

Leesa Ronald

POWER MOVES

CHAPTER 1

There are some people in this world who cruise through life as cool as cucumbers. Slice them up and dollop them with crème fraîche because nothing will ever faze them. They're the kinds of people who forget their sunnies on their way to the beach only to stumble upon a pair at the servo that are so uncool they're 'Prada cool'. They always leave five minutes late but it's never a big deal because they score the best parking spots. If they contracted a mosquito-borne illness, green complexions would suddenly be in fashion. Their faces are always a sunny blend of *Whoops* and *Wasn't that lucky?* They're the kinds of people who win the day, every day—not because they're trying, but because they're not.

I can categorically confirm that I am not one of those people. In fact, I'm the polar opposite. I was born to try. I'm basically Delta Goodrem in that regard.

Take the situation I'm in right now, for example. I should really slow down, but I can't. It's not what I do.

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My legs are thrashing painfully and my lungs can't pump the oxygen fast enough. My body is so drenched in perspiration it's almost comical.

Everything burns. There's a tiny part of me that's terrified I'm dying—and not in the way influencers declare they're *literally dying* while they scoff the latest viral soufflé. I'm legitimately worried about organ failure.

My airways squeeze tighter. *This is not dying*, I tell myself sternly. *This is character building*.

I can't die anyway. I have too much to do, and there'd be no one to plan my funeral. These days, I'm the organised one. Dad and Maxy would try their best, but they'd forget something big. I can imagine them getting out of the car, dressed in their suits, and both saying, *Ohhhh, I thought you were getting the coffin*. Then, after a sheepish laugh, they'd make do with an old cardboard box. I'd be shunted into the afterlife with all the ceremony of an Ikea flatpack shoved on the roof racks.

Jessie would definitely do a better job of organising my funeral given she works in events for a major record label, but her runsheets all involve dirty margaritas and famous popstars emerging from layer cakes. Through sheer force of habit she'd probably hire a former Australian Idol to MC the wake, and that's not a legacy I want to leave.

The only solution to my current predicament is to keep moving. I can get through this.

The pain is pressing in on me from all angles. There's the blunt walloping against my temples, the seizing in my chest and, worst of all, the black spot in my mind that grows in moments like these, threatening to swallow me like a sinkhole.

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I attempt to flex my fingers for grip but my limbs are losing all feeling now. I really think I'm about to spew when—

'Great work, guys!' cries the woman at the front of the studio. 'You're finished! What a way to start your Saturday! For those who went up to Level Six today, well done. Hope you can walk tomorrow!' She flashes a brilliant smile and unclips her shoes from the pedals as I fall gracelessly in a heap on the rubber-matted floor. From my throat comes a sound that is halfway between grizzly bear and pornstar. (To clarify: it is *not* sexy.)

Around me, the more dignified patrons of the East Side Spin Studio dismount their stationary bikes and file out of the room.

The lycra-clad trainer approaches me cautiously. She is wiry and Irish with peroxide hair and terrifying quad muscles. 'You know Level Six is the highest level we normally do, right?' she says. 'And you were doing Level Eight.'

I grimace as I give a weak laugh. 'I was feeling ambitious.'

The trainer frowns in a way that suggests she's trying not to judge me but might be doing so anyway. 'Okay,' she says slowly. 'I'll see you tomorrow for the Sunday special?'

'You bet,' I agree, as she saunters off, leaving me to scramble for my belongings before the next class starts.

My limbs feel wobbly and octopus-like, as though my bones no longer exist. I concede it was dumb to try Level Eight, but there was a combination of factors at play. Guilt that I slept in and missed the 5.30 a.m. class. Guilt that I'm slightly hungover. Guilt that I didn't finalise our media schedule last night like I'd planned to. It was all that, coupled with a

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sadistic need to constantly beat my own PB. It boiled down to one solution, which was penance. Via spin class.

I can feel a sweat patch blossoming between my boobs as I throw my bag over my shoulder and hightail it out of the gym. I still can't believe our election campaign kicks off this week and I just wasted a whole night (last night) drinking cocktails.

It couldn't be helped, though. My boss was in one of those moods where he wouldn't take no for an answer. He said we needed to celebrate the end of parliament next week. He said we deserved it. He said the sun was shining and he had a booking at Opera Bar. And so, in the interests of being 'a team player' and 'a good culture fit', I accepted the invitation to drink \$24 cosmopolitans. I just hadn't anticipated them being quite so delicious.

The top floor of Bondi Junction Westfield is slowly waking up around me as I head towards the car park. The morning sun slants through the skyscraping glass windows while the smell of coffee wafts around me, as vital and life-giving as oxygen. A bleary-eyed security guard is slouched against a wall, clearly trying not to look hungover. I send him an empathetic nod. *I feel ya, buddy.*

The only positive from last night (or more accurately, *this morning*) is that it has reminded me of what's important in life.

Fancy cocktails = not important.

Winning an election = *very* important.

Voting day is now eight weeks away and the NSW Minister for Education, Daniel Harcourt—or 'Boss', as everyone in the office calls him—is relying on me. In my role as Media

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Director, I need to manufacture as much positive media coverage as possible so Boss can win enough votes to stay in power. That means for the next eight weeks I must live and breathe my work. It will be relentless and exhausting and as overstimulating as a pokies room on Melbourne Cup night, but I cannot bloody wait.

Election campaigns are my crack. An eight-week bender of zero sleep, RSI from clip-scrolling and the constant race for a front-page high. If there are risks, I'll spot them. If there are controversies, I'll hide them. I'll hunt down every skerrick of good news and shout it from the rooftops, and if there's no good news, I'll make some. I'll find the untapped angles, twist them around, add a few statistics, and *voilà*: we'll have enough to get us through the daily news cycle. There's always a nugget of gold in every story, and my role is to shine it up and present it to the media on a velvet cushion.

During campaign time, there's definitely no room for one of those trendy work–life balances, but that's fine because work *is* my life.

As I traipse towards the car park past the Lululemon store (my spiritual home), my work phone buzzes in my pocket. It's a text from Petria, my lovely new assistant.

Ch 5 now, it reads. Jacko talking about Boss and the Pools in Schools scheme.

I quickly send her back a thumbs-up emoji. (As a communications professional, I consider emojis to be the ultimate form of efficient communication.)

As I go to open my Channel 5 news app, I spot something better up ahead. It's an electronics store with a giant wall of

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TVs in the window, all showing the iconic orange news desk of Australia's favourite breakfast TV host, Simon 'Jacko' Jackson.

I jog towards the screens, my face broadening into a smile. I can't believe I didn't think to pitch this myself! Recently, Boss has been struggling to connect with voters because they're not falling for my attempts to frame him as a relatable dad. It's because he's too good looking—a bit of a sharp-suited silver fox. For weeks, I've been wondering how I can make him seem more accessible, but now the solution seems so obvious. We need an ally, and who better than Jacko?

Jacko's bald as a spoon and he makes questionable comments about *Bachelorette* contestants. He's the daggiest, most beloved dad on Australian TV. If Jacko makes a few positive comments about Boss, Boss's popularity will skyrocket. (People often think 'cool by association' is a high-school term, but I've found it widely applicable in politics too.)

I jolt to a stop in front of the TVs. On every screen, Jacko is grinning, his co-host is chuckling and the weatherman is positively guffawing. My heart does a hoppity-skip like a Disney character gallivanting over a buttercup-filled meadow. This will be such great coverage for Boss!

At that moment, the presenters' faces vanish and the camera cuts to a busy road outside one of Sydney's most expensive private schools. It has sweeping elms and a cobblestone driveway, wrought-iron gates and rose-filled garden beds. The building itself looks like a castle. It has so many towers and turrets, you'd think someone had transplanted Hogwarts into the Eastern Suburbs and nuked the killer spiders on the way over. There's even a giant man on screen—maybe a Hagrid impersonator?

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Wait, what?

My eyes latch on to the figure in the foreground of the shot. My gut clenches. It's not a Hagrid impersonator. This guy's missing the beard and he has much better bone structure.

Dammit!

I blink three times in case it's a trick of the eye, but there must be a hundred screens. They can't all be lying. Archie Cohen—the most irritating and cocksure political journalist in New South Wales (possibly the world?)—has somehow made it onto breakfast TV.

'Minister Harcourt is completely out of touch,' Archie drawls in his fake-posh newsreader voice. 'We thought he was going to announce a teacher payrise but instead he's announcing funding for schools to clean their pools. I mean, how many schools even have pools? Can someone get this guy a reality check?'

Every word he says drips with scorn. The camera cuts back to the laughing panel and my heart sinks into a subterranean chamber in my abdomen.

They're laughing *with Archie*. They're laughing *at Boss*.

Oh god. Every outlet is going to pick this up. *The Daily Mail* are going to have a field day. The headlines will write themselves.

FOOLS IN POOLS

FOOLS IN POOLS IN SCHOOLS

FOOLS IN POOLS IN SCHOOLS FROM TOOLS

It'll be like Dr Seuss on acid, and Boss already has the bendy physique of the Cat in the Hat. It'll be so easy for the internet to generate memes to match!

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I ball my hands into fists and spin away from the screens, forcing myself to take a deep breath. *I will not panic.* Boss is relying on me, and I'm good at this stuff.

Having been raised by a hypercompetitive mum and a glass-half-full dad, I'm a fiend for meeting deadlines with a barrage of positive spin. When I first started this job, I'd never known the feeling of being particularly good at anything, but nowadays I spend my working hours feeling competent, even clever. It's been revelatory. And addictive.

I draw another deep breath as I repeat my grounding mantra in my head.

I can do this.

Taylor Swift has Tree Paine, and Boss has me—Camilla Hatton—and I'm not letting our election campaign nosedive simply because Archie Cohen had a rant in his too-tight suit with his too-smug smile. I need to harness this adrenaline . . .

That's when it hits me. *YES!* We'll use this coverage as a springboard to announce something bigger. Something better. Something that drowns out the *He's a rich white man talking about pools* storyline.

I grab my phone, jab a few buttons and thrust it to my ear. It answers on the second ring.