



LEAH ASHTON

Beware of the Boss



MODERN
tempted

Leah Ashton

Beware of the Boss

Аннотация

Lanie Smith's boss might look heavenly in a suit, but she's being run ragged by Grayson Manning's outrageous demands! Dog-sitting, clothes shopping... there nothing he won't ask her to do! (Luckily, she's spent enough time checking out Gray's broad shoulders that guessing his shirt size isn't a problem...)The final straw? Being ordered to drop everything for a business trip to Vietnam. But one completely unexpected – and completely magical – kiss later, Lanie's finally forced to admit the truth – that their super-charged battle of wills hides a much more dangerous attraction...

‘Has it ever occurred to you, Lanie Smith, that you have the same effect on me?’

All she could do was stare at him.

He took another step, close enough now to touch.

‘I—’ she began. But she really had no idea what to say. Her instinct was to deny—to shake her head and tell him that he was wrong, that this was unfair, that he didn’t really mean that.

But would she actually believe what she was saying?

Did she *really* believe that incredible kiss at the Night Market had been so one-sided? Or that their daily meetings at the beach were solely between work colleagues—or, at a stretch, friends?

Or was it more that she hadn’t wanted to acknowledge what was going on? That she didn’t want to allow herself to consider—or hope—it was something more?

‘What are we doing?’ she managed eventually.

‘What *is* this?’

Gray’s lips quirked upwards. ‘I have absolutely no idea. But right now I’d really like to kiss you.’

Dear Reader

I always find people who are really brilliant at something endlessly interesting. It doesn’t matter what that something is—anything from art to sport—but I love to hear their story. Of course I’m certainly not alone in this fascination—read any newspaper or magazine and it’s full of just those types of stories.

But what about all those people who are *almost* brilliant? We hear about the most famous, the real superstars of the world—

but how about the guy who gets knocked out in the first round of every Grand Slam? Or the actress who finally makes it in Hollywood but never lands a leading role? These people are the very best at what they do—better than the vast majority of the population—but *still* not quite good enough.

This is where Lanie Smith comes from. She has an amazing drive and determination that has taken her all the way to international swimming championships, but in her mind she is a failure. She is *almost* brilliant. I just had to get to know her better. And I definitely needed to give her a happy-ever-after—even if she doesn't see it coming when she first meets my rather grumpy hero Grayson Manning!

I hope you enjoy Lanie and Gray's story! I love hearing from readers (really!), so please feel free to contact me via my website: www.leah-ashton.com, or e-mail me at leah@leah-ashton.com

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An unashamed fan of all things happily-ever-after, **LEAH ASHTON** has been a lifelong reader of romance. Writing came

a little bit later—although in hindsight she’s been dreaming up stories for as long as she can remember. Sadly, the most popular boy in school never did suddenly fall head over heels in love with her ...

Now she lives in Perth, Western Australia, with her own real-life hero, two gorgeous dogs and the world’s smartest cat. By day she works in IT-land; by night she considers herself incredibly lucky to be writing the type of books she loves to read and to have the opportunity to share her own characters’ happily-ever-afters with readers.

You can visit Leah at www.leah-ashton.com

This and other titles by Leah Ashton are available in eBook format—check out www.millsandboon.co.uk

For Isla. Welcome to the world, honeybun!

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ONE

With a gasp, Lanie Smith sat up abruptly, her floppy straw hat dislodging onto her lap and her towel a tangle amongst her hastily rearranged legs.

What on earth?

A shockingly cold nose pressing insistently against her knee answered that question. The large dog, its long red coat soaked in salt water and decorated generously with beach sand, nudged her leg, then flicked its liquid chocolate gaze hopefully in her direction.

‘You lose something, buddy?’

Lanie leant forward, searching amongst the folds of her towel. The dog found its soggy-looking target first and snatched the ball up, backing a quick handful of steps away before going still and staring at her again.

‘You want me to throw it?’

Knowing there was really only one answer to that question, Lanie pressed her hands into the sand and climbed to her feet. She shook her head a little, still fuzzy from her impromptu nap.

One minute she’d been reading her paperback...the next... She glanced up at the sky, looking for the sun, and breathed a silent sigh of relief when she realised it was still low and behind her. At least she hadn’t slept for long.

Not that sleeping the day away would have been such a disaster. It wasn't as if she had a million other things to do.

The dog came closer and dropped the ball with a dull plop at her feet.

Hurry up.

Lanie couldn't help but smile.

'Okay, okay, buddy—here we go.'

With barely a grimace as her fingers wrapped around the slobbery ball—there was enough water here at North Cottesloe beach to wash her hands, after all—Lanie weighed up her throwing options. Back towards the water, from where the dog had obviously come? Or along the shore...?

'Luther!'

The deep voice stilled Lanie's movements. The dog momentarily glanced in the direction of the obviously familiar voice before refocussing his rapt attention on the ball.

A man loped across the blinding white sand towards her. He was shirtless, wearing only baggy, low-slung board shorts and a pair of jet-black sunglasses. The morning sun reflected off toned olive skin that glowed with exertion, and he ran a hand through slightly too long dark brown hair as he approached, leaving it standing in a haphazard arrangement.

Lanie found herself patting uselessly at her own brownish hair—which, in contrast, she was sure had not been rakishly enhanced by the combined effects of sand, wind and the fact that she'd done no more than loop it into half a ponytail before

walking out of the house this morning.

‘Luther!’ the man said again.

The dog moved not a muscle, every line of his body focussed on Lanie’s hand.

For the first time the man glanced in her direction.

And it was only a glance—as brief and uninterested as Luther’s when he’d heard his owner call his name.

‘Are you planning on keeping his ball?’ the man asked, shifting his weight from foot to foot as he waited for her response.

Lanie blinked behind her own sunglasses. ‘Pardon me?’

He sighed, twisting his wrist to look at his watch. ‘Can you please give Luther his ball? Soonish would be great.’

The ball dropped from Lanie’s fingers, but the big red dog pounced as excitedly as if she’d thrown it miles away. Now he crossed the short distance to his owner, and moments later the ball was whizzing through the air and into the shallow waves. The dog followed with huge, galumphing, splashing strides.

The man left too, without a backward glance, jogging the exact parallel distance from the lapping waves as he did every single morning.

‘You’re welcome,’ Lanie said to his rapidly retreating broad shoulders.

What a jerk.

She knelt to stuff her towel and book into her canvas tote bag, and covered her windblown hair with her hat.

Well, at least now she knew.

In the past weeks she'd come to recognise most of the early-morning regulars at the beach—the dedicated open water swimmers who swam at seven a.m. every day, come rain, hail or shine. The walkers—both the walking-for-exercise and the walking-because-the-beach-is-gorgeous types. The joggers, the surfers, the sunbathers—and of course the dogs.

That man was also a regular. Unlike the others, who would greet Lanie with a familiar nod or smile each morning, this man appeared to be absorbed completely in his own world. He went for his run, his dog zipping about the shore in his wake—and then he left. That was it.

Dark and interesting, Lanie had thought whenever she'd seen him. Private. Intense.

Gorgeous. Obviously.

She wouldn't have been human not to wonder about a man like that. What did he do? What was his name? Was he married?

Not that she'd harboured any ridiculous daydreams. Lanie was, if nothing else, pragmatic.

But still—she'd wondered.

And now she had the only answer she needed. So, what was he like? Rude. Definitely.

Oh, well. No great loss—he could still add to her beautiful view each morning. A personality deficiency wouldn't impact on that.

With her shoes dangling from her fingers, Lanie followed a path through the green scrub-tufted dunes towards Marine

Parade. Small white shells mixed amongst the sand dug into the soles of her feet. When she hit the footpath she dropped her shoes to the ground so she could step into them. The concrete was surprisingly warm, despite the lukewarm winter day.

It was Tuesday, so the Norfolk-pine-lined street was mostly empty, not crammed with cars fighting for every available space as was typical throughout summer weekends. Across the road, multi-million-dollar homes faced the cerulean ocean, with a single café nestled amongst their architecturally designed glory. The café's white-painted tables and chairs spilled outside, protected by brightly covered shade cloth sails and decorated with blue glass bottles filled with yellow daisies. Lanie's house was a two-minute walk up the hill—but a wave from the grey-haired man amongst the empty tables drew her attention.

'Lanie!' he called out, pausing his energetic sweeping to prop himself against a broom. 'Morning! Did you swim today?'

She smiled as she shook her head. 'Not today.'

'Tomorrow?'

They followed this script every day. 'Maybe.'

The man grumbled something non-distinct, but his opinion was still crystal-clear.

'Tell me what you really think, Bob,' she said dryly.

'Such a waste,' he said—just as he had yesterday—then patted one of the table tops. 'Coffee?'

Lanie nodded. Along with her early-morning beach visits, coffee at the eponymous Bob's Café had become part of her daily

routine.

She slid onto the wooden chair, careful to avoid Bob's scruffy-looking apricot poodle who slept, oblivious, at her feet. Bob didn't wait to take her order, just shuffled inside to brew her 'usual': flat white, no sugar, extra shot of coffee.

On the table was today's newspaper, and automatically Lanie flipped it over as she waited.

A giant colour photograph almost filled the back page: a familiar, perfect, blinding white smile; slicked back, damp blond hair and eyes identical to those she saw in the mirror each day—except Sienna's were a sparkling azure blue, not brown.

'Hazel,' her mum always said. 'Not brown. If you only made more of them, Lanie, they'd be your best feature.'

'Another gold medal,' Bob said, sliding a large mug and saucer onto the table.

Lanie shrugged. 'I know. She's doing really well. This is a great meet for her.'

Meet. Quite the understatement.

Bob raised his white-flecked eyebrows.

'I mean it,' Lanie said—and she did. 'I'm thrilled for her. Very proud of her.'

Her sister was in London, living Lanie's dream.

No, Sienna's dream. Lanie's dream had ended months ago, at the selection trials.

Lanie held her mug in her hands for a few moments, then raised an eyebrow at Bob, who still hovered.

‘It’s the relay tonight,’ Bob said.

‘Uh-huh.’ Lanie took a too-quick sip and the hot liquid stung the roof of her mouth. She pressed her tongue against the slight pain, dismissing it.

Bob didn’t push, but she felt the occasional weight of his gaze as he swept around her. He was a sports nut—pure and simple. Fanatical, actually—he had to be to have recognised her that first morning she’d emerged from her mother’s house. Lanie Smith was far, far from a household name. Sienna Smith—well, that was another story. A story that could be read in the sports pages, in gushing women’s magazines, or even in lads’ mags accompanied by pictures of her in far more revealing bathers than her sister wore at swim-meets.

It didn’t bother her. Her younger sister was suited to the limelight and she deserved it. Lanie was much happier in the shadows and perfectly satisfied with her accomplishments as a world-class relay swimmer. Besides, she certainly didn’t crave the adulation that Sienna seemed to draw like a magnet.

Mostly satisfied. Lanie mentally corrected herself. Mostly satisfied with her accomplishments.

Absently she flicked through the sporting pages, full of photos of winners on podiums.

‘Wish it was you?’

She hadn’t realised Bob had approached her table again, and she glanced up in surprise. ‘Of course not,’ Lanie replied—snapped, really. Immediately she wished she could swallow the

words. 'I'm retired,' she clarified, more calmly.

He nodded and drifted politely away again—but Lanie didn't miss the questions, and maybe concern, in his eyes.

She stood and left a handful of coins on the table, trying to ignore how her eyes had started to tingle and squint.

It was the sea breeze.

She slung her bag onto her shoulder and took big, brisk strides to exit the café and get home as quickly as possible.

She'd walked past three huge mansions, heading towards the street where her mother's small neat cottage was, when something caught her eye.

The glint of sun off a sweaty, perfectly muscled chest.

That man.

He jogged along the footpath on the opposite side of the road. His dog was now on a lead, intermittently gazing up at his owner in adoration.

Lanie felt herself tense, for no reason she could fathom.

She'd slowed her walk, but now she deliberately sped up—back to the pace she'd been before.

She didn't care about that guy. Didn't care if he was rude. Didn't care what he thought of her.

Didn't care what Bob thought.

Didn't care what her sister thought. Didn't care what anyone thought.

She held her head high and walked briskly past. With purpose.

But out of the corner of her eye she couldn't help but watch

the man.

And notice that he paid her absolutely no attention at all.

It was as if she were invisible.

* * *

The knock on Lanie's front door later that night was not unexpected.

She headed down her narrow hallway, her slippers thudding against the hundred-year-old floorboards.

She flung the door open, and—as expected—behind the fly screen stood Teagan. Her long black hair was swept off her face and semi contained in a messy bun on the top of her head, and her eyes sparkled behind red-framed glasses.

Her oldest friend held up a plastic grocery bag. 'I have four types of cheese, olives, sundried tomatoes, and something I believe is called quince. The guy at the deli told me it was awesome, but I remain sceptical.'

Teagan bounded up the hall, as comfortable in this house as her own. As kids they'd split their time between their family's homes, although Teagan's family had long upgraded and moved on, while Lanie's mum had quite happily stayed put in the house she'd grown up in.

Lanie watched as Teagan pottered around the kitchen, locating a large wooden board and helping herself to cutlery.

She didn't bother asking why her friend was here as it was so obvious. Equally obvious was the fact that Teagan had ignored her when she'd politely declined her offer to hang out with her

tonight.

‘It’s just another race, Teags,’ she’d told her. ‘I’ll be fine.’

Apparently she’d convinced Teagan about as well as she’d convinced herself.

Soon they’d settled on the rug in front of the TV, red wine in hand, cheese platter set out in front of them.

‘You do know the final isn’t until, like, two a.m.?’ Lanie asked, her legs sprawled out in front of her.

‘That’s what coffee is for,’ Teagan said between sips of wine. ‘Besides, this current job I could do in my sleep. Hardly anyone calls Reception. In fact I’m starting to think they don’t have any customers at all. You know...’ Teagan paused, leaning forward conspiratorially. ‘I reckon it’s possible that it’s all an elaborate front for something dodgy. I’ve always thought that my boss has shifty eyes...’

Lanie laughed out loud as Teagan outlined a typically outlandish theory. More than once Lanie had suspected that Teagan’s preference for temping over a more permanent job was purely to get new material—whether they caught up for coffee, dinner or a drink, it was guaranteed that her friend would have a new story to tell.

As they ate—and polished off the bottle of wine—Lanie flicked from channel to channel of the sports coverage—heats of rowing, horses leaping over huge fences across country, cyclists whizzing around a velodrome.

‘So, have you made a decision?’ Teagan said a while later, her

tone much more careful than before.

Lanie shifted uncomfortably. ‘Has my mother been in touch?’

Teagan pulled a face. ‘God, no. And it isn’t like your mum’s not capable of nagging you directly.’

Lanie’s lips quirked unevenly.

Teagan drew her legs up so she sat cross-legged. ‘I was just wondering.’ She paused. ‘Worrying, maybe,’ she added softly.

Lanie found herself biting the inside of her lip. When it happened twice in one day—first Bob, and now her best friend—that look really couldn’t be misinterpreted.

They felt sorry for her.

Her whole focus had been aimed in one direction for so long. But now the pool wasn’t calling her to training each morning. Her coach wasn’t yelling at her. Her times weren’t creeping down—or up. She didn’t have another meet to aim for.

She had no goals.

Even though she wasn’t the slightest bit hungry she reached for the cheese platter, busying herself with slicing bread and cheese and then taking her time to chew and swallow, not looking at Teagan

She mentally pulled herself into shape.

‘I’ve decided not to go back to my old job,’ she said, finally answering the question. ‘It’s time for a change. Managing the swim school is too much the same thing I’ve been doing for ever.’ She attempted a carefree laugh. ‘Although I can’t imagine a job where my office doesn’t smell of chlorine!’

Teagan, ever the good friend, smiled back, but she wasn't about to let her off the hook. 'So, the new plan is...?'

On the TV a rider toppled off his horse when the big grey animal slid to a stop before a hulking log fence. Lanie watched as he immediately jumped to his feet. She could see what he was telling everyone with his body language—I'm fine!—but the commentator was explaining in a clipped British accent that this meant he was disqualified. His dream was over.

The man patted his horse's neck, then leant forward until his silk-covered helmet rested against the horse's cheek.

Lanie knew exactly how he felt.

'I don't know—maybe I'll finish my business degree,' she said with a shrug. Three-quarters finished years ago, she'd abandoned it leading up to the national titles, intending to defer only for a semester or two. But then she'd made the Australian team, and everything had changed.

'Still living here?' Teagan's wrinkled nose conveyed exactly what she thought of that idea.

Lanie didn't know. She'd moved back in months earlier, after the selection trials. At the time it had seemed sensible—she'd taken extended leave from her job, needed a break from swimming entirely, and without an income she couldn't afford the rent on her little one-bedder in Scarborough without putting a huge dent into the savings she had earmarked for a house deposit. Her mum and sister had been focused on Sienna—not unusual in itself—so she'd reasoned that it wouldn't be too bad.

But they'd both be back soon.

'Maybe.'

Teagan raised an eyebrow. 'Hmm. You're always welcome to crash at mine. Or I can put a good word in for you at my temp agency?'

'And I can inadvertently work for an international drug cartel?' she asked with a smile.

Teagan stuck her tongue out at her.

So the conversation was over—for now.

Some time during one of the rowing finals Lanie noticed Teagan had fallen asleep sprawled against the front of her sofa. She padded over to extract the empty wine glass from her friend's hand, and then took her time washing up and tidying the kitchen.

She wasn't at all tired. Quite the opposite. In fact with every passing minute she felt more alert, more awake.

Before Teagan had arrived she'd considered not watching the race at all. She'd told herself that it wasn't as if anyone would know—and she'd find out the result tomorrow, anyway.

But she hadn't really believed she could do that, and now she knew she couldn't. It wasn't quite the same, but she recognised how she was feeling: as if she was racing today.

The anticipation, the adrenalin, the nervous energy. Muted, but there.

From her kitchen bench Lanie watched the swimmers walk out for the men's hundred-metre breaststroke final. Watched them stretch and roll their shoulders, wiggle their legs about.

Then she watched the race—listened to the crowd, to the increasing hysteria of the commentators, and then watched the moment the winner won gold.

Automatically she smiled in reaction to the winner's smile, and then grinned to herself when she realised what she'd done.

See? She could do this. Tonight was just like any other night in front of the television. She'd watched her sister win two medals and been genuinely nervous and then over the moon for her. If she was going to have regrets, or be overwhelmed by jealousy or resentment or something equally unpleasant and inappropriate, she would have done it by now.

It really was just another race.

On the screen, groups of swimmers began to walk out to the pool. Sweden, in their uniform of vivid blue and gold. Japan, with all four women holding hands as they waved to the crowd. The Dutch in orange and grey.

And then the Australian team.

'Lanie?' Teagan poked her head over the top of the couch and blinked sleepy eyes in her direction.

'Perfect timing!' Lanie said, managing to sound remarkably normal. 'The race is just about to start.'

Her friend raised an eyebrow.

Okay. Maybe she didn't sound totally normal. But surely a little bit of tension was to be expected?

The swimmers had all discarded their tracksuits and onto the blocks stepped the lead-out swimmer. Australia was in lane four,

sandwiched between the United States and the Netherlands.

Teagan's eyes were glued to the television when Lanie sat beside her, but her friend still managed to reach out and grab her hand. She shot a short glance in Lanie's direction as she squeezed it—hard.

‘You okay?’

Lanie nodded. ‘Totally.’

‘Take your marks.’

Pause.

Complete silence.

BEEP!

And they were off.

The first leg was good—strong. The United States touched first, but there was nothing in it. By the end of the second lap Australia had drawn level.

Then the third Aussie girl dived in, sluicing through the water like an arrow.

This was her leg. The girl was just like her—the fastest of the heat swimmers, awarded with the final relay berth amongst the more elite girls.

She was doing a brilliant job. Holding her own.

Would Lanie have?

She closed her eyes, squeezing them shut tight.

She imagined herself in the water. Remembered the way her focus became so narrow, so all-encompassing, that she didn't hear the crowd—didn't hear a thing. It was just her body and the

water, and all she could control was her technique.

Stroke, stroke, breathe. Stroke, stroke...

The crowd—a world away—was suddenly much louder, and Lanie's eyes popped open. The anchor swimmer was in the water, and Great Britain had a chance for a medal. The crowd had gone wild.

Teagan squeezed her hand again, harder, and Lanie blinked, refocussing her attention.

Australia had pulled ahead. They were going to win.

And just like that—they had.

The girls had done it, and done it in style—in record time. They deserved every accolade the over-excited commentator was bestowing upon them.

They filled the television screen, swim caps stripped off, damp hair long around their shoulders, as they completed the standard pool-side interview.

'Lanie?' Teagan's voice was full of concern.

Despite her own mental reassurances that she was fine, and the many times she'd told herself she was a bigger person than to be jealous or resentful or whatever, she suddenly realised she wasn't.

A tear splashed onto her hands, and she looked down to where her fingers were knotted in the flannelette of her pyjamas.

She'd been wallowing. Treading water until this moment—waiting for tonight, for this race.

Why?

Because tonight was the end. The end of her swimming dream.

Teagan silently shoved a handful of tissues in front of her and Lanie dabbed at her cheeks. Blew her nose. And considered what to do next.

She needed to do something—anything. And she had to do it now. She couldn't wake up tomorrow and be the also-ran swimmer.

She turned to face Teagan on the couch. Her friend was so close to be as good as shoulder to shoulder with her, but she'd wisely not made a move to comfort her.

'I need a job,' Lanie said.

Teagan's eyes widened, but then she smiled. 'But no drug cartels?'

'Or anything involving swimming.'

Her friend's smile broadened. 'Consider it done.'

TWO

Grayson Manning shoved his chair away from his desk, then covered the generous space between the desk and the door in quick, agitated strides.

Outside his office, his assistant's desk was empty.

He glanced at his watch, confused. It was well after nine a.m., and Rodney was always on time. Gray insisted upon it.

He frowned as he walked into the hallway. Thankfully a woman sat behind the glossy white reception desk. Behind her, 'Manning' was spelt out in ridiculously large chrome block

capitals.

What was her name again? Cathy? Katie?

‘Caroline,’ she said, unprompted, as he approached—reminding him he’d guessed wrong last time he’d asked her a question, too.

‘Caroline,’ he repeated. He’d been told doing so was useful when remembering names—not that it had helped him so far. ‘Where’s Rodney?’

The woman blinked. Then bit her lip, glancing away for a moment. ‘Um...Mr Manning, Rodney resigned...’ A pause. ‘Yesterday.’

Gray’s jaw clenched. ‘Our agreement with the agency specifies at least two weeks’ notice must be provided.’

The woman nodded, her blond ponytail bouncing in agreement. ‘I believe he asked your permission that his resignation be effective immediately.’

‘I didn’t agree to that.’

Caroline’s lips twitched. ‘I’m pretty sure you did. Rodney forwarded me your e-mail so he could organise cancellation of his building access and so on. It was there in writing.’

Gray pulled his phone from his jacket pocket and quickly scrolled through yesterday’s sent messages. Yesterday had been stupidly busy—back-to-back meetings, a major issue with one of his contractors, and a lead on a new investment opportunity in South East Asia.

Even so, surely he would have noticed if... Letter of

Resignation.

It wasn't even a vague subject line. He really needed to start paying more attention to his inbox. But then, that was one of the reasons why he had an assistant: to prioritise his mail, to nag him to respond to anything important, and to allow him to pay no attention to anything that wasn't.

The irony was not lost on him.

Without another word he headed up the hallway to the opposite end of the floor. To his father's office.

A mirror image of his own, Gordon Manning's office also had a smaller adjacent waiting area—although his was complete with an actual assistant.

'Marilyn—'

Unlike Caroline, the older lady didn't even attempt to hide her smile. She shook her head. 'Gray, Gray, Gray...'

'I need a new assistant.'

'So I hear.'

His lips thinned. 'Does everyone but me know that Rodney resigned?'

'A group of us had farewell drinks last night. Lovely guy.'

'I was unaware you were so close,' he replied dryly. 'He was only here a couple of weeks.'

'Two months,' Marilyn corrected smoothly.

Really? Since his father had announced his impending retirement six months ago, Gray could barely remember what day it was. He was working seven days a week, and easily twelve-

hour days.

‘Is my father in?’

‘No, not today.’

His father hadn’t been into the office in months. Initially his transition to retirement had been gradual—and Gray had been unsure if his father was capable of retiring at all. But soon Gordon’s days in the office had been reduced to only a few hours, and then to nothing. And while Marilyn continued to manage his dad’s life, now she did so exclusively via e-mail.

A month ago Gordon Manning had had his no-expense-spared retirement party and that had made it all official. But Gray wasn’t silly enough to clear out his dad’s office just yet—apart from the fact it contained about forty years’ worth of god-knew-what paperwork, it would be a while before Gordon—or Gray, come to think of it—could imagine a Manning Developments office without a desk for its founder.

‘So you can help me today? Fantastic. I need you to accompany me to a meeting in West Perth. And to sort out my flights for next week. And—’

But Marilyn was shaking her head. ‘No need. Your new assistant should be here soon.’

Oh. The agency must already be on to it. Even so...

‘I’d rather not have someone completely new to Manning with me today. This is a very important meeting. It’s essential that—’

Marilyn’s look froze him mid-sentence, exactly as it had frozen him many times before—although the vast majority of

such glares had been twenty-five years ago. A kid learnt quickly not to mess with Marilyn.

‘If you don’t want a new assistant, be nice to the assistant you have.’

‘I am nice.’

Her eyebrows rose right up beneath her dead straight fringe.

‘Be nice to this one, Gray. Let’s try for three months, this time, hey?’

* * *

Almost an hour later, Caroline ushered Gray’s new assistant into his office.

‘Mr Manning?’

He was just finishing an e-mail, so he barely glanced in the direction of the figure in his doorway and instead just waved an arm in the general vicinity of one of the soft leather chairs in front of his desk.

Absently, he heard the door thud quietly shut, and then the click of heels on the marble floor—but all his attention was on the e-mail he was composing:

I look forward to discussing the proposal further...

No. He hit the delete key half a dozen times, maybe a little harder than was necessary. He didn’t want any discussion. He wanted a decision. The deal was already behind schedule. He needed a yes and he needed it last week.

I trust you’ll agree...

That was even worse. He held down the delete key again,

thinking.

But that was the problem. He was thinking too much. It was just an e-mail—an e-mail to an investment partner with whom he already had an excellent rapport. The proposal was little more than a formality.

Or at least it should be. But their last meeting had been...off. It had been subtle—more questions than he'd normally expect, more careful perusal of the numbers Gray had shown him. All perfectly normal things for a wise investor to do. The thing was that this particular investor had so much confidence in Manning that he was usually rather relaxed about conducting his own due diligence.

Quite simply—he'd trusted Manning.

But now...

Maybe it was a coincidence that this new-found caution coincided with Gray's father's retirement...

Gray didn't believe that for a second.

And it was damned infuriating.

Gray glanced up. His eyes landed on the woman's hands—long, elegant fingers, unpainted, neat, short tips. She was sluggishly rubbing each hand down her thighs, the movement slow but clearly triggered by nerves.

She wore trousers, not a skirt, he noticed.

'How do I finish this e-mail?' he asked. His tone was sharper than he'd intended, and Marilyn's words echoed momentarily.

His gaze shot to the woman's face.

As their eyes met her body gave a little jolt and she gasped—quite loudly.

Immediately one of those long-fingered hands was slapped to her mouth.

Her eyes widened as she looked at him.

And they were very lovely eyes, he acknowledged. Big and brown, framed by dark lashes—even though he was almost certain she wore no make-up. They watched him with unexpected intensity and an expression that was impossible to read.

He didn't understand. Surely his request wasn't so shocking? Abrupt, maybe, but hardly earth-shattering.

When the silence continued he shrugged, his temporary interest in her reaction rapidly morphing into frustration.

He didn't have time for this. The agency would just have to send someone else.

'I don't think this is going to work out,' he said, very evenly. 'Thanks for your time.'

He didn't bother to wait for her to leave, just gritted his teeth and got back to his e-mail.

Again he only half listened to the sound of her heels on the marble—although soon he realised she was coming closer, not going further away.

'Regards,' she said, from right behind his shoulder.

'What?'

He looked up at her. She was somehow bigger than he'd

expected—taller, and wider through the shoulders. She leant forward slightly as she studied his computer, her long hair shining in the sunlight that flooded through the office's floor-to-ceiling windows.

'I'd delete all that stuff at the end, and just say Regards. Or Sincerely. Or however you normally sign off your e-mails.' She met his eyes, and this time she didn't look like a deer caught in the headlights. She watched him steadily, and there was a sharpness to her gaze that he appreciated.

Her eyes were definitely hazel, he realised. Not brown.

When he didn't say anything, she explained further. 'Judging by the e-mail trail beneath this one, you've been having this conversation for a while.'

Gray nodded.

'And you want a resolution? But you don't want to be seen as pushy?'

'Exactly,' he said, surprised.

'Well, then,' she said, as if it was the most obvious thing in the world. 'Sometimes saying less is more.'

She straightened up and took a step away from his chair.

Silently, he deleted his half-written sentence, ended the e-mail as she'd suggested, then hit 'Send.'

Good. It was gone.

He stood, and with this action, the woman took another rapid step away. Then she rolled her shoulders back, and thrust out her hand.

‘Elaine Smith,’ she said, very crisply. ‘Lanie.’

Automatically he grasped her hand. It was cool and delicate. And she was tall. But even in heels she was an inch shorter than him.

Her suit jacket was a dark grey and a little tight across the chest—and her soft pink shirt wasn’t sitting quite right, with one side of her collar higher than the other. Combined with her loose, wavy hair and lack of discernible make-up, no one would call her perfectly presented.

He would call her pretty, though. Very pretty.

Gray rapidly dispatched that unexpected musing. The appearance of his employees was irrelevant. All he cared about was their ability to do their job.

And, despite her slightly odd initial reaction to him, there was an air of practicality to this woman that was appealing. Plus she’d been right about the e-mail.

Most importantly he needed an assistant, and she was here.

‘I have a meeting in half an hour in West Perth.’

For a moment she looked at him blankly. ‘So I have the job?’

He nodded impatiently. ‘Yes, of course.’

A beat passed.

He sighed. ‘Anything else?’

‘Oh,’ she said. ‘No.’

He turned back to his computer and a moment later she walked away, her heels again clicking loudly.

He briefly wondered if she needed help figuring out how to log

into her computer or anything—but then another e-mail popped in that he urgently needed to attend to, and that was that.

Surely it wasn't that difficult? She seemed smart. She'd figure it out.

* * *

Lanie almost collapsed into her new, plush leather office chair.

Her phone trilled its musical message notification from within the depths of her bag, but for now she ignored it.

Of course she'd forgotten to put it onto silent mode prior to her interview.

Thank goodness she hadn't received that message a few minutes earlier. She could just about imagine Grayson Manning's reaction to that.

But then would that have been such a bad thing?

If he'd stuck with his original conclusion—that she wasn't suitable—she'd have walked out of this office no worse than how she'd walked in: without a job.

With the added benefit of not working for Mr Grumpy Pants. No. Not a bad thing at all.

And yet she'd had her chance to leave. She had her chance still to walk away. No one would force her to stay. Not even the employment agency she was working for.

Which reminded her...

Lanie fished out her phone. As expected, the waiting message was from Teagan. As she'd been whisked up to the twenty-fifth

floor in a seriously shiny mirrored lift she'd tapped out an urgent message to her friend:

What did you do??!

Because this building was definitely not what Lanie had been expecting of her first assignment with the agency. Yes, she'd known the role was as a personal assistant, but after seven years managing the swim school she'd been unconvinced she really had the skills for such a role—but Teagan had been adamant. 'You'll be fine,' she'd said. 'Piece of cake,' she'd said.

Given her lack of relevant experience, Lanie had imagined she'd be working somewhere small. Somewhere that couldn't afford a true executive assistant. Somewhere she could kind of figure it all out as she went along.

Manning Developments was not that place.

Teagan's text message therefore did not surprise her at all.

I spruced up your CV. Just a little.

Right.

Lanie rolled her head backwards until it rested on the high back of her chair and stared up at the ceiling.

The sensible thing to do would be to leave. She didn't have the experience for a role like this, and if she stuffed it up then the agency, Teagan and herself would all look pretty bad.

It was sweet of Teagan—annoying, inappropriate, and dishonest—but sweet.

It should end here.

But she remained at her vast new desk. For the same reason she'd stayed in Grayson's office after she'd recognised him as the man from the beach.

For long seconds she'd searched for the cutting comments he deserved after his performance at the beach—but then, before she'd gathered her thoughts, she'd realised he'd just dismissed her.

Again. Just as he had at the beach, he'd carried on as if she was irrelevant to his world. Why on earth would she want to work for someone who would treat her like that?

But she couldn't let that man—Grayson—ignore her again.

So here she was. With a job she didn't really want, working for a man she didn't like.

Lanie wiggled the wireless mouse on the desk and the large flatscreen monitor blinked instantly to life, revealing a login screen.

Her gaze flicked to the still open door to Grayson's office, but then immediately away. That he would be of no help at all was obvious.

She stood and headed for the hallway—Caroline, the little plaque on the reception desk had proclaimed. She should be able to point her in the direction of IT Support or something.

She could do this. It couldn't be too difficult.

She'd figure out why she was doing it later.

THREE

The little green man started blinking, so with a coffee cup gripped firmly in each hand Lanie made her way across a very busy St Georges Terrace.

‘Lanie!’

A fierce breeze whipped between the high-rise buildings, blowing her loose hair every which way and partially covering her eyes. Not that she needed a visual aid to identify that particular deep and demanding voice.

Calmly she stepped onto the footpath and Grayson met her halfway, jogging down his building's steps and deftly negotiating the sea of lunchtime pedestrian traffic.

‘We're going to be late,’ he said. ‘Why didn't you say something?’

Lanie tossed her hair out of her face and met his gaze as she handed him his triple-shot latte.

‘I did mention that there may not be time for a coffee.’

Grayson blinked. As always, he seemed genuinely surprised. ‘Oh...’ he said.

In the week she'd worked for him this routine had already become familiar. He was rather like a mad scientist—so utterly focussed on his work that the practicalities of life seemed beyond him.

It would have been endearing—except...

‘Well, make sure it doesn't happen again.’

Lanie bit her lip.

Remember the money. Remember the money...

It was the money, Lanie had decided. The reason she hadn't already quit.

Thanks to Teagan's creativity with her CV, and her ability so far to fudge her way through the job, she was earning almost twice what she had at the swim school. And she needed the money so she could move out of her mother's place as soon as possible—before she and Sienna returned from Europe, preferably.

That was the only reason she was here. Nothing to do with that morning on the beach.

Lanie nodded tightly. 'I've got a car waiting for us.' She gestured with her spare hand in its direction, and to the driver idling illegally in the clearway. Grayson opened his mouth, but Lanie jumped in before he could get a word out. 'The laptop, projector and business specs are on the back seat.'

In response his eyebrows rose, just slightly. 'Good,' he said.

Again Lanie bit her lip. How about a thank-you, huh?

She pivoted on her heel and strode towards the car.

Remember the money. Remember the money. Remember the

The toe of her shoe caught on something and Lanie stumbled. But before she had much time to register that the grey pavers of the footpath were rapidly becoming closer her descent was suddenly halted.

Grayson's arm was strong and solid and warm around her waist. In an effortless movement he pulled her upwards and towards him, so she was pressed against his impeccably suited body.

She tilted her chin to look up at him.

He caught her gaze—really caught it—and for a moment Lanie was completely speechless.

His eyes weren't just grey—they were flecked with blue. And with his face now arranged in concern, not hard with tension, he was somehow—impossibly—even more handsome.

Of course she already knew he was gorgeous. To pretend otherwise would be ridiculous. And, frustratingly, beautiful people didn't become less beautiful simply by their unlikeable behaviour.

Less attractive, though. They did become less attractive. He'd proved that, that day on the beach. And each day since then.

But right now Grayson did not seem unattractive. Right now, with the subtle scent of his aftershave and the warmth of his arm and body confusing her, he was anything but.

The side of her body he touched...no everywhere he touched, reacted to him. Electricity flooded through her.

'You okay?'

Because it was all she could manage, she simply nodded mutely.

He took a step away from her and amazingly she had the presence of mind not to follow him. She took a deep breath,

rolled her shoulders back, and rebalanced on her own two feet.

She realised she was gripping her coffee cup hard enough to slightly crumple the cardboard, and made herself loosen her grip.

Then he smiled. It was a subtle expression—far from broad—but it was the first Grayson Manning smile she'd witnessed.

Once again her ability to form words evaporated.

He covered the short distance to the car and opened the door for her.

She slipped past him, not catching his gaze. With every moment she was increasingly aware that she really needed to pull herself together.

If she was going to keep working for Grayson she needed to erase completely from her subconscious even the smallest skerrick of romantic daydreams involving her boss.

Obviously the agency would not approve.

Secondly she—Lanie—did not approve. She might not have extensive experience in the corporate world, but even she knew getting involved with your boss was...well, pretty dumb.

And thirdly, Grayson was not about to be overcome by lust when it came to Lanie Smith.

Lanie's lips quirked up at the idea of Grayson arriving at her front door to take her out to dinner. It was laughable.

She settled into the soft leather of the back seat as Grayson closed her door, and moments later he was sliding into the car from the opposite side.

Lanie took a good long gulp of her coffee, hoping that the

addition of caffeine would help get her brain back to speed.

She fully expected Grayson to flip open his laptop as the car pulled away, or to make another one of his seemingly endless phone calls. But instead he turned towards her.

He cleared his throat, the sound unexpected and awkward in the quiet vehicle.

‘Thank you for the coffee,’ he said gruffly.

Lanie shot a look in his direction, not immediately sure she’d heard him correctly.

But his expression was genuine. Not quite contrite—that wouldn’t be Grayson Manning—but still...

‘Not a problem, Grayson.’

He nodded, then glanced away through his darkly tinted window at the passing traffic.

Without looking at her, he spoke again.

‘You can call me Gray.’

* * *

The beach was near deserted the following morning. Gray’s bare feet smacked rhythmically against the wet sand, his progress only occasionally punctuated with a splash when the waves stretched across his path.

Luther was well ahead of Gray, having abandoned his ball to begin enthusiastically digging a hole to China. Beyond Luther rocky fingers of coastline stretched into the ocean, and distant cranes for hoisting shipping containers formed blurry silhouettes against the sky.

It was cool—it was only July after all—and all but the most dedicated swimmers had abandoned the beach on such a dull and overcast day.

But today Gray needed to run.

Maybe he'd hoped the bite of the frigid air in his lungs would help. Or, more likely, it was that heavy ache in his legs that he craved.

Because out here he was in control. He could run as far as he wanted—further even than his body wanted to go.

And Gray liked being in control. He was used to it. Expected it.

He was in control of everything he did in both his business and his private life. He knew what he was doing and could plan with absolute confidence how things were going to work out.

By Gray's reckoning, his father's retirement should be no more than a blip on Manning's radar—after all, it had been many years since Gordon Manning had spearheaded a project. For the past five years Gray had been Manning's CEO in all but name. So Gordon's retirement was nothing more than a formality. Nothing would change except he'd eventually have to repurpose his dad's offices.

That was how it was supposed to be happening.

It was still how Gray thought it should have happened.

But it hadn't.

Things had changed.

That irritating e-mail from the suddenly cautious investor was

just one example. Not of many—far from it—but enough to frustrate the hell out of Gray.

An extra question here or there shouldn't bother him. Or decisions taking longer than he felt they should. Or even that subtle, almost but not quite imperceptible shift in the atmosphere at meetings...

Even Gray had to smile at that. Since when had he been so sensitive to a change in feel?

Well, whatever it was that had changed—it had. And it did bother him. Because it wasn't just an irritation...all these questions and atmosphere-shifts...it had the potential to impact his bottom line.

In fact it already was.

And Gray was not going to tolerate that.

In his peripheral vision, Gray noticed a lone figure walking near the dunes. As he glanced in her direction the woman waved, while her other hand firmly held an oversized floppy hat to her head.

Automatically Gray waved back, then refocused. Deliberately he crossed from the wet sand to the dry, wanting the extra demand on his muscles the deep, soft sand forced from his body.

It turned out that, despite the many years since his dad had actually led a Manning project, for some of his clients Gordon Manning had been a very real and very important presence—somewhere behind the scenes.

The reality that it had truly been Gray they'd been working with—not Gray as Gordon's mouthpiece—didn't matter, and that exasperated Gray.

He deserved the trust he thought he'd already earned. He deserved his stature in Australia's business community.

A larger wave pushed far up the beach and Gray's bare feet splashed through foamy puddles as the water slid back into the ocean.

It also annoyed him that he hadn't realised this reality. That he hadn't fully understood what it meant to be Gordon Manning's son, regardless of his own track record and years of success.

So it was frustrating and exasperating and irritating...

But it was also...

Gray's time.

Now was his time to prove himself.

And nothing could be allowed to stand in his way.

* * *

Lanie dropped her arm as Gray disappeared into the distance. He'd waved each morning since she'd started at Manning, although he'd shown no sign of realising she was the woman he'd been so rude to on the beach that morning of the relay final. Now, knowing Gray, she doubted he ever would.

She'd considered telling him—but what would that achieve?

Lanie knew the answer to that: a blank stare, followed directly by a look that said *Why are you wasting my time with this?*

That was a look she was quickly becoming familiar with. At

least now she didn't take it personally. Pretty much everything not immediately related to Manning and preferably relevant right at that moment elicited exactly that look.

'Which hotel would you like me to book for you in Adelaide?'

When he'd discovered he was not, in fact, booked into his favourite hotel, he'd booked himself in, then sent Lanie a helpful e-mail with the name of the 'correct' hotel for next time.

'For that presentation tomorrow, would you like me to include the numbers from the Jameson project?'

Turned out she'd guessed right with that one...

So a returned wave each morning was both unexpected and welcome. Although ignoring the woman he worked with every single day would have been quite a stretch—even for Gray.

With Gray and Luther little more than specks in the distance, Lanie started walking again and allowed her thoughts to circle back to where they'd been before the flash of Luther's red coat against the sand had distracted her.

It would be odd, she'd just decided, if she wasn't jealous of her sister.

Wouldn't it?

She didn't know. It was what had got her out of the house so ridiculously early on a work day. She needed the beach. The space, the salt and the sound of the waves... It was all as familiar to her as breathing.

Water had always helped her. Whether chlorinated or not, it was where she gravitated at times of stress. When her dad had

left it had seemed natural. He was, after all, the reason she loved water. With an offshore mining job he'd rarely been home—but when he had he'd spent all his time at the beach.

As an adult, she looked back and wondered whether he'd simply tolerated the fact she'd clung to him like a limpet when he was home—rather than her more romanticised version in which she'd told herself she'd been his swimming buddy.

Because surely if he'd really wanted her there he would have bothered to stay in touch after he'd left. Or not left at all.

But if nothing else he'd given Lanie her love of water and the genes that helped her swim very quickly through it.

It had been a mistake to skip the beach earlier in the week. She needed to rectify it. Even today, with the wind whipping off the waves and gluing her long cargo trousers and thin woollen jumper to her skin, it was the right place for her to attempt to organise her thoughts and her reactions.

Sienna had e-mailed her overnight, full of post-championships euphoria. From the magnificence of the closing ceremony to how much fun she was having, through to how she was dealing with the rabid tabloid press after being seen out on a date with a British rower.

Lanie had seen the photos—and the headlines—as they'd made it to Australia too. 'Golden couple'. 'Winners in love'.

Jealousy? Whatever it was she was feeling, she hadn't defined it.

Until Sienna's e-mail.

It hadn't been until right at the end, amongst all the glitz and excitement, that her sister had acknowledged how Lanie might be feeling. Her sister wasn't stupid, or heartless. A bit oblivious at times—but then, that was Sienna.

Somehow, though, Sienna's awkward attempts at making the contrast in their situations seem somehow okay had hit home harder than anything else.

How are you doing? It wasn't the same without you. You should be so proud of your personal best, though. Any other year you definitely would've made the team.

And so here she was, at the beach.

Walking today, not swimming—but the scale and scope of the ocean helped, just as she'd known it would.

She envied Sienna. She was jealous.

Today she allowed herself to be.

FOUR

The unexpected sensation of warmth against his chest snatched Gray's attention from the report he'd been reading. He glanced downwards, to discover a trail of pale brown liquid trickling in multiple rivulets down his front.

A brief perusal of the obvious culprit—the takeaway coffee cup in his hand—revealed a leak beneath the lid.

He swore. Loudly. He had a meeting right in this office in less than twenty minutes.

Tossing the defective lid into the bin beneath his desk, Gray downed the rest of his coffee as he tapped a short message into Manning's internal instant messaging system.

Moments later his office door swung open, although Lanie paused before walking in. 'You said you had a problem?' she asked.

He stood, his gaze moving downwards as he surveyed the damage to his shirt and pulled the damp fabric away from his skin. With the other hand he gestured for Lanie to come closer.

Moments later her long, efficient stride had her by his side. 'Nice one,' she said, a hint of a smile in her tone. 'I don't suppose you have a spare shirt?'

'If I did,' he said, for the first time transferring his attention from the shirt to Lanie, 'would I—?'

His eyes met hers and he momentarily had absolutely no idea what he'd been about to say.

She stood closer than he'd expected. Or maybe it was just her height. When she was in her heels they were very nearly eye to eye, and he still wasn't quite used to that sensation.

Plus today she looked...different.

Her hair, he realised. It was tied back. It highlighted the striking structure of her face—the defined cheekbones, the firm chin—and her skin's perfect golden glow.

He'd thought her pretty when he'd first met her, but right now she looked...

As he watched she raised an eyebrow.

Gray blinked. ‘If I had a spare shirt...’ he tried again ‘...would I need you?’

He looked down at his ruined clothing again, yanking his mind back on track. So what if he’d noticed Lanie looked nice today?

Lanie crossed her arms in front of herself. ‘What size are you?’ she asked.

Not for the first time she’d pre-empted his next question.

‘I have no idea.’

She didn’t bother to hide her sigh. ‘How can you not know that?’

Gray shrugged. ‘I shop in bulk. Those couple of times a year I shop, I figure out what size I am then.’

He reached for his shirt, automatically sliding button after button undone. He’d tugged it off his shoulders and gathered the fabric in his hands before he noticed Lanie had backed off a few steps and was currently staring out the window.

‘This is how I normally work out my size,’ he explained, finding the tag beneath the collar. ‘There you go. Turns out I wear a forty-two-inch shirt.’

‘And you’d like me to go buy you a replacement?’

‘Exactly.’

Not meeting his eyes, Lanie turned away from the window and took a step back towards the door. ‘You know, I could’ve just checked the tag for you. No need to...’ a pause ‘...undress.’

For the first time Gray noticed the tinge of pink to her cheekbones. He suspected the right thing to do would be to

apologise. But with the words right on the tip of his tongue he paused.

‘My shirt was covered in hot coffee,’ he said, instead. ‘And this way you can take the shirt with you. To check the size or whatever. Here.’

He thrust the shirt out in front of him.

Now she met his gaze, and hers wasn’t bashful any more. It was razor-sharp and most definitely unimpressed.

He just shrugged. He’d done too much second-guessing recently. The equation was simple—he needed a new shirt and quickly. That was it. Anyone walking down the beach most mornings in summer saw a heck of a lot more skin than he’d just revealed to his assistant.

He steadfastly ignored the subtlest echo of Marilyn’s words in his head. Be nice to this one.

Lanie reached out and their fingers brushed as she snatched the shirt away. Gray watched as her blush spread like quick fire across her cheeks, but her gaze never wavered from his.

‘Thank you,’ he said.

She raised the subtlest eyebrow, but remained silent.

See? He was nice. He checked his watch. ‘You’ve got about ten minutes.’

Gray thought he might have heard Lanie muttering something as she strode out of the room.

Something about remembering money?

* * *

‘He took off his shirt?’

Teagan’s voice was incredulous as she raised the pizza slice to her lips.

‘Uh-huh,’ Lanie said, rounding her kitchen bench to join Teagan at the dining table. ‘I guess it’s not that big a deal. I’ve seen it all before at the beach.’

Teagan chewed thoughtfully for a few moments. ‘You don’t think he was...like...coming onto you or something?’

Lanie just about choked on her own mouthful of pizza. ‘No! I told you. This guy looks like he just walked off a catwalk.’ She shook her head in a decisive movement. ‘It’s more likely he happily whipped of his shirt because he forgot I was female.’

Her friend narrowed her eyes. ‘That’s a pile of crap and you know it. You’re gorgeous.’

Said with the certainty only a best friend could manage.

‘I’m not gorgeous,’ Lanie said, and waved her hand dismissively when Teagan went to speak again. ‘Not in the way people like Grayson Manning are. Or my sister. My mum, even. I’m just not one of the beautiful people. And, honestly, if it means I’d carry on like Gray does, I really don’t mind my ungorgeousness.’

Teagan shook her head in disagreement, but thankfully kept silent.

It had been a great disappointment to Sandra Smith that her eldest daughter had inherited not only the height and athleticism of her ex-husband, but unfortunately also the strong features that

were arresting in a man but not exactly beautiful in women. Thankfully two years later Sienna had come along, and was every bit as beauty-pageant-pretty as Sandra.

‘So what are his latest efforts?’ Teagan asked, picking up the unspoken cue to change the subject. ‘Other than the emergency shirt-shopping expedition?’

Lanie shrugged. ‘Same old, same old. Letting me know he needs me to write up a report five minutes before five—so I’m there until seven. Or asking me to book the best restaurant in Perth that is fully booked, for a very important lunch meeting—so I have to go down there and sweet-talk a table out of them. And then cancelling said meeting. Plus, of course, just the general expectation that I can read his mind.’

Teagan shook her head. ‘You shouldn’t put up with this, you know. I’m starting to feel bad. This guy isn’t normal—trust me.’

An unwanted flashback to that more-than-a-glimpse of incredible bare chest she’d seen in Gray’s office very much underlined that comment. No, Gray was not normal. She didn’t understand why, but somehow in his office his chest had been just so much more naked than at the beach. It had felt personal.

Intimate.

She put her half-eaten pizza slice back down on her plate, suddenly no longer hungry.

‘You can quit, you know. I’m sure the agency would find you something else—no problem.’

‘I know that,’ Lanie said. ‘But it’s not so bad. It pays almost

double my salary at the swim centre, and I wouldn't get that anywhere else—anyone but Gray would see straight through my total lack of experience.'

Teagan's eyes narrowed. 'There you go again. Underselling yourself.'

Lanie snorted with her wine glass in mid-air. 'No. You were the one that oversold me, remember?'

Teagan rolled her eyes dramatically. 'A small detail. The fact is this guy has an awesome PA and he should know it. He's taking you for granted. Most people would've quit by now.'

Based on what she'd learnt in the Manning lunch room, most had. Lanie had a sneaky suspicion that one of the guys in Legal was running a book on how long she'd last.

'Teags, I could deliver his twice a day triple-shot latte nude and he wouldn't notice.'

Disturbingly, her friend's eyes widened. 'That's it!'

'I'm not flashing Gray Manning, Teagan,' she said dryly.

'No, no. Not that—at least not exactly.'

'Partial nudity, then?' Lanie said. 'You know, I reckon if I borrowed one of Sienna's skirts it would be so short and so small that—'

'You're not taking this seriously.'

Lanie raised her eyebrows. 'I didn't realise you were.'

Teagan's wine glass made a solid thunk as she placed it firmly on the table. She leant forward, meeting her eyes across the half-finished pizza.

‘Make him notice you. Make him appreciate you.’

‘And what would be the point?’

‘Because you deserve it.’

It was lovely, really, what Teagan was doing. Lovely, and kind, and all the things that Teagan’s friendship always was. Plus also one of the things it occasionally was.

Misguided.

‘I’m fine, Teags,’ she said. ‘Really.’

She didn’t need Teagan—or Gray as her proxy—to be her cheerleader.

She knew Teagan was worried about her—worried about how she was handling the continuing publicity around Sienna and her success.

But she was fine. She had a new job that paid well. A fresh start.

Not that working for a grumpy property magnate had ever been a particular dream of hers.

She looked across at Teagan. ‘So you can put the pink hair dye or whatever you were planning on hold for now.’

‘I was thinking more along the lines of a gorilla suit, but...’

And then they both laughed, and Gray and his shirtlessness was—mostly—forgotten amongst talk of Teagan’s latest disaster date, the cooking-related reality TV show they were both hooked on, and anything and everything else.

Except, of course, swimming. Or Sienna.

* * *

Lanie's phone rang far too early the next morning.

She rolled over in the narrow single bed she'd grown up in, reaching out blindly with one hand towards her bedside table. Typically, she managed to knock the phone to the floor rather than grab it, so it took another twenty seconds of obnoxious ringing and fumbling around on her hands and knees in the inky darkness before said phone was located.

'Hello?' she said.

She'd been too disorientated to read the name on the screen, and besides it was most likely Sienna. Her sister hadn't quite managed to figure out the whole time difference thing.

'I need you to come over.'

The voice was deep and male. Definitely not her sister.

Lanie blinked in the semi-darkness. Dawn light was attempting to push its way under the edge of the bedroom's blinds with little effect.

'Gray?' she asked, although it was a rhetorical question. Of course it was. 'Do you know what time it is?'

'I have a flight to Singapore that's boarding in a few hours' time—so, yes, I do.'

There was a long moment of silence as Lanie considered hanging up on him.

'Oh,' he said eventually. 'I'm sorry. I woke you.'

Lucky.

'Can you come over?' he repeated. 'Now?'

'I'd rather not,' she said honestly. 'What's the emergency?'

Now it was Gray's turn to go silent. 'Oh...' he said again, and his surprise that she hadn't just dropped everything to come to his aid was apparent even in that single syllable.

At work Lanie could roll her eyes at his unreasonable requests—probably not as subtly as she should—or she could tell herself it was her job or whatever. But just before five in the morning...

No. There was a line, and Gray had definitely just stepped over it.

'It's my dog,' he said.

Instantly Lanie felt terrible. 'Is he okay?'

'Yes,' Gray said. 'But I forgot to organise someone to walk and feed him. Rodney used to sort it out for me, but I guess I didn't mention it to you.'

Lanie supposed he got points for not making that somehow her fault.

'And you couldn't e-mail me about it?'

'No,' he said. 'I need you to come over now so I can explain what he eats and where to walk him, and—'

'Okay, okay,' she interrupted on a sigh. There was no point asking him to write it down. Gray just didn't work—or think—like that. In his head it would be far more efficient for her to come over and for him to tell her. 'I'm coming over.'

Ten minutes later she knocked on Gray's front door. He lived only a few kilometres away from her, but unsurprisingly his house was right on the beach. It was gorgeous in an angular, modern, mansion-like way. At this hour of the morning the street was

silent, save for the muffled crash of waves.

The door swung open, but before she could even say hello his back was to her as he walked away, already shooting out instructions. Luther, at least, bothered to greet her. He sat obediently for his welcome pats, then pressed his head against her thigh as she followed Gray down the hall. Lanie had thrown on an old tracksuit, and her sandals thwacked loudly against the pale, glossy porcelain tiles.

‘So, Luther is a red setter,’ Gray was explaining. ‘And he’s on this special prescribed diet as he has a few allergies. It’s essential he only eats this food...’ Gray opened up one of the many, many drawers in a huge granite and glass kitchen to point at neatly labelled tubs of dog biscuits. ‘Otherwise he gets sick and—well, you don’t want to know what sort of mess that makes.’

Lanie raised an eyebrow as she considered the size of Luther and the fact that every bit of the house she could see was decorated in shades of white and cream. ‘I can imagine.’

Gray met her eyes for a second and one side of his mouth quirked upwards. ‘I’d advise you not to.’

Automatically, she grinned back.

When he smiled, his face was transformed. She wouldn’t say his expression softened—there was something far too angular and intense about Gray—but there was certainly a lightness, a freshness. And a cheeky, intriguing sparkle to his gaze.

Lanie took a step backwards and promptly walked into a tall stainless steel bin. Some sensor contraption obediently flipped

the lid open, and the unexpected movement made Lanie jump and bump her hip—hard—against the benchtop.

‘You okay?’ Gray asked.

‘Other than it being far too early in the morning for me to be co-ordinated?’ she replied, raising a pointed eyebrow.

Nicely covered, she thought, giving herself a mental shake. The last thing she needed was another confusing beside-the-taxi or shirt-off moment.

‘Sorry about that,’ he said, not sounding sorry at all. He’d already walked off again, continuing his monologue.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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