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The Little Lady Agency

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Published by Hodder & Stoughton

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First published in Great Britain in 2005 by Hodder and Stoughton
A division of Hodder Headline

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1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

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A CIP catalogue record for this title is available
from the British Library

ISBN 0 340 83867 1

Typeset in Plantin Light by Palimpsest Book Production Limited,
Polmont, Stirlingshire

Printed and bound by
Clays Ltd, St Ives plc

Hodder Headline's policy is to use papers that are natural, renewable and recyclable products and made from wood grown in sustainable forests. The logging and manufacturing processes are expected to conform to the environmental regulations of the country of origin.

Hodder and Stoughton Ltd
A division of Hodder Headline
338 Euston Road
London NW1 3BH

I

My name is Melissa Romney-Jones, but you can call me Honey. In the past, when people asked me to describe myself, I used to say I was one of Nature's organisers. Reliable. Sensible. A bit, you know, *shy*. My friend Gabi would have said I was a domestic goddess in practical shoes, but then she always took a positive view of my hips. My flatmate Nelson would have said I was too bloody nice for my own good, and then would have been unable to resist making some crack about my clueless taste in lounge lizard men.

Ask about Honey, though, and you get a much more interesting description.

Honey is a supercharged whirlwind, Mary Poppins in silk stockings. I've dated over fifty men this year alone, seven of whom were gay; I've been married temporarily to another fifteen; I've sent seventy Mother's Day cards, all to different mothers, and dispatched armfuls of flowers to sisters, secretaries and secret amours; I've been a live-in girlfriend to twenty-one bachelors and a vengeful ex-girlfriend to another three men keen to return to bachelorhood; I've transformed forty-three frogs into princes by dragging them round the shops and into barbers' chairs; I've cured nine men of nail-biting, found gifts for fifteen godchildren, and arranged no fewer than thirty-one very successful parties.

I've also attended five weddings. Three as Honey, one as Melissa and one, very confusingly, as both Honey and Melissa at the same time.

How I got myself out of that particular tangle is a tribute to the magical powers of feminine charm and good manners. How I got myself *into* it is rather more complicated . . .

My golden rule has always been to look on the bright side, no matter what. With all the complications in my life, I've had to. Notorious father, unsupportive sisters, constant cash-flow dramas, multiple schools . . . But if you can find three good things about any given situation, no matter how dire, I guarantee you'll forget the rotten stuff.

The three best things about my job with the Dean & Daniels estate agency were as follows: first, it was highly satisfying to know I was helping people to find somewhere perfect to live. Second, the hours weren't too long. And third, the office was terribly convenient for the shops, on the rare occasions that I ever had any money to spend.

I won't go into the rotten stuff. You can probably guess it for yourself.

According to my job description, which I wrote myself since no one else had ever bothered to sort it out, I was Personal Assistant to Hughy, who sold two-bed and three-bed houses, and Charles, who specialised in mews. It was my job to calm them both down and smooth everything over, and, although I say it myself, they only believed they were efficient because I left no trace.

'No shopping bags, Melissa?' simpered Carolyn, the office manager, when I bowled in after lunch – on time, I might add. 'Your credit card lives to fight another day?'

'My credit card is just fine right now,' I said with as much dignity as I could muster. And then, because I'm pretty hopeless at lying, even when I'm trying to be dignified, I added, 'Anyway, nothing fitted. I'm just not the right shape for modern clothes.'

'Fashion is a cruel mistress.' Carolyn folded her arms over her flat chest, and gave me one of her smug looks. She wore a lot of sleeveless Joseph tops, just to prove she had money to chuck around and didn't need a bra.

'Mel's an hourglass,' said Gabi, adding, 'whereas you're just ghaaaastly,' under her breath in a grating Sloane accent.

I mouthed a 'thank you' at her over my monitor. I wished I had Gabi's confidence. Particularly in my figure; she thought I should embrace my billowing curves and wiggle around in skin-tight Capri pants and straining blouses, like Gina Lollobrigida or Jayne Mansfield. In my head, I did entertain the idea, honestly. But out in the real world, I didn't have the nerve.

Gabi was my best friend at Dean & Daniels. We were united in our loathing of Carolyn and our mutual desire for a real Kelly bag. That's about all we had in common, but we got on like a house on fire, despite the fact that she claimed to hate posh girls (the office is packed with them) and stupid Hooray men (who made up the other half of the staff). I often wondered what she was doing working somewhere like Dean & Daniels, but I think it was because she got a malign pleasure out of running rings round everyone: Gabi's filing was so baroque that you'd need to have worked in code-busting at Bletchley to find anything unaided.

'It's nice of you to see it like that,' I said, and automatically checked my emails in case there was any

communication yet from Orlando, the on-off love of my life. We had been off for a few months now, but I lived in hope that he might change his mind. Still nothing. My heart broke a little, yet again, but I rallied myself before Gabi's eagle eyes could register any signs of weakness. A big sigh slipped out.

'Oh, come on,' she said. 'Ignore the numbers on the labels – they don't mean anything.'

'Don't they? Good job I'm handy with a needle and thread or I'd never have a thing to wear.'

'Mel, I would kill for your figure,' said Gabi sternly. 'Your tiny waist.' She grimaced. 'Your proper lady's bosom.'

I smiled because it's rude to refuse a compliment, even if you don't quite believe it. 'Oh no, you wouldn't. Bones are so much more elegant.'

'I don't know,' said Gabi, shooting a sideways glance in the direction of the photocopier. 'Nothing worse than those posh Fionas who trail up and down outside, all skinny and blonde like malnourished Afghan hounds,' she went on, making sure Carolyn could hear her. 'What a fecking waste of space they are. Chalet girls surfing the King's Road on Daddy's magic credit card, in between ironing their hair and planning their next ski trip.'

Gabi said this at least once a day, and yet it never apparently registered with her that I'd spent *my* year out running a chalet complex in Val d'Isère. I spent more time tidying up the various love affairs and broken friendships than I had done tidying chalets.

'Gabi, *I* was a chalet girl,' I protested gently.

'Oh, yeah.' She stared at me, then shook her head. 'Jeez, I always forget you're one of them.'

'Why?' I ignored the 'one of them'.

Gabi shrugged. 'Well, you're working, for a start. And you just get on and *do* things. You don't keep banging on about where you buy your puffa jackets and who your daddy is.'

I was about to remind her why my father was the last person I'd want to be discussing when the office door opened and the boys steamed in, fresh from one of their long lunches.

Only it occurred to me that this hadn't been a very long lunch and they weren't looking their normal jolly selves. In fact there was no steaming at all.

'Early?' mouthed Gabi to me, looking at her watch.

'Yes, we are back early,' snapped Quentin. 'Because there's a lot to do.'

Quentin was the company director and the main man for serious three-million-plus houses. He did nothing all year, until the City bonuses rolled in, then he was rushed off his feet. Carolyn was meant to be his PA, but all she seemed to do was book mysterious lunches with clients I knew he didn't have and order flowers for his very sweet and undeserving wife, Letitia.

The other boys slunk into their seats and started making subdued phone calls, which wasn't like them at all.

'Melissa, would you come into my office?' said Quentin. 'And bring a pot of coffee and some cups with you.'

'Oooh, Melissa,' smirked Carolyn who had reappeared out of nowhere, much in the manner of Mr Benn's shopkeeper. Her coral lipstick looked very fresh and brought out the nicotine stains on her teeth beautifully. Gabi swore blind Carolyn couldn't be a day under thirty-five, despite the desperate palaver of her 'thirtieth' birthday party the previous year. 'It'll be about that skirt, I'd bet.'

I tugged the hem down. It was my favourite skirt because I had spent ages microscopically adjusting the seams so it fitted at both the waist and hips, but I must admit that it did have a habit of riding up. 'What's wrong with it?' I asked.

'Nothing wrong with that skirt,' said Hughy and, as he walked past, the cheeky article gave my bottom a firm slap. 'Miss Monroe.'

Gabi giggled and I blushed bright red.

Hughy hadn't joined the others for lunch, hence his cheerfulness; a while ago, I'd arranged for him to have private lunchtime Pilates lessons to cure his terrible back problems – now all too cured, it seemed.

Carolyn's eyebrows dropped immediately and she looked as if her lunch was repeating on her.

'It's too short,' she snapped. 'You're in an office, not a cabaret.'

Then she disappeared into her office with a handful of brochures for Chelsea loft conversions.

'Ignore the scrawny witch,' said Gabi loudly. 'Her nicotine patches aren't sticking. I saw her in the loo trying to fasten two on at once with sellotape.' She paused. 'If she carries on like this, I'm going to offer to staple them on for her.'

I sniggered, and whinnied, 'Oh, Gabi!' in my best Carolyn impression. It wasn't as good as Gabi's impression, which came complete with a jerky array of hair-flicking gestures and poker-faced scowls.

'Well, she deserves it . . .' Gabi wagged her stapler at me. 'Now get in there and do some of that upside-down reading you're so good at, eh?'

'Will do.' I pulled my hem down as far as it would go and checked that my white blouse was safely buttoned

up. Then I made the coffee, got my notebook and walked over to Quentin's office, wondering what it was I'd done that he wanted to discuss so privately.

Quentin was sitting at his desk with his fingers steepled and a serious expression on his face. I'd seen this expression before, on my father; it was the first stage of the school-report reading process, which would begin with an unconvincing display of sympathetic calm and end with Daddy bright red up to his ears, roaring, '"Melissa must try harder"? Too bloody right she should at seven thousand pounds a term!'

I steeled myself not to cry whatever Quentin said, because I made it a rule never to cry in public: it doesn't help, except as a very, very last resort.

Quentin waited for me to sit down and I perched on the edge of the leather chair, with my knees clamped together, as drilled into us in Home Economics classes at school. I noticed that Carolyn hadn't been watering Quentin's weeping fig and made a mental note to give it a good soak later.

'Now then, the lovely Melissa,' said Quentin, unctuously. 'Thanks for the coffee. How long is it you've been with us now?'

It was a stupid question, because my file was open on the desk in front of him. One of the files that I'd dragged out of the paper-y jungle when I arrived at Dean & Daniels, the jungle I'd reorganised and updated on the computer system. But I didn't point that out, I just said, 'Eight months next week.'

'Indeed. And you've certainly made your mark on the office.'

I gave him a really big smile because it wasn't often

that Quentin said nice things like that to people. It was true though. When I'd arrived, the office had been in a dreadful state. It had taken me ages to sort it out, but now everything ran like clockwork. Gabi said I should have made a bigger deal about what I'd done, but for an easy life, I let Carolyn imagine it was still all her own work. I'm terrible at blowing my own trumpet. It's much easier to blow other people's – then everyone's happy.

'Thank you,' I said. 'It's nice when everything's running smoothly.'

I hoped that didn't make me sound like a dreadful prig. I had this morbid fear that everyone in the office thought I was deadly boring because I knew how to do double-sided photocopying.

'Yeees.' Quentin shifted about a bit in his chair. 'Yeees, you do a really sterling job, and that rather makes what I have to say next somewhat difficult.'

'Spit it out,' I said cheerfully, pouring the coffee. How bad could it be? Clearly my skirt was fine, or else he wouldn't have suggested I sat on this particular chair. Maybe he wanted to promote me, I thought. Stranger things had happened.

'Melissa, it's—'

'One sugar, isn't it?' I said, leaning over the desk to hand him his cup.

Quentin looked up, straight into my cleavage, looked down at the desk, and swallowed rather hurriedly. 'Oh er, yes, thank you.'

At this point the door opened and Carolyn's head popped round. When she saw me she looked furious; presumably she was dying for Quentin to rollock me about my skirt, so I sat down again quickly.

Quentin made a faint gesture to me around his tie area

and I looked down to see my blasted middle button had burst open again. I try to reinforce the buttonholes, but the power of gravity can't always be checked.

'I'll leave you to it, Quentin,' said Carolyn frostily. No word of apology, mind. I often wondered exactly who the boss was.

Hatches safely battened, I stirred some cream into my coffee and resumed my perch on the edge of the chair.

Quentin smoothed down his quiff and re-steepled his fingers. This time he stared fixedly at my file while he spoke. 'Now, Melissa, I'm afraid I have some bad news for you. It's bad news for the whole company, really. Well, bad news and good news.'

I widened my eyes.

Quentin looked up, coughed and took a big gulp of coffee. 'The good news is that Dean & Daniels is being incorporated into Kyrle & Pope, a very prestigious New York estate agency.'

'How marvellous!' I said, warmly.

'Yes, well, head office have decided that it would make more sense to merge the Chelsea and the Knightsbridge offices of Dean & Daniels into one large flagship branch, with state-of-the-art computer facilities, architectural simulations, and recreational areas for our clients.' Quentin was really warming to his theme. 'Kyrle & Pope want to provide the most complete house-buying experience possible for their international clientele, from arranging the mortgage to finding the best vase for displaying architectural flower arrangements in the hall.'

'What a fabulous idea!' I said, impressed. 'I've always thought we should organise a sort of collaboration service with Peter Jones, you know, a helping hand for those male

clients who might not have a woman's touch when it comes to decorating their lovely new home.'

It occurred to me that this was exactly the kind of thing I would be excellent at, and I was about to demonstrate my initiative by suggesting it, when an ominous 'sympathetic' expression swam over Quentin's red face.

As I recall, this was the expression that accompanied Daddy's enquiries as to whether I'd been ill for significant portions of the term to have missed so much information. Even when he knew very well that I hadn't.

I gripped my saucer tighter.

'Now, the bad news is,' intoned Quentin, 'that for every advance in business there are usually some casualties, and since we're merging our staff with Knightsbridge and taking on some American agents too, we're forced to let some personnel go.'

'Oh dear!' I gasped, thinking of poor Hughy and Charles, and I crossed my fingers under my coffee cup. I knew for a fact that Hughy had a big holiday planned for three months' time, and Charles had the most horrendous mortgage. I helped him fib on the application form.

'So you're not the only redundancy to be made from this office, but believe me, you're the one everyone will miss most, and I include myself in that.'

'Thank you very much, that's so sweet of you,' I replied, with another big smile. Really, I thought, Quentin could be quite charming when he tried.

Then it dawned on me that I'd just been sacked.

An ominous lead weight settled at the pit of my stomach. Not *again*. Oh God.

The door opened and Carolyn's haystack of blonde hair appeared a good two seconds before the rest of her.

'Not *now*, Carolyn!' snapped Quentin and she scuttled out.

I bit my lip and replaced my coffee cup on Quentin's desk so I could think better.

Part of me wanted to burst into tears, hammer my fists on the desk and demand my job back, if necessary on the grounds that, unlike Carolyn, I didn't fake my typing certificate, but I knew this wouldn't work, and more to the point, it would be spectacularly undignified. So I pulled myself together, as I'd been brought up to do, and glued a big smile on my face, despite the cracking sensation I felt inside.

'Oh dear,' I croaked. 'Oh . . . dear.'

Quentin looked genuinely cut up, which is where he started to deviate from the Daddy Plan. 'It's only because you're the newest PA,' he apologised. 'Really, you've worked much harder than most of the other brainless— er, young girls we *normally* seem to have working here. And you certainly brighten the place up no end. I'd be happy to give you a glowing reference. And of course, there'll be severance pay to see you through.'

God! The rent!

The overdue rent. And the small matter of the phone bill. My salary barely covered bills at the best of times.

I tried to smile bravely. 'Well, that will help. I know it's none of my business but does this mean . . .' I cast about for a tactful way to put it. 'Um, are Charles and Hughy . . . ?'

'Charles and Hughy?' Quentin looked surprised, but shook his head. 'No, they'll be heading up the flagship with me.'

Good. Well, I was pleased about that, at least.

'Is there anything else?' I asked.

'No,' said Quentin, 'that's it.' And he looked a bit sad.

Gabi took the news very badly. If I didn't know she was a tough nut, I'd have sworn she was crying for real.

'Don't leave me here with Carolyn!' she pleaded. 'It'll be like working the night shift with Dracula. In a blood donor unit.'

'I won't be leaving you here, you idiot,' I said. 'You'll all be shipping out to Knightsbridge.'

'Oh God,' moaned Gabi and sank her head onto her folded arms.

'Think of the shopping, Gabi!'

'I am,' she groaned from underneath her sleeves.

Quentin's office door opened and everyone froze until he barked, 'Jeremy? A word? ASAP?'

The door closed. Jeremy walked over in a silence so extreme I could hear his Gucci loafers squeaking.

'Sooo, skirt too tight then?' simpered Carolyn in passing. Her face looked so innocent that I couldn't help wondering if she'd been listening in.

'Nothing wrong with my skirt,' I said, lifting up my chin so I could look her in the eye that didn't squint. 'In fact Quentin thinks I brighten up the place no end.'

'Brightened,' Carolyn corrected me smugly, then looked cross with herself.

'I don't know what we'll *do* without Melissa,' wailed Gabi. 'Apart from the small matter of the office grinding to a halt, she's the only one who knows how to work the coffee machine without getting it full of grit. Quentin must have gone insane. Why has he sacked *you*?'

You can't tell Gabi anything and expect it to stay secret.

Hughy had got into loads of trouble that way, with Gabi answering my phone and telling clients what other people were offering. I, on the other hand, prided myself on being the very soul of discretion.

'I've been *made redundant*,' I reminded her, putting on a brave face. 'These things happen, don't they? No sense in getting bitter about it. New challenges and all that.'

As Gabi sank her head back into her hands, I struggled to think up three positives about the situation.

More time for dress-making at home – the pocket money sideline that had saved my bacon with the rent more than once already.

No more fighting Carolyn's inept filing.

Um, sometimes things go wrong for a reason?

For once, none of them made me feel much better.

There really aren't that many rewards for being nice, not in real life. I suddenly wished I could throw an all-out hysterical bitch fit – God knows I'd seen enough at home – but I just couldn't. For a start, I didn't know what you were meant to do once you ran out of bitchy hysteria. Rush away? Vanish in a puff of smoke?

'Well, I'm sure Daddy will bail you out,' said Carolyn nastily. 'Slip you a couple of thousand for a skiing holiday to get over it.'

'No, he will not,' I retorted.

I didn't need to pretend to be dignified here, because it was true. My father had always made a huge deal about how my sisters and I wouldn't get a penny until we're fifty. He reckoned that if anyone wanted to marry us for our money, they'd have to stick around for at least twenty-five years to get it.

His actual words were, 'If they want to get into my daughters' pants, they can bloody well pay for it up front.'

Not nice, is he? I think thirty years in Parliament does that to you.

I used to think it was because he wanted us to earn our own money and be independent, or at least marry for love, but the older I got, the more I realised that Daddy liked to make sure his was the only name on the cheque-book. Maybe there was a tax break in it too somewhere. Maybe there wasn't actually any money. Cash flow was ever a mysterious force in our family. There was never enough for Mummy to buy new clothes, for instance, but always enough to restock the wine cellar.

Anyway, unlike my confetti-happy sisters and my poor subjugated mother, I vowed at an early age that I'd never be a household slave to any man, especially my father, so I made a point of always earning my own money, what little there was of it. Apart from which, Daddy and I didn't see eye-to-eye about, well, previous loans.

'I don't get a penny from my parents,' I insisted.

'Daddy not paying your bills?' said Carolyn with great surprise. 'Do me a favour.'

Gabi looked shocked too. Her boyfriend, Aaron, was a maths whizz who did something complicated with spread-betting in the City; he earned a small fortune, but had no time to spend it, so Gabi's main purpose in life was getting her hands on his cash and redistributing it amongst deserving shops, salons and spas. She was the Robin Hood of Bluewater, basically. 'How else can you afford to work here on this salary?' she demanded. 'It doesn't even cover my credit cards!'

I looked from Gabi's sagging jaw to Carolyn's spiteful moon-face and the red-faced agents in the background, all making panicky calls to their girlfriends, and felt rather

affronted. I was no blonde Daddy's girl. I wasn't even a blonde, for heaven's sake.

'I pay my own way,' I said. 'I have done since I left college. This and my, um, side projects cover the bills, thank you very much.'

Carolyn hooked up her eyebrows in a very inelegant enquiry. 'Side projects?'

I wasn't going to mention my dress-making to Carolyn. It was the big office joke that I was a 1950s throwback already, what with my girls' school education and my pearl earrings. In *fact*, I made gorgeous T-shirts, embellishing baby-soft cotton shirts with tiny beads and sequins. I only did them for friends, but even so it was quite a lucrative hobby, given that I mainly did it to keep my hands busy and out of the biscuit tin while watching television.

But Carolyn wasn't interested in that, and I wasn't going to tell her.

'Yes, side projects,' I said and shut my lips tight. My head was beginning to throb with tension and hurt.

'How fascinating,' she said, sounding bored. 'Now, come into my office so we can talk about your P45. Why don't you take your outstanding holiday now, and have the rest of the week off?'

There are many marks of a true lady, but I believe that one of them is to walk with her head held high into the office of redundancy, while her world falls apart around her. Which I did. For the third time in eighteen months.