

The Boss of Her

By

Carolyn Faulkner

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Chapter 1

Annie dropped her purse into her desk drawer, turned on her computer, and took a bite out of her everything bagel with olive cream cheese, thus completing her morning ritual. She didn't know why she kept getting that bagel—she didn't really want it. She was too stressed.

She and her almost-ex husband were finalizing their divorce, but it seemed like she was getting the raw end of the deal, ending up with all of the debt and none of the assets. Of course, the fact that she'd gotten her lawyer out of the yellow pages might have had something to do with that, but he was all she could afford. To add insult to injury, if she didn't get her bills taken care of, she wasn't going to be able to afford to care for Daniel, her forty-year-old autistic brother, who, right now was comfortably ensconced in a nice private facility where he had been for the length of Annie's lackluster marriage. She and Shaun made enough money together to keep him at Wolsey House, but there was no way she was going to be able to afford to do so on her own.

Cassie stopped by her office and plopped herself down in one of the two chairs in front of her desk with the same enthusiasm as Annie had taken her own chair. "I'm wiped!"

Annie nodded, "Me, too," but she knew her reasons weren't anywhere near the same as Cassie's. Cassie was a knockout, who enjoyed partying all week long, regardless of having to get up for work. Annie was her exact opposite, in temperament and tendencies. Whereas Cassie was the office beauty, Annie was, as far as she was concerned, barely passable physically. She balled her honey blonde hair up into an unbecoming bun at the back of her neck, wore thick small glasses, and no make up whatsoever. "No sense in wasting' the stuff on a hopeless cause," her mother had always said, preferring to dote on her pretty younger sister, when she could spare time away from Daniel's care. Not wanting to cause her parents any more work or concern, Annie did her best to blend in with the woodwork, and no one had ever really cared to notice that that was what she was doing.

The only place she allowed herself to shine was at work. She was always impeccable—always on time, always perfect. The company was doing extremely well, becoming more and more involved in government sub contracting for the software they were developing. Annie, who worked in human resources, didn't really get too involved in the specifics, but even she had had to qualify for a security clearance.

Other than that, she'd pretty much stayed away from any possible contact with men. Her marriage to Shaun had been an aberration. The sex had never been good, and they had quickly descended into an almost roommate like existence that was now drawing to an agonizingly slow close.

It wasn't until she was hired on at Trask Corporation that she met the one man she had been attracted to in her life—the owner and CEO, Cole Trask. Of course, being married, even though they had already been separated for a while by then, she tried to be as circumspect as possible about her fascination with him. Thankfully, she worked on a completely different floor. She wasn't sure her heart could take seeing him that often. It was bad enough when they ended up in the same elevator with five other people. He made her feel woozy and light-headed, but at the same time, more alive than she'd ever been in her life, frighteningly so. She could only stand him in very small doses; he was incredibly potent—almost too much so for her. Almost.

And she knew that she wasn't the only woman who coveted their perpetually single boss. The break room on her floor was always full of women chattering about sightings and they weren't referring to UFO's. And he wasn't easy to spot, at least not outside of work. The man was almost obsessive about his privacy, and barely anyone had ever even seen him anywhere besides in his office. To be summoned there was tantamount to hearing the death knells of one's career. Nary an employee left while still drawing a paycheck from the man.

But Annie had an in that others did not. She and Cassie had been friends since they had both been hired as clerks, long before Cassie had gone to work as assistant to the big man. Unfortunately, Cassie was nearly as scrupulous in her work habits as Annie was, so there were precious few tidbits she'd let slip.

This morning, though, was one of the few times that Annie was less concerned with the object of her stilted desires than she was with herself and her own problems, mainly of a financial nature.

Her beleaguered sigh had Cassie leaning forward eagerly. “You need some time off,” Cassie counseled, patting her friend’s hand.

Annie snorted. “Time off? Not likely. What I need is a second job to pay off all the bills I’m getting stuck with, or pay towards Daniel. I just don’t know what to do. The lawyer is costing so much money that I can’t afford to go to anyone else. I’m stuck, and I’m digging myself deeper in debt just sitting here.” In an uncharacteristically blue moment, Annie laid her head down on her folded arms.

“Cassie, I need you to—”

Annie would recognize that voice from her grave. She lifted her head immediately, wishing she wasn’t going to breathe everything bagel on him, and hoping against hope that he hadn’t seen her practically asleep on the job.

No such luck. “Are you all right?” he asked, to Annie’s mortification.

“I’m fine,” she squeaked, but she had the strangest feeling he didn’t believe her for some reason, not that she knew him well enough to judge him about that.

Cassie had already hopped up. “What can I do you for, boss?”

She earned herself a deep frown that Annie was heartily glad wasn’t directed towards her.

“Sorry, Mr. Trask.” Annie’s eyebrow rose. She’d never seen the high energy Cassie so subdued.

“I need the notes for my meeting with Ballentine as soon as possible.” He nodded vaguely at them both and left.

“Well, that’s my cue.” Cassie nearly ran out of Annie’s office.

Annie called and caught her a couple of hours later, when she needed a break.

“Want to wander down to the cafeteria and see if they have those cinnamon muffins you like?” Annie asked, hoping it would entice her friend into leaving her desk for even a short time. Annie had questions, and plenty of them, about their oh-so-secretive boss.

Luckily, cinnamon muffins cured all ills, as far as Cassie was concerned.

He wasn't the easiest man to work for, but if there was one thing that Cole Trask knew how to do, though, it was take care of his employees. The list of people who wanted to join the company was a mile long. He paid top dollar to everyone, from the janitors on up. Of course, he expected his pound of flesh in exchange, but all employees had access to a cafeteria that served great tasting, relatively inexpensive food. And everyone, from day one, got a share in the company. He felt—and rightly so—that people worked better if they owned a part of where they were working.

Turning some of the shares of his company over to his employees, though, made him no less of a demanding boss. His higher management people were expected to meet or exceed the number of hours he spent in the office—and he practically lived there. The word around the office was that if you were an upper manager, you didn't dare leave until the boss left, although he was a sucker for any sort of family problem. He doubled the usual two months paid maternity leave for everyone, including for fathers, and expected that people would take time—paid time, no less—for things like parent teacher conferences, school plays, and field trips. He also gave whatever time was needed for anyone who had a family member who was terminal. Trask was noted for being a hard driving boss, but an extremely generous and fair one.

They found the muffins—moist, slightly tinged with the faintest hint of nutmeg, the tops dipped in melted butter then cinnamon sugar—and indulged themselves for fifteen minutes or so. The coffee at the cafeteria, as well as the small break rooms on every floor, wasn't the usual, "swept off the floor at Folger's", either. The big Boss had struck up a deal with Starbucks to provide free coffee and real fixings—no powdered cream for his employees.

"So was he mad that you were down talking with me this morning?" Annie asked as casually as she could.

Cassie took a big mouthful of muffin and a tiny swallow of coffee. "Ah. Nirvana! No, he was fine. He never gives me trouble even if I'm a little late in the morning, because he knows I'm there when it counts, and I stay late a lot without him even having to ask."

“What are you moaning about now, Cassie DeNault?” Peri Hazelton, a manager from the floor above them asked as she joined them. She looked at least as worn out as they both felt.

The conversation ended up considerably diverted from what Annie had originally intended, which was pumping Cassie for as many scraps of information about her boss as she could, not that that was ever very much, but she usually found herself moderately satisfied with the crumbs she could pry out of Cassie.

But it wasn't to be this break, anyway, and it was back to the grind long before any of them were ready.

Her phone rang less than a half an hour later, though, and she picked it up absently, still inexplicably entranced by the statistics in front of her, which was a testament to exactly how tired and stressed she was. “Annie Foster,” she announced, having converted back to her maiden name long ago.

“Ms. Foster, I'd like to see you in my office in fifteen minutes.”

The conversation was over before she knew it, almost before she recognized that voice. But if she had any doubts as to the owner, it was right there in green and gray on her phone: Cole Trask. He didn't need to bother having his title listed beneath his name.

What the heck could he want with her? Annie started to panic, running every possible scenario through her head. But her small department was doing well, spending was under budget, and her last review read as if she could nail Jell-O to walls. She hadn't felt such out and out panic since she'd faced her wedding night, and that had certainly turned out to be a disappointing bust.

“What's wrong with you?” Angel Ramirez practically screeched to a halt outside her door, giving her an over the top of her glasses once over with a look of alarm that had nothing on Annie's. “You're even whiter than usual. If you weren't already sitting down, I'd make you. What's happened? Has that rat Fink found another debt to pile onto you? Is something wrong with Daniel?”

For a few seconds, Annie couldn't speak, and only shook her head, trying to take deep breaths rather than the short, panicky panting she'd begun unconsciously. “No,” she said breathlessly. “Got a call. From the boss.”

Angel's eyes went very wide, and she stood up jerkily, backing away from Annie as if the woman in front of her had pulled an Exorcist twist of her head. "Oh, wow. My condolences. It's been nice working with you."

If she'd been in her right mind, Annie would have said something sarcastic, like, "Thanks for the support," but she wasn't. Luckily, though, she was a compulsively early person, and nearly ten minutes had gone by without her knowledge while she was in a coma of shock.

She stood, straightened the skirt of her conservative—dowdy—navy blue suit along with her backbone, and marched to the elevator, feeling somewhat like a condemned prisoner taking her last walk down the Green Mile. She was sure she heard "dead woman walking" in the whisper quiet of the elevator. Her hands were so cold from nerves she was sure her fingers were going to fall off. She wished she hadn't taken her wedding rings off. Now she had nothing to twist and fidget with while he fired her.

Annie had hoped that Cassie would be at her desk. She desperately needed to see a friendly face before she died—or worse, was fired. But Cassie was conspicuously absent when she walked up to rap sharply on the double doors to his office, as if she hadn't a care in the world. As if she was all business, and not a bundle of nerves that was inches away from turning tail and running somewhere, anywhere but into that room with him.

Luckily, before he called to her to come in, some sort of strange calm descended on her. Annie didn't know if its origins were pure stupidity or adrenaline induced bravado, but she certainly welcomed it, whatever it was. "Come in," she heard him call, and she grabbed a hold of the doorknob and pushed into the office as if she wasn't worried in the least about losing her job.

He was on the phone, but stood half out of his chair in a courtly gesture and motioned her to a comfortable looking chair in front of his desk—not that she was able to enjoy the fine leather chair, perched as she was on the edge of it. She was trying desperately not to appear too fidgety as her knee bobbed up and down fast enough to turn a turbine engine, and no amount of trying to still it or tugging her skirt down over it was going to help.

She looked around nervously, and then realized how it might look and stopped immediately. His office was gorgeous, big and roomy, the de rigueur corner office with lots of windows, a sitting area, and what looked like an antique sideboard with a carafe of amber liquid that she desperately wished she had a shot of about now.

When he hung up the phone, Annie plastered what she hoped was a pleasant smile on her face and forced herself to look him straight in the eye. But his response was not what she envisioned. “Are you feeling all right? You’re pale as a ghost, and you look like you’re in pain.” Cole would have sworn he heard her whimper, but knew he must’ve imagined it. Annie Foster wasn’t the type of woman to whimper at anything. She was one of his hardest workers, and he knew from the personnel files he’d pulled that her supervisor thought she walked on water.

He’d picked her for a very particular reason to perform a very particular task, but here she was looking like she expected him to fire her.

“Can I get you anything?”

Annie’s eyebrows went up at the question, although she declined his offer, thinking he was being very solicitous for someone who was going to send her to the unemployment line.

Cole thought she might break apart right in front of him, and there was nothing he hated worse than an emotionally fragile person. Perhaps she wasn’t exactly right for what he had in mind, but he pressed on nonetheless. She probably wouldn’t agree to it anyway, but he had to try.

He didn’t believe in pussyfooting around, so he dove right in. He’d rather know whether or not she would agree, and then he could proceed from there. “I hear you’re in a bit of a financial bind.”

There was very little else he could have said that would have been more calculated to make her blush. “I’m fine, sir. I’ll work my way through it.”

Cole admired her tenacity. She hadn’t dissolved into tears, and she hadn’t spilled her guts. But he knew from Cassie, who had been admirably circumspect considering the fact that he could see that she had been fair to bursting with information, that Annie was very near bankrupt, and that she had an older brother who depended on her financially.

And Cole wanted to help her out. Hell, he flat out wanted her, and the benefits of his money came with that. But he knew she wasn't about to take charity from him. "Well, I admire your forbearance, but that's one of the reasons I've called you up here." He watched her swallow hard, and it struck him that she really did think he was going to fire her. "By the way," he added as casually as he could, "you can relax. Your job is more than safe."

Her sigh of relief was audible, almost making him smile, but his next words made her more nervous than before. "I understand you're going through a messy divorce."

She should have been a lot more relaxed now that she knew that her paycheck wasn't in jeopardy, but somehow, considering the topic he had introduced, it just wasn't happening. "Uh, yes."

"And you have a brother who has special considerations?"

Annie was ready to haul Cassie up by her toenails. What the heck had she been telling him? "Daniel is autistic, yes. But he's pretty high functioning."

He leaned back in his chair, which in no way diminished his powerful presence. He was a big man—six four, and broad shouldered. He'd dwarfed poor Annie on the few occasions they'd met. Unlike a lot of men his age, which she knew from the grapevine was forty-five, he had a fiercely tamed shock of thick dark hair that was somewhere between black and brown, an angular nose that was too big for his face, and a strong, lantern jaw. In other words, he wasn't a cover model by any means. Just the opposite, in fact. His looks fit him, though. They were straight forward and no nonsense. No one would ever catch him dying his hair or getting nipped or tucked in any way, shape, or form.

His money was the draw for some women, and that was to be expected. But for a lot of the gaggle that followed him almost religiously, in and outside of his company, it was the man himself. Cole Trask never had a moment's doubt about what he was doing, and he had never faltered from his vision. He said what he meant, and he meant what he said. A power emanated from him that was something no amount of money could buy. It was an inner core of strength that made him absolutely irresistible. He was always calm, always controlled, never flustered or worried or nervous.

He was the exact opposite of Annie at this moment. She felt as if she had ants crawling beneath her skin, wondering when the other shoe was going to drop. Surely he hadn't asked her into his office to talk about her family or her finances.

He cleared his throat and leaned forward. "I want to be very up front with you, and I want to again reassure you that your job is not on the line here. You can say no to me and still go back to your desk as if nothing had happened. But I have a special project I'd like you to work on with me, and it involves a bit of travel, but it would also involve a considerable pay raise. I know that's not something that you signed on for as a Human Resources manager, but it's very important to the company. I need someone who can read people well, and who isn't well known as a part of my company. Someone who is more of a people person than I am. Somebody new, and someone who isn't likely to get rattled easily." A somewhat rueful smile touched his lips. "And you're one of the few people who were able to get a security clearance."

What he was saying seemed awfully intriguing, although she had definitely proven him wrong about the not being rattled. But that had really only been when she thought she was going to lose her job. She had found, once she'd recovered from the heart attack she'd been experiencing, that although she'd always been a bit jittery around him, those nerves had been completely blown out of the water by her earlier panic. She was actually quite a bit calmer now. Annie knew she was no great beauty, and she knew that she couldn't hope to attract him, so she could relax. He seemed to already have a pretty good opinion of her, and she made a mental note to bake something special for her supervisor, Joe Abercrombie, in thanks. His wife was a doll, but couldn't cook to save her own life, and the best way to reward him was to bake something gooey for him.

Cole had stopped talking and was watching her closely, which might have set her to trembling again, but Annie took a deep breath and put those nerves to rest—at least until she got out of his office. She nodded slowly. "I'd be interested," she answered cautiously, "but I can't be away from Daniel for too long. I—" she hated to sound hesitant, but there it was. "I want to take some time to think about this before I decide."

He was way ahead of her. "I understand that. And regardless of whether or not you decide to accept this assignment, I want to give you the name of a good divorce

lawyer I know. You need to get hold of him today or tomorrow, because he's not in town for long. Call him anytime."

Annie bit her lip, not quite knowing how to tell him that there was no way she could afford anyone he would recommend, but glad she was able to stifle her out and out snort of derision, which was her first impulse.

But not much got past him as he handed her a card. "I know what you're thinking, but just tell him I sent you and he should do it for free. And if he gives you any guff, you tell me and I'll straighten him out," he growled. "Don't take too much time deciding; we have to move quickly on this."

Annie couldn't imagine anyone going against Cole Trask and living to tell about it. There were rumors that he had been anything from a CIA Black Ops agent to a mafia hit man, and everything in between, although the occasional interview he allowed never hinted at anything so daring—graduated high school early, BA and MBA from Harvard, of course, stint in the army after college. Never married, no scandalous love affairs. Workaholics didn't make for great copy or sound bites. Down right boring stuff. That was probably why he wasn't interviewed all that often.

But what he was suggesting sounded so cloak and dagger.

"I'm not at liberty to discuss a lot of details about what we're going to be doing. I'll need you to trust me. I would never let you be put in any sort of danger. Regardless, I'd have you out of it well before it got to that stage."

Annie wasn't sure exactly what to say, so she cleared her throat and asked, "Uh, exactly where will we be traveling to?"

"Germany. For about four days. Is your passport in order?"

"Uh, no." Like she, in her "do nothing but work" life, had ever had a need for a passport. Even her honeymoon with Shaun had been lame—they'd gone from Boston to Maine.

He grimaced, and she instantly wished she'd been able to answer in the affirmative. "Well, I can get that pushed through channels and have it to you by the end of the week. We'll get a photo ASAP."

He started to shuffle through some papers, and Annie figured that she had been dismissed and arose from the chair.

“Leaving so soon?” he asked, somewhat sarcastically.

Feeling braver than she probably ought, Annie’s eyebrows rose. “I said that I needed some time to think about this.”

Her boss met her eyes—that was all. There weren’t any advances; there was no harassment, no nothing, but nevertheless she felt a pure bolt of sexual pleasure such as she’d never experienced in her life.

If she accepted this offer, she would be spending more time with him. A lot more time being much closer to him than she was now, as she literally creamed in her pants from three feet away.

How could she possibly turn him down?