

**LEAH IN LOVE (AND TROUBLE) EXCERPT:**

With that, he stalked towards his house, a lovely red brick place with a veranda around its sides, windows beneath its eaves, and a fantastic set of double doors with lead light glass insets. I'd fallen in love with it the moment I set eyes on it. That was when Mrs. Weston, obviously Sean Russel's sister, asked me to call round to give her a quote on some landscaping for the garden I'd presumed was hers. So now it turned out it was this guys.

My business thrived on work in this leafy suburb. I'd been born not far from here, in Mornington, and spent my childhood on a farm in the center of the Mornington Peninsula. I went to high school near Melbourne, when my mother's sister came to Australia from England to care for me after my parent's untimely death when I was eight. Good old Aunt Eliza, she'd taught me everything I know about botany, gardens, and the pleasures to be gained by creating them.

Now what do I do? If the house belonged to him, I couldn't go ahead and start digging without his consent, even if his sister had already paid me. Now there was a snag! I didn't fancy giving the loot back, and anyway she'd signed the contract. Another thing Aunt Eliza taught me was to always make sure a contract was signed before I so much as put my spade in the ground on anyone's property.

I sauntered up to the front door, which he'd left open. It was a lovely June day, sunny, with a warm breeze blowing. Unusually warm for this time of year in southern Victoria. I'd been looking forward to transforming this unkempt block of land. Fabulous the house might be, but Sean Russel's sister was right—the garden needed a lot of work.

"What bloody game do you think you're playing at now?" He stood just inside the hallway, blaring down the receiver of the phone that was clenched in his fist. His hair was taking a real bashing from the other hand. Ugh, oh, I guessed he was blasting his poor sister. I did not wish to be a part of a family squabble. I turned about, ready to go back to my truck.

"Wait!"

I stopped. Presumably he was roaring at me. I put a hand to my chest and raised my eyebrows as I faced him again. He was right in front of me—his height slightly intimidating. That is if you were inclined to be intimidated by large men—which I wasn't. Well, not usually. Those lovely chocolate colored eyes were flashing sparks at me and the very sensuous mouth was held in a grim straight line. He rubbed his forehead as if he had a pain there.

"Forgive me, but my sister had no right to order work done on my property." The hands were now on his hips. "I'll have to ask you to leave."

"Sorry, can't do that." I shook my head and my ponytail bounced from side to side. I waved the clipboard at him. "I have a contract here, all signed and sealed. And I've been paid to do this job."

His big sigh was heartfelt. "I don't care a fig. I do not want a female digging up my garden."

“What have you got against female gardeners?” Now I was getting annoyed.

“I have nothing against females doing any job. That is not the point here. This work was ordered without my knowledge or consent and anyway what’s wrong with the garden as it is?” He wagged his fingers as he looked over my shoulder, which wasn’t hard for him to do seeing as I barely reached his chin.

“Pardon me, but if you think your garden doesn’t need work then you must be half blind.” That was rude, I know, but this guy was beginning to rattle me. Why the hell didn’t he just let me get on with the job I’d been paid to do?

“There is nothing wrong with my eyes.” He cast a glance up and down me, making me feel like I did when Patrick, my live-in lover of three years, walked out on me two years ago—on my 33rd birthday. The rat went off to live with a mouse of a woman who had no spunk, no energy, and no boobs. Stupid prat! They made a good pair, a rat and a mouse. Last I heard she was pregnant—perhaps she’d give birth to a chipmunk.

“Look, seeing as I’ve already been paid by your sister, why can’t I just finish this and then I’ll be on my way, out of your beard.” I gave the whiskery chin a sneer. “And you can have it out with Mrs. Weston. This is your problem not mine.”

The beard got a rub or two. The look in his eye said he was tiring of the whole business. “How much did she pay you for God’s sake? My sister is not a sane woman.”

“She paid me the going rate. And I think she’s a very sensible person. At least she appreciates the importance of a neat garden.” I glared at him.

His snort said a thousand words. He now rubbed his nape. He was doing an awful lot of rubbing, drawing my attention to his hands. They were strong, tanned, the fingers long and the nails clean. Obviously hands that weren’t used to hard work. I put my work-soiled mitts behind my back. I really should wear gloves more often to do the hard stuff.

“What’s it to be?” I hoped I sounded as fed up with the whole business as he appeared to be. “I have a signed contract, but it’s against all my principles to leave a job unfinished. My reputation would be at stake.”

He sighed as if he held the worries of the world on his wide shoulders.

“How hard can it be to decide to let me finish what’s started? Your garden looks like a wilderness now, and will look like a showplace when I’ve finished with it.” I hope. Well, I was sure actually. I’d never had a complaint—yet.

Those beautiful eyes assessed me for a long moment. I shifted uneasily. I didn’t like being assessed. When they settled on my breasts I folded my arms so the clipboard was held across my front like a shield, and gave him another glare meant to intimidate him.

He now looked amused. “What possesses a woman like you to do this for a job, anyway?” he stunned me by asking. I felt like flooring him with a swift punch.

“How the bloody hell do you know what sort of woman I am?” My cheeks had reddened I know, and I cursed the fair colouring I’d inherited from my English mother.

“Forgive me.” He looked unrepentant. “Let me rephrase that. You’re not very big are you? And digging and that sort of thing is usually done by big blokes with wide shoulders and not much brains.”

“Does that mean then that you consider I’ve got brains? And my size has nothing to do with anything. I consider that an insult to my mates in the same game. I know some very intelligent landscapers. I love making gardens.” Had loved it since I’d helped Aunt Eliza plan and remodel the first one behind the big rambling house she’d bought when she first came over from England to care for me and two year old Harry.

“OK, go ahead and do your thing, if it makes you happy.” He wagged a finger before my face. I frowned at it. “But let me tell you, Miss—” He looked bewildered. “What’s your handle?” He glanced over to my truck, then down at my left hand, at my ringless fingers still clutching the clipboard in front of me. “Miss Violet Amelia Connor.”

That was printed on the door of my truck. I wasn’t too struck on either of my names but Aunt Eliza and Harry persuaded me that my full name sounded very professional so ought to be emblazoned to show the world I was a really capable worker.

“Call me Leah, everyone else does,” I told him with a touch of defiance. I don’t know why but he brought out the worst in me.

“OK, Lee-ah.” He drew it out so he sounded like a Chinaman. “Get your work over as fast as you can and get out of my hair. Right?”

My nose went up in the air haughtily. “I do not rush my work. I will do exactly what I have been paid to do. And as for keeping out of your way, I will not bother you one little whit.”

I turned to march off. My haughty exit was rather spoiled when I tripped over a crack in the wooden porch floor and almost fell. Immediately he was at my side, his hand on my arm, warm and strong. His touch unsettled me, so I gave him another glare and he removed his hold.

I waved my clipboard at the offending crack. “You ought to get that fixed, mister. Someone is going to sue you before long if they actually fall and do themselves some damage.”

“I have a man coming in tomorrow,” he said with the same air of hauteur. “Just make sure you don’t trip over it again before he has time to fix it.”

A spark of mischief made me think for a moment of coming up here again when he’d gone inside and deliberately tripping over it and faking a cracked skull. But I said instead, “I’ll keep well off your porch, Mr. Russel.”