Or got some fresh air? Or, I don’t know, showered?” Her strawberry-blond curls trembled within the twist she’d fashioned.

I lifted an arm and sniffed. Damn it. I forgot to order the

deodorant again. “I’m having flashbacks to my mother telling teenage me to put the books down and go outside and be social,” I complained. “That was between husbands two and three, in case you were keeping count.”

“I’m not your mother. I’m your agent and sometimes your friend. And as both, I gotta tell you, you’ve officially sunk to depressed-bachelor standards.”

“Wouldn’t that be spinster standards?”

She held up a discarded sock stained with soy sauce. “How many spinsters do you know who live like they’re in a boys’ high school locker room?”

“Point taken. Look. It’s not like I’d *decided* it would be fun to spiral into some depressed, antisocial writer’s block,” I reminded her.

Zoey opened the refrigerator and then immediately regretted her decision. “There are things growing in here.”

“I’ve been meaning to tell you. I took up urban farming in my spare time.” I slammed the fridge shut.

“Well, you’re about to have a lot more spare time if you don’t get your shit together,” she said ominously.

I squeezed past her and bent to wedge an arm into the cabinet of the tiny butcher-block island. It took a few seconds and a strained neck muscle, but I finally found a bottle of wine inside and pulled it free.

“Wine?”

“I’m not consuming anything in this apartment. I don’t have time for a staph infection. Tell me you’re at least writing something.”

“Oh yeah. Chapters are just flying out of my ass.”

“We should be so lucky,” she muttered.

“Cut to the chase. Why are you here at noon on a Thursday, Zo?”

My agent and best friend stomped over to the living room windows and dramatically yanked open the heavy curtains. She gestured at the lights on the building next door. “It’s seven p.m. on a Monday.”

I feigned shock and added a dramatic gasp just for fun.

She rolled her eyes, realizing she'd been had. "You're such a pain in the ass."

"Yeah, but I'm *your* pain in the ass. But I'd like to point out that I'm also thirty-five years old. I don't need you clucking over me like some mother hen." We'd known each other for longer than either of us cared to remember. Through braces and prom dresses to book tours and bestseller lists...and the aftermath.

"You're thirty-six."

I blinked, then started my calculations.

"Remember your birthday? You said you had plans to write in an Airbnb in Connecticut for the weekend, and instead I broke in here to leave flowers and cake and found you in month-old sweats, knee-deep in a *Golden Girls* marathon, so I dragged you out for wine and more cake?"

Great. Now I was forgetting entire birthdays.

"Speaking of wine." I opened the cabinet next to the fridge and found it void of any glassware. I rummaged half-heartedly through the dishes in and around the sink. *What was that blue stuff growing up the sides of that bowl?*

Spying a short, squat, and—more importantly—clean flower vase, I unscrewed the cap and poured the wine.

"You're wearing a bathrobe with marinara stains on it in a dark, dirty apartment and drinking screw-top wine out of a vase," Zoey said.

"A good editor would say that's telling, not showing." I took an exaggerated slurp of wine.

"I'm not your editor. I'm your agent, and I need you to get your shit together."

This was a more aggressive version of the message Zoey had been delivering for the past several months. I roused myself into suspicion. "What's the problem now?"

“I just came from a meeting.”

“Hence the ‘don’t fuck with me’ suit.”

“Very different from the ‘please fuck me’ dress. It was a meeting with your editor, Mikayla at Royal Press, who expressed some rather concerning concerns,” she said, reaching under the kitchen sink and producing a fresh trash bag. She opened it with a violent snap.

“Can I just say that it’s a good thing I’m the writer instead of you? Also, who the hell is Mikayla? My editor is Jennifer.”

Zoey stuffed a half-empty container of old fried rice into the bag. “They cut Jennifer and half of the editorial staff six months ago. Mikayla was younger and therefore cheaper.”

“Does she even read romance?”

“She prefers domestic fiction and psychological thrillers.”

“Oh, then she’ll *totally* get me and my small-town rom-coms.”

“She might if you actually turn in a manuscript,” Zoey shot back.

“Excuse me. What happened to the ‘take your time, you’ve gone through something traumatic’ phase?”

“That phase ended about six months ago and you’ve been on borrowed time ever since. Bottom line, Urban Old MacDonald. If you miss your next deadline, Royal Press is canceling your contract.”

I scoffed and began to shovel to-go bags into another trash bag. “Nice try. They can’t do that.”

“They can and they will. They quoted your contract to me, which means they’ve already had their legal team look into it. You missed your extended deadline. Again.”

“I’m just getting back on my feet. They can’t expect me to just—”

“Hazel, you signed on the dotted line twelve months ago,” she said softly. “Your publisher graciously pushed your deadlines back *three* times. This time you didn’t even bother telling them any reassuring lies. You just didn’t turn anything in. And you know what that looks like to all of us on the publishing side?”

“No, but I’m sure you’ll tell me.”

“It looks like you’re done. Another burned-out author who couldn’t cut it anymore. One of those people who talks about how they used to write books.”

“You’re so dramatic. What are they going to do? Cut me loose? Readers will hate them for kicking me when I’m down.”

Zoey stuffed an entire plastic bag of plastic bags into the trash. “What readers, Haze?”

“*My* readers.” I gave the bag a resounding shake.

“The readers you’ve ignored? The readers you haven’t bothered responding to? The readers who’ve moved on to reading authors who still publish?”

I snatched the full bag out of her unnecessarily dramatic hands and tied a knot in it. “Seriously, what climbed up your Pelotoned ass today?”

She leveled a stare at me. “Hazel, you used to be one of the best-selling rom-com authors out there.”

“Used to be? You’re mean in that suit.”

“And then you let someone in your head and now look at you.”

I didn’t particularly want to look at me.

“Haze, if you miss this one, you’re out,” Zoey said.

I stuffed a stack of take-out menus I’d used to mop up a spill into the bag while pretending my intestines hadn’t just gone ice-cold.

“They can’t. They wouldn’t. I wrote nine books for them. Seven of them bestsellers. I went on tours for them. Readers still write me emails asking for more books.” At least, they did when I last checked my business email.

“Yeah, well, your publisher is asking for the same thing. The Spring Gate book that you are contractually obligated to write. You know as well as I do that, to a publisher, an author is only as valuable as their next book. And you don’t have one.” She produced another garbage bag, opened the fridge again, and held her breath as she scooped rotten salad mixes and expired condiments into the bag.

I didn't know how to tell Zoey that Spring Gate was dead to me. That the idea of returning to the series that I'd loved, that had launched my career, made me feel queasy.

Ooh! Maybe my heroine could be a professional cleaner hired by the hero to clean out a dead relative's farmhouse? It was less disgusting if the slob was someone else, right? Plus then I could weave a whole house makeover into the story to reinforce character growth. I could see her hauling things to a dumpster in an adorable bandana and with smudges of dirt on her cheeks.

"I can't control the creative process, okay?" I said, reaching for the closest notebook.

Cleaner. Dumpster. Dirt face. This book was practically writing itself.

Zoey peered over the fridge door at me. "If that's true and you really aren't going to hit this deadline, then you need to start thinking plan B."

"And what exactly would plan B be?" I demanded.

"You might want to start working on your résumé."

I spread my arms wide, daring Zoey to take in my holey shorts, mismatched socks, and rabid bunny slippers. "Do I *look* employable to you?"

"Not even a little."

I fisted my hands at my sides. "Fine. I'll write. Okay?"

She shut the refrigerator. Her forest-green eyes pinned me with a look. "I haven't heard you laugh in months. Do you even remember how to be funny anymore?"

"I'm fucking hilarious. Just today I got my bathrobe stuck in the elevator door and gave Mrs. Horowitz an eyeful." Technically it had been over a week ago because it was the last time I'd taken out the trash. But being funny wasn't about accuracy. It was about timing.

"Are these important?" Zoey held up a fat stack of legal papers with a coffee ring on the top page.

I snatched them out of her hands. “No,” I lied, setting them on top of the refrigerator.

“I’m also hearing murmurs around my office,” she said, changing the subject.

“Maybe it’s haunted?”

Ooh! What about a small-town rom-com with a little bit of paranormal thrown in? Maybe the hero sees ghosts? Or maybe the heroine house cleaner discovers a zombie? Wait. That wasn’t paranormal.

“They’re worried about relevancy.” That dragged me out of my head.

I feigned a good dry heave. “You know I hate that word.”

“Yeah, well, you better start making it your mantra because I don’t want them to make me cut you loose.”

“You want to drop me? Zoey! After everything we’ve been through? After Zack Black asked us both to the junior high dance? After the stomach flu in Vancouver? After we missed our flight to Brussels and ended up hitching a ride on the tour bus of an Amsterdam punk band and then they wrote a song about us?”

She threw a hand in the air. “I don’t want to drop you! I want to be your agent and make lots of money with you, but you’re not making that easy right now!”

“I know,” I said pitifully.

“Look, Haze. Not to be an assface or anything, but your sales are at their lowest since you were a baby author. Readers haven’t seen your face in forever. You haven’t sent out a newsletter in over a year. Your last social media activity was when your account got hacked and Fake Hazel started DM-ing your followers for ‘monetary aid for a luxury high-end kidney transplant.’”

“Are you this mean to all your clients?”

“You don’t respond to gentle hand-holding. You respond to hard truths. Or at least you used to.”

“Oh my God. You’re so dramatic. Okay. Fine. I’ll do the thing.”

Zoey stacked the full trash bag on top of the other full trash bag on top of the full garbage can. “What thing?”

I waved my vase of wine. “The signing thing I said no to.”

She drummed her glossy red nails on the butcher block and studied me. “It’s a start, but I’ll tell you now, it’s not enough.”

She reached into her sleek briefcase and pulled out two fat folders, dropping them on the nearly cleared counter space with a *thwack*. “Read these.”

I sighed. “If the ass-kicking is over, would you like a vase of wine?”

“I wouldn’t ingest anything in this apartment if Pedro Pascal appeared and offered to spoon-feed it to me.”

What's more inspiring to a rom-com author than a hot, grumpy contractor literally knocking down walls?

Hazel Hart is a thriving romance novelist until a breakup drives her straight into writer's block. Having failed to deliver her new manuscript, she's living in pajamas and hiding behind a mound of take-out containers until her publisher lays down the law—if she misses her next deadline, it's The End.

Desperate for inspiration, Hazel impulse-buys a historic home online and flees Manhattan to tiny Story Lake, PA. Upon her dramatic arrival—involving an incident with a bald eagle—she discovers the charm of her new home may have been slightly exaggerated.

But Hazel doesn't care. Not since all six foot three inches of grouchy contractor Campbell Bishop slapped a bandage on her forehead and unintentionally inspired the heck out of her. There's only one thing to do: Hire Cam and his equally gorgeous brothers to renovate her new spider museum...er...house.

Cam wants to say no. Hazel's got trouble written all over her. But if his family business is going to stay afloat, they need the job. Besides, he's certain Hazel won't last a month in rural Pennsylvania. But before she knows it, she's writing a romance novel and living one...at least until she has to save the town and Cam remembers exactly why he doesn't do relationships.

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