



POLLY
COURTNEY

it's a
man's
world

But it takes a woman to run it

Polly Courtney
It's A Man's World

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Courtney P.

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This is women's fiction with bite! Join Alexa as she battles her way through the chauvinistic lads mag's industry and makes real progress – it might be a man's world, but it takes a woman to run it. If you can't beat 'em, join 'em... Alexa Harris loves a challenge. So when she's asked to head up lads' mag, Banter, she doesn't need much persuasion. But life on the all-male editorial team proves harder than Alexa had imagined – and not just because of her ambitious targets. As Alexa battles with a testosterone-fuelled office, she decides to play the boys at their own game. As success hits, she's forced to look at who she has become. Has she forfeited her principles in return for praise from the lads? And what price will there be to pay? An addictive read with a hard-hitting meaning.

POLLY COURTNEY
It's A Man's World

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[Dedication](#)

To Caroline – because we all need a Leonie in our lives.

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Many people helped to inspire, shape and publish this book. Firstly, I'd like to thank the members of OBJECT for their tireless work in challenging our 'sex object culture'. Good luck with your campaigns and thank you for opening my eyes. Thanks also to those at Bauer Media who helped, wittingly or unwittingly, to provide a relevant backdrop to the story. A big thank you to my dear friend Caroline, who read every page in record time and put me straight when I went off course. Of course, I thank Sammia and everyone at Avon for turning my words into a published book and lastly, I thank Chris, for putting up with my hermit impression. I couldn't have done it without you.

Chapter 1

'Ah, Alexa. Thanks for coming to see me.' Terry Peterson leaned forward and waved at the seat opposite.

Alexa pressed the door shut behind her, relishing the wall of cold air that separated Peterson's office from the rest of the building. As the folds of soft, cool leather engulfed her, she wondered whether Peterson really believed that there had been any element of choice about today's meeting. To turn down an invitation from the chief executive of Senate Media UK, particularly an ambiguous, last-minute 'catch up', was to propel oneself straight to the top of the redundancy list.

'I've been thinking about your role,' said Peterson, leaning forward and blinking a couple of times at Alexa.

She nodded, forcing a smile despite the stomach-churning sensation that his ominous words had provoked. Alexa was on a two-year contract at *Hers*, Senate's leading title for the over-fifties, of which there were still three months left to run.

'Sorry,' he chuckled. 'Poor choice of words. Don't look so worried.'

Alexa smiled harder and joined in with a laugh of her own. Despite his fifty-seven years, Peterson had a good head of hair and piercing blue eyes that crinkled attractively at the edges as he smiled, which he did *all the time*. The chief executive wore his smile like a mask.

'As you know, I'm very pleased with your achievements at *Hers*.'

Alexa nodded again, more confidently. Peterson *was* pleased with the re-launch of *Hers*; she knew that much. Who wouldn't be pleased with a three-fold increase in gross revenue and a twenty percent reduction in costs? The magazine had been on the brink of collapse when Alexa, then a management consultant at TDS Consulting, had been seconded to establish a new business plan for the title. At Peterson's request and at vast expense, Alexa had been transferred from TDS and brought in-house at Senate Media to oversee the execution of this transformation – a transformation that was just beginning to bear fruit. The magazine was cash positive for the first time in a decade and Alexa had made it happen.

'I think you proved a lot of people wrong – not least the Americans.'

Alexa returned his smile. Being part of a US-owned company meant that everyone in the UK offices, including Terry Peterson, answered to the board of Senate Media Inc., or 'the Americans', as they were known.

Alexa knew what the Americans had thought of Peterson's initial suggestion that a twenty-nine-year-old management consultant should take charge of their fifty-plus title. She knew, because Peterson's PA had inadvertently forwarded her an email containing the full conversation between the UK and US board. Alexa sometimes wondered whether she would have made quite so much progress at *Hers* had she not caught sight of that email.

'I'm thinking,' said Peterson, his eyes still twinkling, 'you might be able to help us out on something else.'

Alexa felt a combination of apprehension and relief. Peterson's smile was suspiciously intense.

'Another title,' he clarified. 'It's the same set of problems we had at *Hers*, really: declining circulation, collapsing advertising industry, increasing competition from the internet . . .'

Alexa looked at him, trying to guess which magazine they were talking about. Frankly, it could have been any Senate title, or any UK magazine for that matter. The whole publishing industry was falling apart.

'I'm referring, of course, to *Banter*.'

Alexa swallowed. She looked up to the wall behind Peterson's head, where a set of black frames immortalised the front cover of every title ever published by Senate Media UK. *Banter* was there, top right, next to *Teenz*, an American import that had a limited life expectancy. Alexa glanced at the cover and then looked away, gazing at the bustle of Soho in the mid-afternoon heat. She tried to collect her thoughts. Even looking at the cover felt wrong. There was such a concentration of flesh and cleavage, it was overwhelming. Breasts spilled off the page, a smattering of strategically placed headlines obscuring nipples and other bodily parts that would tip the magazine into the category of porn – if it wasn't already there.

Porn, mused Alexa, increasingly aware that Peterson was expecting some kind of a response. That was the answer, up there on the wall, amid the airbrushed buttocks and cleavages. *Banter* was a form of soft porn. It was dirty, sexist, degrading to women and, frankly, an embarrassment to UK society. What would her mother say if she found out she was working for *Banter*?

Alexa pursed her lips, angry with herself for letting her mother's opinion interfere with her decision-making. She was turning thirty next year.

'I . . .'

Alexa cursed inwardly. The image of her disapproving mother was distracting. But there was something else, deep inside her, knocking her thoughts off course. It was small, only partially formed, but Alexa knew instantly what it was.

‘I’m not familiar with the lads’ mag market,’ she said.

‘Just as you weren’t familiar with the over-fifties market,’ Peterson returned, pointedly.

The feeling swelled inside her. Alexa tried to suppress it. She recognised it from the first time she had sat in this room with the chief executive – the time he had asked her to take on the *Hers* re-launch. It was the buzz of the challenge. She could do little to quash it, this amorphous sensation at the back of her mind. *Banter* was one of Senate Media’s flagship brands. It was a household name. Licensed in seventeen countries and filled with the dirtiest smut that could be legally sold in supermarkets around the world – and some that couldn’t – the magazine had been a controversial hit for Senate since its launch nearly seven years ago. Unfortunately, though, this was one challenge she would have to turn down.

‘As I said,’ Peterson went on, uninterested in Alexa’s protest, ‘the project isn’t dissimilar to the one you’ve undertaken at *Hers*. The only difference is the severity.’

‘The severity of . . . what?’ Alexa knew that what she really ought to be doing was telling Peterson, politely, that she wasn’t interested in the role. But she was curious.

‘*Banter*’s circulation fell by a third this year. The audience isn’t buying magazines any more – or if they are, they’re buying a competitor’s.’ He shook his head. ‘And then there’s the legal costs.’

Alexa nodded. No explanation was required. Lawsuits against *Banter* were legendary. Nearly every week, *Banter* was served a writ by some celebrity objecting to a crude or racist joke in the magazine.

‘The truth of the matter – and please, don’t mention this outside these four walls – is that the Americans are looking to shut it down by the end of the year.’

‘What?’ Alexa stared. She hadn’t meant to speak, not until she had formulated her polite rejection of Peterson’s offer. But *shut it down*? *Banter* was one of Senate’s biggest brands.

Terry nodded, his smile wavering a little. ‘They’re looking to cut costs.’

‘Right.’ Alexa tried to hide her morbid fascination. She would have liked to see a copy of *Banter*’s financials, just to find out where they were going so badly wrong.

Peterson suddenly straightened up in his chair, looking at Alexa with a strangely breezy expression.

‘However! It’s not all doom and gloom. I’ve secured us a lifeline. If we can turn things around by the end of the financial year then we’re home and dry.’

We, noted Alexa. She hadn’t agreed to anything.

‘Mind you,’ he went on, ‘I had to agree to some fairly hefty year-end targets in order to get the Americans to agree.’

Alexa did some quick mental arithmetic. It was early July. *Banter* had until the end of April to hit its year-end targets. That was less than ten months. Re-launching *Hers* had taken over a year and that was just a magazine with a few online tools. Reviving *Banter* would involve websites, tablet editions, mobile apps . . . Alexa stopped herself. She was already thinking about the solutions. This wasn’t a project she would be working on.

‘Look,’ she said, meeting his eye. ‘I’m sure this would be a great opportunity for someone, but I’m not sure I’m the right person for the job.’

‘Ah.’ Peterson leaned forward, squinting jovially. ‘I know what you’re thinking. You’re young, you’re female and you’re worried that the staff won’t treat you with respect.’

Alexa hesitated. That wasn’t what she had been thinking at all.

‘I’ve come up with a solution that I think you’ll like.’

‘No, the thing is—’

'Hear me out.' The chief executive raised a warning finger. Alexa was reminded yet again that the smile was a veneer. 'I think we should give you the title of *managing director*. That way, we won't be treading on any toes but you'll get the respect you deserve.'

Alexa frowned. Quite apart from the fact that she didn't want to be discussing the politics of an office in which she had no plans to work, she couldn't think of a single magazine that had a managing director at its helm. Magazines were run by *editors*.

'How does that work?' she asked, despite herself.

'Derek Piggott has been acting editor for the past nine months,' Peterson explained, so I suggest that we promote him to deputy editor and—'

'Promote? Isn't that a *demotion*?'

'Well, strictly speaking. But I suggest we don't make him *editor* in case he tries to pull rank. I've known Derek for years. He's a good man, just a little . . . well, I'm sure you'll be fine.'

Alexa wondered for a moment what Peterson meant, then stopped herself and leaned forward in the chair.

'I'm sorry, but I think you need to look elsewhere for your managing director,' she said, as clearly as she possibly could without risk of sounding condescending.

'Alexa, I think you're the right person for the job. I called you here today because I wanted to ask *you* to undertake the project.'

And because you need to fill the position as quickly as possible, thought Alexa, wondering how much of Peterson's persuasion was down to his faith in her ability and how much was due to desperation.

'You have the experience from your work at *Hers* and you understand digital . . . wireless . . . solutions.'

Alexa managed to refrain from laughing. Terry Peterson was not known for his technological know-how. Having worked in the magazine industry since the late eighties, he was very much a man of paper and ink. If the rumours were to be believed, his morning ritual involved his PA printing out the contents of his inbox, then Peterson replying to each email on pieces of paper for the PA to type up and send. Perhaps, thought Alexa, the chief executive's aversion to new technology might be a factor in the decline in so many Senate brands.

'That's where the money is, these days,' Peterson went on, his confidence sounding a little shaky. 'You understand that. You did it for *Hers*. You can do it for *Banter*.'

Alexa nodded warily. There were so many reasons for not taking on the project. It involved undisclosed targets that even the CEO was describing as 'hefty', the timeframe seemed ludicrously short and what with this Derek character and Peterson's *managing director* proposal, it sounded like a political minefield. But most of all, thought Alexa, seeing the image of her mother flash through her mind again, there was the fact that *Banter* was a porn magazine.

She held Peterson's gaze, trying again to come up with a firm but polite rejection. As she opened her mouth to speak, she saw that Peterson's expression had changed. He was smiling more intensely than ever, like a hypnotist defying his charge to disobey.

'We'll add twenty percent to your day rate.'

Alexa closed her mouth. After several more seconds of thought, she finally formulated her reply.

'I'll think about it,' she said.

Chapter 2

Alexa sipped her drink, glancing periodically towards the door. She swilled the bitter cocktail around her mouth, challenging her taste buds to ascertain how exactly a Japanese margarita differed from an ordinary one and to establish which ingredient was responsible for the fifteen-pound price tag.

Only Kate would choose a place like this, thought Alexa, giving up on the challenge and accepting that tonight was going to be an expensive night. These days, hanging out in the expensive

part of Mayfair was just about the only way to ensnare her high-flying friend, who seemed to spend a disproportionate amount of time in her Berkeley Square offices.

Alexa tipped back her final mouthful and asked the barman for a glass of water. As she did so, the door swung open to reveal a windswept, mousy-looking blonde who seemed perplexed by the waiter's desire to take her coat. Alexa waved Leonie over.

'Bit posh, isn't it?' Leonie screwed up her nose and nodded in the direction of the cloakroom, where men in green jackets swished soundlessly about their business. 'Don't they have pubs around here?'

Alexa smiled. 'You know Kate.'

Leonie rolled her eyes. She squinted at Alexa's glass and a look of relief crossed her face. 'Is that tap water?'

'Purest spring water from the Japanese Alps,' replied Alexa, smiling. 'Of course it's tap water.'

Leonie motioned to the barman for another and gulped down her glassful in one, pulling a face as an ice cube tumbled onto her nose.

Alexa laughed. She and Leonie had been friends since high school, their surnames – Harris and Hatton – dictating that they should sit next to one another in class. Establishing themselves as lab partners for science lessons, they both went on to study biology in their degrees, albeit at different universities. After uni, their paths diverged again, Leonie opting to teach Biology in a south London comprehensive and Alexa following the more lucrative path into the world of management consulting. It was while working at TDS Consulting that Alexa had met Kate – who, coincidentally, had been at uni with Leonie in Edinburgh.

'How's school?'

Leonie's eyes flitted up to the ceiling. 'Exhausting. Most of my kids have exams, so I'm looking after the younger ones. It's all videos and field trips and lessons outside. Yesterday, I had two lads climbing out of the second-floor window and abseiling down a drainpipe, trying to distract the girls in the classroom below.'

'Sounds like the end of term.' Alexa smiled.

'Piers broke up weeks ago, lucky bastard. He hangs around the flat like a little lost puppy, waiting for me to get home every night. Although I shouldn't complain; he cooks dinner.'

Alexa laughed, in awe, as ever, of her friend's perfect relationship. Piers and Leonie had met at a kids' camp in Camberwell, just after leaving school. Predictions that the holiday romance would fizzle once they went off to universities at opposite ends of the country had been proved wrong; nearly twelve years later, they were back with the kids in south London – although in Piers' case, it was a very different bunch of kids. He had landed on his feet at King Charles' Boys' School in Dulwich, recently being promoted to Head of Science and enjoying a significant pay rise with apparently very little extra work. Leonie, meanwhile, was dealing with over-crowded classrooms, drug-addicted kids, bullies and pupils who spat in her face at Langdale Comprehensive. Still, she seemed to enjoy the challenge.

Alexa nodded at the empty glass. 'D'you want a proper drink?'

'I think I need one.' Leonie drew the menu towards her. She studied it for a couple of seconds, then slowly pushed it away. 'Um . . . actually, no. I might just . . . leave it for a bit.'

Alexa looked at her friend. She knew what the problem was.

'I'll pay.'

'We could . . . share?'

Alexa laughed. She could just imagine the barman's face when they asked for a cocktail with two straws. Then she realised that Leonie was being serious.

'My round,' she said firmly. 'What're you having?'

Reluctantly, Leonie pointed at one of the martinis on the list.

'Thanks,' she said quietly.

Alexa ordered the drinks, grateful that Kate wasn't here to witness the moment. Public sector teaching salaries were an embarrassment, particularly compared to the rates that could be commanded in their field of work.

Leonie grasped the slender stem and gently tapped her glass against Alexa's.

'So,' she said. 'What's the summit in aid of?'

'Well, I—'

'Hi!' screamed a voice from the doorway. A swoosh of short, raven-black hair could be seen from inside a cloud of suit jackets, laptop bags and rucksacks, all of which were shed in rapid succession and dumped on the bewildered-looking doorman. Kate had arrived.

'Hey, guys!' Kate leaned forward and threw her arms around the two of them. Alexa smiled as her shoulders were squeezed, aware of the dirty looks they were attracting from other customers. That was the thing about Kate. She had no shame.

'Sorry I'm so late. Bastard project. All the partners have buggered off, leaving me to "just quickly update the pack". I think tonight might be another all-nighter.'

Alexa pulled a face. 'You're going back to the office after this?'

Kate nodded, waving to catch the barman's eye.

All-nighter. Alexa thought back to her early years at TDS, when, as a fresh-faced graduate, working through the night had been a regular occurrence. She shuddered, remembering how it felt to be trapped in that stale, airless office at three o'clock in the morning, feeling your brain grinding to a halt, filling your bloodstream with caffeine and taurine in an effort to ward off the inevitable exhaustion. Never again. Alexa had done her time. However tempting the salary, she would not be going back to work at a 'big five' firm like TDS.

Kate drew the sugar-coated cocktail towards her. 'One can't hurt, can it? Might help me be a bit more creative with my strategy.' She grinned and wolfed down about five pounds' worth of drink. Alexa watched, marvelling at her friend's stamina. She was showing no sign of slowing down as she neared the end of her twenties.

Sipping her drink, Alexa became aware of Leonie's eyes on hers. She was still waiting for an answer to her earlier question. Alexa took a deep breath and looked at her friend.

'I've been offered a new job.'

Kate stopped drinking, mid-sip, and lowered her glass to the bar.

Leonie leaned in excitedly. 'Where?'

'Within Senate. It's . . .' Alexa found herself struggling to say the name out loud. 'It's . . . you know the lads' mag, *Banter*?'

'Oh my God!' Kate gasped. 'Of course we know it! Are they asking you to be editor of *Banter*?'

Alexa hesitated. 'Sort of. It's similar to what I've been doing at *Hers*. Finding new revenue streams, new channels, that kind of thing.'

'Oh. Wow.' Kate rocked forward on her bar stool, looking respectfully into Alexa's eyes. 'Lex, that is amazing.'

'Well done, mate.' Leonie raised her glass. There was hesitation in her voice.

'But . . .' Alexa squirmed, avoiding Kate's open-mouthed stare and Leonie's wary expression. 'I don't think I'll take it.'

'What!' yelled Kate.

Leonie just looked at her, waiting.

Alexa sighed. She had been half expecting this set of responses. For Kate, the most important thing in life was career progression. Her beliefs were based on a kind of post-feminist mantra that went along the lines of: *women should feel the same pressure to succeed in the workplace as men*. She intended to become a partner at TDS before she hit thirty next year and, as far as Alexa could tell, there wasn't much standing in her way. Leonie, however, was naturally cautious and saw life through the lens of a secondary school teacher – always thinking about the bigger picture.

'Have you ever looked at a copy of *Banter*?' asked Alexa, by way of explanation.

Leonie replied with a loaded nod.

'What's wrong with girls showing a bit of ass?' Kate was clearly outraged that Alexa might be considering turning down such an opportunity. 'That's what men want! It makes money! *Banter* is one of the UK's biggest brands.'

'Yeah. For all sorts of reasons,' Leonie said pointedly.

Alexa ignored this comment and turned to Kate. 'It doesn't make as much money as you might think. I looked at their financials. Even stripping out the cost of lawsuits, they only make a few pence profit per copy.'

Kate looked at her, smiling a little. 'So, you're already looking at their financial model, then? You want to take this on, don't you?'

Alexa shrugged helplessly. *No*, she wanted to say. No, she didn't want to take on the role because it was inappropriate and unethical. But there was something inside her that wouldn't let her rule it out. Peterson had given her two weeks to decide and she had already used up one of them, yo-yoing between the arguments for and against.

Leonie cleared her throat. 'I can see why you wouldn't.'

'What?' cried Kate, staring accusingly at Leonie. 'Sorry, but what's wrong with working for *Banter*? We're not prudes, are we? There's nothing wrong with lads' mags. Hey,' she nudged Alexa in the ribs and lowered her voice to a conspiratorial whisper, 'it's less shameful than saying you work for Tedious Consulting.'

Alexa smiled lamely. Kate was wrong. It was far, far worse to tell someone that you worked in the soft porn industry than one of the soulless but highly respected consultancy firms like TDS – especially when that someone was your mother.

'Have you told your mum?' asked Leonie, right on cue. She knew Alexa's mother from their school days.

Alexa raised one corner of her mouth in a wry smile. 'What do you think?'

Leonie matched her expression. 'I think she'd disown you if you told her.'

Alexa sighed. Leonie was probably right. A sudden, unwanted image flashed across her mind of the two of them, aged nine, scrambling up the stairs of Leonie's parents' house, wearing various lacy garments sourced from Leonie's mother's wardrobe and their own interpretation of pop star makeup. Her mother, arriving early to pick up Alexa, had turned purple with rage at the sight of them. It was only the presence of Leonie's mother, hovering nervously in the doorway, that had saved them from the initial outburst of rage. As it was, Alexa had suffered alone, on the journey home, and the mental scars would probably stay with her forever. Alexa knew exactly how her mother felt. She was a Class A prude and nothing would ever change that.

'Who cares what your mum thinks?' Kate screwed up her nose. 'She's probably about fifty years behind the times! Fuck that. You don't need to pander to her way of thinking.'

Alexa and Leonie looked at one another.

'You haven't met Lex's mum, have you?' asked Leonie, politely.

Kate looked nonplussed, then quickly brightened again. 'What about Matt?' she asked. 'What does he think?'

Alexa allowed herself a little smile. Six months had passed and still it felt new and exciting – or rather, it still felt unreal. For once, things were working out on the man front.

'His first question was whether he'd get free copies of *Banter*.'

Kate hooted. 'Typical! That is *so* Matt!'

Alexa smiled. She didn't mind that Kate took the credit for setting her up with Matt, or that she pretended to know him when in fact he had simply been one of the hundreds of guests at her New Year's Eve party. She didn't mind, because frankly she *was* grateful – to Kate or to fate – for getting them together.

'Then he kind of went a bit . . . weird.' Alexa squirmed as she remembered the way Matt's expression had changed. It was as though he had flipped from being excited to lukewarm, in an instant.

'What sort of weird?' asked Leonie.

'Well . . .' Alexa hesitated, unable to think of a better description. 'I think he just has some reservations.'

'What?' Kate screwed up her nose. 'Matt's not a raving feminist, is he?'

'No. I think it might be more . . .' Alexa hesitated, unsure as to whether her theory stood up. 'I think it could be the male-dominated environment.'

Kate's expression intensified. 'He wouldn't be jealous, would he?'

'He's too good-looking to be the jealous type,' said Leonie.

Alexa shook her head, thinking of Matt's piercing blue eyes and his fine blond hair. 'I think he's probably just worried. He said he's seen what lads can be like. He said something about a "lions' den".'

Kate rolled her eyes. 'Like he'd know, from his experience in a city law firm!'

Leonie flashed Alexa a warning look. 'He's probably had some experience on the rugby pitch.'

'Oh . . .' Kate waved a hand. 'That's bollocks. Totally different. This is the workplace. You can handle it, Lex.'

'So, is it *all* men, on the team?' Leonie persisted.

'Apart from one.'

The first thing Alexa had done following her meeting with Peterson had been to grab a copy of *Banter* and tear out the credits page. There were twenty-four men on the staff and one woman – an editor's PA/editorial assistant named Sienna Pageant.

'One girl, eh? I bet she has a laugh,' remarked Kate.

Alexa nodded, wondering, not for the first time, what type of person Sienna Pageant might be. She glanced at Leonie, who didn't need to voice her concerns; they were written all over her face.

'Well,' said Kate, as though her mind was made up. 'Damo says there's a girl in his office who—'

'Hang on, who's Damo?'

'Oh. He's a guy I'm kinda seeing,' Kate replied casually.

Leonie looked at Alexa, then back at Kate, shaking her head in wonder. 'Where do you get them from?'

'How do you have *time* for them?' added Alexa.

Leonie raised her eyebrows at this. 'Er . . . pot, meet kettle? Where do *you* get time for men?'

Alexa frowned in mock offence. 'I've had the same one for months. Kate gets a new one every week.'

'Hey!' Kate shoved her playfully. 'Only once a fortnight. Damo works in the office above me. We were working late one night . . .' A grin crept across her pale face. She flicked back a lock of black hair in a half-hearted attempt to look bashful.

'Unbelievable.' Leonie was still shaking her head, still smiling.

'Do you nip upstairs in the middle of the night, while you're waiting for the printer?' asked Alexa. 'Is that what you're going back for tonight?'

'Can we meet him?' Leonie raised an eyebrow.

'Not yet.' Kate looked slightly ruffled. 'It might not last.'

Alexa rolled her eyes. Kate's relationships didn't generally last – simply because she lost interest and moved on to the next one. Kate treated her men as she treated her projects: she worked through them quickly, always lining up the next one as each came to an end. Nobody seemed to mind when things didn't work out – there was never any great expectation from either party and Kate never went for the overly sensitive type.

'Anyway, Damo was saying that there's a girl in his office who sits there and *cries*. I just can't believe any woman would let herself do that. You have to have some self-respect, I mean . . . at least she could have the decency to take herself off to the ladies.'

'Why does she cry?' asked Leonie.

Kate shrugged. 'I guess she can't handle the banter. She's the only woman there – that's what made me think of it.'

Alexa nodded, feeling grateful that she would never have to encounter her ball-breaker friend in the workplace. She thought back to the problem in hand. What were the *Banter* offices like? Would she handle the banter? This would no doubt be banter of a vicious kind – banter fuelled by an excess of testosterone and highly-sexed males. It would be a stark change from the all-female offices of *Hers*, where conversation rarely ventured far from the core topics of recipes, home furnishings and anti-wrinkle creams. The harshest criticism Alexa had taken from colleagues at *Hers* was a back-handed compliment from Deirdre a couple of months ago about the way that she dressed. Deirdre, eliciting support from the young, ditsy secretary, Annabel, had been of the firm opinion that Alexa should be bolder in her choice of clothes, displaying more of her 'lovely young figure' to the world. It was unlikely that conversations at *Banter* would be so tame.

'This is an *amazing* opportunity, Lex.'

Alexa half-smiled. She could feel Leonie's wary gaze upon her again.

'We're talking about one of the nation's biggest brands.'

'Mmm.'

'And you have the opportunity to make it even bigger.'

'Mmm.'

'I bet they're offering you an awesome day rate, right?'

'Twenty percent on top of what I get now.'

'See? And you're already on mega-bucks!'

Alexa cringed, not daring to look at Leonie.

'So.' Kate pressed her face right up to Alexa's and looked her in the eye. 'Are you going to agree to take the job yet, or do I need to get a round in?'

Alexa gave a reluctant smile. 'Go, Kate. Your lover's waiting by the photocopiers.'

Chapter 3

Alexa rounded the corner and waited impatiently to cross the road, squinting in the half-darkness at the lone figure at the top of the marble steps. He looked like a movie star, leaning casually against the floodlit pillar, the glow illuminating his blond hair and casting shadows across his chiselled jaw.

'Hi,' she called breathlessly, hitching the black silk dress a little higher as she darted across the road and mounted the steps, two by two. Kate's kitten heels were wearing holes in her ankles, but she put the pain to the back of her mind. 'Sorry I'm late.'

Matt didn't reply immediately. He just pulled away from the pillar and stood for a moment, appraising her heaving chest and flushed cheeks, smiling.

'It was worth the wait,' he said eventually, pulling her towards him and kissing her hard on the lips.

Alexa felt something inside her lurch. His suit was a perfect fit across the shoulders and the crisp, white shirt set off his tan. She looped an arm around his and stepped onto the dark red carpet.

'I think we're supposed to have gone through to the ballroom,' he said, 'but let's grab a drink on the way.'

He led them into a giant, echoing hallway flanked by two spiral staircases. A solitary waiter stood in the corner, holding a circular tray of champagne flutes – evidently the last remaining member of a troop of serving staff. Alexa cursed her poor time management. If she had just put down her work at six-thirty, as planned, she could have arrived on time and enjoyed her allotted quota of pre-dinner bubbly. There was always just one more feature to work on, one more financial report to check.

'Shall we?' Matt paused by the entrance to a vacuous ballroom. It sparkled with chandeliers, expensive watches and diamond earrings. Alexa took a deep breath, glancing down at her own attire.

It was probably a good thing that Kate had insisted on taking her shopping, she thought. The dress was racier than anything she would have dared to buy on her own and, out of context, the jewellery had seemed over the top – but judging by what she could see here, it was exactly right for the occasion. Cut from black imitation silk, the dress clung to her waist and hips, its neckline plunging to reveal a cleavage she usually kept hidden away.

Suddenly, Alexa found herself being whisked to the centre of the room at a disconcerting pace. She gripped Matt's forearm, ignoring the pain in her feet and focusing on keeping her champagne glass upright. Through the blur, she spotted the reason for the urgency. On the stage at the far end of the hall, an ancient-looking man was tapping a microphone, indicating the start of a speech.

'Ladies . . . and gentlemen!' The shaky voice was amplified across the room. 'May I first say how grateful I am . . .'

Alexa crept into her chair and quietly tucked herself in. On her left was a middle-aged man with a ring of greying hair around a largely bald head, who was nodding gently as though enthralled in the speech. Matt took his place on her right, next to Dickie, a friend and colleague at his law firm, Fothergills.

Alexa was nursing her ankle under the table when she caught sight of a frantic waving gesture from three seats along. It was Dickie's girlfriend, whose name Alexa had already forgotten from the previous black tie event. Clarissa? Loretta? Alexa's memory was hazy. Conversation had involved skiing, horses, red wine . . . but she couldn't for the life of her recall the girl's name.

The speech droned on. Alexa tuned in and out, her heart still recovering from the rushed entrance, her mind still working on Dickie's girlfriend's name. She wasn't entirely clear on the purpose of the evening, but then, she never was. Law must have been one of the few remaining industries in which career progression was partially dependent on attendance at elaborate dinners throughout the year.

She looked around the room. In the far corner, by the speaker, an all-female string quartet sat, looking very bored. Around the edges, waiters stood, staring straight ahead like foot soldiers on parade. The guests, of which there must have been four or five hundred, varied in their composure. Some were pretending to listen, others surreptitiously poured themselves glasses of wine and a small number of people, mainly older gentlemen, were nodding off.

It quickly transpired that Dickie's girlfriend was very drunk. Her eyes were rolling around in their sockets and every time the speaker paused for breath – sometimes after a joke's punchline, often not – she would let out a loud, throaty chuckle as though the man had said something exceedingly funny.

'I always look back to something that someone once told me . . .'

'Mwahahahaha!' cried the girl.

' . . . that if you want to know the difference between a good lawyer and a *great* lawyer . . .'

'Mwahahahaha!' she cried again. People were starting to stare. ' . . . then it is this. A good lawyer knows the law. A great lawyer knows the judge.'

'Mwahahahahahahaha!' yelled the girl, this time accompanied by a polite murmur of appreciation from around the room.

Alexa sipped her champagne, trying not to catch the girl's eye in case the hysterics became contagious. *Fenella*. That was it. Fenella's interjections were clearly not winning her any favour with the balding man on her left. Dickie was making a halfhearted attempt to shut her up, but short of physically restraining or removing her, there was little he could do.

Eventually, the speaker stepped down, amid a trickle of light applause. Predictably, Fenella clapped and whooped like a winner at the races. Alexa smiled as Dickie tried to explain that wolf-whistling was not an appropriate form of celebration.

Matt laid a hand on Alexa's thigh under the table, pressing his lips to her ear. '*The guy next to you is Dickie's boss,*' he whispered.

'*Oh dear,*' replied Alexa, softly.

'*He's also my boss,*' added Matt, with a meaningful look.

'*Right.*' Alexa nodded, understanding what was expected of her. Matt didn't want a Fenella on his hands tonight.

Matt smiled, leaning back as a waiter swooped over to pour the wine. '*Oh,*' he said, his mouth returning to her ear. '*There's one thing you should know about David Wint—*'

'DAVID WINTERBOTTOM,' boomed the voice on her left.

Alexa jumped. The balding man was offering his hand.

'Nice to meet you,' she said, wondering what Matt had been about to say.

'The pleasure,' he declared theatrically, 'is all mine.'

Alexa smiled politely as he grasped her hand in his and drew it slowly to his lips. He spoke in a way that might have been appropriate for very young children or foreigners: slowly and very loudly. She nudged Matt with her knee under the table, but he was already embroiled in a conversation about litigation with Dickie. Fenella, she noticed, was mumbling incoherently into her glass.

The starters were placed on the table with military precision by the waiting staff, offering Alexa a brief but welcome reprieve from Winterbottom's ogling stare. He seemed to be looking at her as though she were some form of exquisite art, not a conscious person.

'So!' The stare returned as Alexa tucked into her caramelised onion tart. She didn't actually like onion, but she decided that tasting small quantities was preferable to making conversation with Matt's lecherous boss. 'What do you do, then?'

'I . . .' Alexa avoided the man's gaze, which was now firmly focused on her breasts. 'I work in media.'

'Ah.' Winterbottom nodded knowingly. 'I could have guessed.'

'Could you?'

'Yuh.' He nodded again, glancing appraisingly at the silk dress as though sizing her up. 'Yuh, definitely a creative type. What d'you do? Graphics?'

Alexa frowned. She wondered whether her role could be classified as 'creative'. Some of her financial forecasts could probably qualify as such, but strictly speaking her profession was management or business. 'No, I look at new markets for magazines.'

'New markets, eh? Farmers' markets? Are you a communities journalist?'

Alexa pushed away the remains of her tart. 'No,' she replied, through gritted teeth. Had Winterbottom not been Matt's boss, she would have put him straight in no uncertain terms.

'Let me guess,' said Winterbottom. 'Are you . . . oh, I know. Is it a local magazine?'

'No.' Alexa heard the resentment in her voice and reined herself in again. 'No. I'm not a journalist.'

'Then why did you say you were?'

Alexa kept calm, watching as he scooped out the filling from his starter and stuffed it into his mouth in one go. A small strand of onion flicked up from the fork, leaving a trail of chutney across his left cheek.

'I said I worked in media. I look at new markets for magazines – *new revenue streams.*'

'Oh.' The man looked confused. 'So, you work in finance?'

'Sort of.' Alexa nodded. It was probably the closest they were going to get to her actual job description.

The waiters whisked away their plates, topping up glasses as they went. Alexa took a large gulp of red wine, leaning sideways and trying to catch Matt's attention.

'No, no, *no,*' insisted Dickie, apparently oblivious to his girl-friend's sleepy head on his shoulder. 'Regulation works better than litigation, every time. Prevention is better than cure!'

'I disagree,' argued Matt, launching into a complicated explanation for why.

Alexa turned back to her wine. It was always the same. Matt promised not to talk shop with his colleagues, then when the time came, the word 'litigation' reared its head and they were off. It was no wonder Fenella had drunk herself into a stupor.

'So!' It was the same slow, booming tone that had rung out before.

Reluctantly, Alexa turned to face Winterbottom.

'You never told me which *title*,' he said, patronisingly.

'Oh.' Alexa nodded. She thought for a moment. Part of her wanted to shock him by telling him about *Banter*, but she didn't know whether that would reflect badly on Matt. 'It's a women's magazine called *Hers*.'

'A *women's* magazine,' he nodded, smiling. 'Of course.'

Alexa managed to keep her cool. Inside, she wanted to grab the man's tightly-stretched collar and shake him off his chair, wiping that smug, condescending smile off his face.

'I trebled its gross revenue and shaved twenty percent off the costs last year,' she said.

'*Did* you?' He looked at her, wide-eyed, glancing overtly at her breasts. 'And how much revenue does a *women's* magazine bring in, these days?'

Alexa exhaled. The fire was burning inside her. This man was intolerable.

As it happened, just as the collar-grabbing fantasy started to take hold in her mind, Alexa's thoughts were interrupted by the arrival of her main course. Matt looked over and must have registered her expression because he suddenly wanted to know her opinion on joint liability in American asbestos cases.

Alexa's shoulders remained tilted towards Dickie and Matt for the entirety of her next two courses: succulent veal followed by peach melba with raspberry coulis. She wasn't enjoying the conversation exactly, or even following it, but she was doing a reasonable job of saying 'mmm' at appropriate intervals and the wine was slipping down nicely. Dickie and Matt didn't seem to mind; they were lost in a world of corporate constitutions and shareholder rights.

Dessert wine was followed by cheese and port which was followed by a random selection of red and white wine scavenged by Dickie from nearby tables. Alexa was pleased when conversation eventually moved on to random trivia such as the fact that there were apparently more chickens in China than people. At some point in the proceedings, Fenella perked up enough to work her way through a large slab of Brie, but ten minutes later was looking decidedly queasy. It was agreed, through smeary wine glasses, that the time had come to go home.

Leaning against the cold, exterior wall, Alexa watched as Matt helped Dickie ease Fenella into a cab. She lifted her hair off her shoulders, tying it into a knot and enjoying the cool night air on her face.

'You never told me,' said a voice, languid and loud, right next to her ear.

She sighed, turning to face Winterbottom and feeling her spirits sink.

'Told you what?' she asked, reluctantly. Fenella was refusing to get in the cab. Her limbs were protruding from the open door and she seemed to be yelling something about a club.

'How much money a *women's magazine* makes.'

Alexa drew a lungful of air. She knew exactly what the man was getting at. The implication was that women's magazines generated such small revenues that they weren't worth the bother. The implication throughout the whole evening had been that women's magazines, women's jobs, women's efforts in general, were a waste of time.

The rage mixed with the wine and port in her belly and, for a brief moment, Alexa wondered whether she might throw it all up on the obnoxious man. She held it in though, glancing sideways at the cab, where Dickie and Matt were attempting to trap Fenella in a pincer movement.

'About thirty to forty million,' she said, pushing away from the wall and feeling instantly dizzy. She steadied herself and looked into Winterbottom's eyes. 'The same as the equivalent men's

magazine.' She started to turn away, but kept her eyes fixed on his face. 'And by the way,' she said, 'that's irrespective of whether it's run by a man or a woman.'

She glared at him for a second, watching his jowls flap with the hesitant opening and closing of his jaws, then she turned and marched into the road, where Matt was patting the roof of the cab as it pulled away.

'Matt?'

He looked up, seemingly perplexed by the speed at which she was tottering towards him.

'What were you going to say? Before the dinner – about your boss?'

'Oh.' Matt nodded apologetically, holding out his hand as another cab pulled up. 'After you.'

Alexa stumbled inside, falling back against the seat. 'Tell me,' she said, feeling her eyes drop shut.

Matt slipped an arm around her shoulder and drew her towards him so that her head was on his lap. 'I was just going to say that he's not one for respecting women.'

Alexa managed a laugh. 'Really?'

'Sorry.' Matt started stroking her hair. 'I would've swapped places if there'd been time.'

Alexa let out a quiet sigh. She was exhausted and very drunk, but she recognised the feeling inside her. It felt like fire. She had made up her mind about something.

'Matt?' she said again.

He stopped stroking her hair for a second and looked down at her face.

'I'm going to take the job at *Banter*.'

Chapter 4

Alexa stepped into the lift, trying to align her thoughts. Her hands were clammy and her legs felt weak. She wanted to swallow, but her throat was devoid of anything to swallow.

The doors started to slide shut, then juddered to a halt as the other woman in the lift thrust a limb between its jaws, calling out to a colleague in the atrium. Alexa leaned back on the reflective wall and exhaled, grateful to the woman for adding an extra few seconds to her journey.

The women's small talk washed over her as the lift lurched upwards. Alexa stared straight ahead, struggling to focus. The adrenaline was having a strange effect on her mind – muddling up the important things, like how she would hit the revenue targets laid down by Peterson, with the small, insignificant details that ought not to be taking up space in her head, like whether her shoes made her look too tall and whether she ought to have pinned back her fringe. It was only when the two women stepped out on the fourth floor that she realised she wasn't going anywhere.

Alexa snapped to, pressing '5' and checking her makeup in the mirrored wall. The shoes definitely made her look too tall, she decided, and her light brown fringe was hanging limply over her eyes like an unkempt mane. Why hadn't she noticed that before? She turned away from her reflection in disgust.

Stepping onto the fifth floor, Alexa turned left, suddenly very aware of the fact that she was stooping. She pulled back her shoulders and forced her legs forward, one after the other, fighting the urge to turn and flee.

She had caught glimpses of the *Banter* office in the past, but she had never taken much in. The life-size pin-ups on the door had rather put her off. This was her first proper sight of the place she would inhabit for the next nine months.

The office was a colourful, dirty mess. It looked like a teenage boy's bedroom. There were piles of magazines, DVDs and clothes all over the floor and copies of *Banter* strewn across every surface. Lodged in the gaps between piles were random objects that included, at first glance: a water pistol, a set of elf costumes, a pyramid of baked bean cans, a giant beer mug in the shape of a naked woman and a lawnmower.

Alexa drew to a halt in the gangway that ran along the middle of the office. There was nobody there. She looked at the clock. It was only ten past eight. Her nerves had woken her at six and she hadn't been able to get back to sleep.

She felt a vibration and felt around for her phone, suddenly hoping for an email from Peterson saying he'd changed his mind and urgently needed her back on *Hers*. It wasn't an email though; it was a text message from Matt.

Thinking of U. Mx

Alexa smiled, feeling a little more confident as she looked up at the fifty-inch plasma TV at the end of the office. It showed two semi-naked teenage girls, writhing around on a bed together, looking very unsure about what they were supposed to be doing. Alexa grimaced. Something had to be done about Banter TV. It was essentially a ten-minute roll of filmed photo shoots on loop, interspersed with amateur ads for cheap phone-ins that looked as though they'd been filmed in somebody's garage. It was little wonder that Banter TV had no viewers.

Alexa scanned the five banks of desks, trying to identify her seat. *It was only pin-ups*, she told herself, wandering to the next bank of desks and coming face to face with a pair of giant breasts hanging from a filing cabinet door. She shuddered as the image of her mother flitted across her mind.

Alexa continued to scan the desks, wondering where Derek Piggott sat in relation to her. At Peterson's request, she had had no contact with the deputy editor since the press release had gone out about her appointment. That was typical of how things were done at Senate: behind closed doors, with no collaboration, creating maximum potential for resentment. She didn't even know how the deputy editor had taken the news of his effective demotion.

She jumped. Someone was clearing his throat behind her.

'Sorry, didn't mean to scare you.'

Alexa felt her heart rate triple. She turned to find herself staring at someone who looked exactly like Amir Khan. His hair was jet black, short and spiky, his angular jaw coated in a few days' worth of stubble and his eyes were dark, like pools of ink.

'Um, hi.' She collected herself together and managed some kind of smile.

He was tall, she noticed. Alexa rarely found herself looking up to meet someone's eye.

'Alexa?' he said, at exactly the moment Alexa chose to say her name.

They laughed awkwardly.

'I'm Riz,' he said, shaking her hand with the grip of a champion boxer. 'Sports editor.'

'Right.' Alexa straightened up. It was refreshing, not having to stoop. 'Great to meet you. I'm . . . well, you already know. I'm going to be managing director for the next few months. Launching new initiatives, that sort of thing.' She glanced around. 'That's the plan, anyway.'

Alexa inwardly screamed at herself for adding the unnecessary final sentence. This had always been a problem. It wasn't just first-day nerves; it was her pathetic inability to talk in a normal way to attractive men. It maddened her. She could devise a ten-million-pound business plan and execute it within a year, she could build websites and draw up cross-platform strategies, but she couldn't have a normal conversation with a good-looking guy.

'Yeah, we got the email.' Riz moved a little closer, lowering his voice. 'That caused a few ripples.'

Alexa tried to laugh, but nothing came out. *The email*. What had Peterson told them? How much did they know about the ultimate purpose of her secondment to *Banter*? The fact that the title's future was in jeopardy would have been kept from the team, surely, in which case, why the 'ripples'? She couldn't think of a subtle way to ask.

Riz looked around the office. 'You're looking for a desk, I presume?'

Alexa nodded, still thinking about the email. 'A desk would be good.'

He was wearing low-slung, casual jeans and a T-shirt, she noted, clocking his muscular shoulders as he headed off along the gangway. The trouser suit had been a mistake, she thought,

cursing her lack of foresight. This was media; she knew how people dressed here. Why had she gone for the formal look?

Riz walked quickly to the far corner of the office and then stopped.

'Hmm.'

Alexa followed, as speedily as her inappropriate high heels would allow.

Riz was squinting at one of the monitors on the last bank of desks, gently stroking the stubble on his chin.

'I think . . .' He grimaced. 'I think the news desk might have got here first.'

Alexa drew level with Riz and then froze. On the desk in front of her, gleaming in the weak morning sunlight, was a black rubber dildo about four times the size of any she had seen in any shops. It rose up above her monitor like an obelisk.

'Delightful.' She managed a smile, but inside, she felt anxious. She could imagine it now, half a dozen grown men crowding round her desk like little school boys, smirking as they tried to agree on the optimal position.

Riz stepped forward and made as if to remove the offending article. 'Shall I?'

Alexa nodded. 'If you don't mind.'

He lifted it off the desk and then looked around, surveying the mounds of paper and toys around them.

Alexa was about to suggest the nearest waste paper bin when she had a better idea.

'Put it there,' she instructed, clearing a space on the window sill next to her desk.

Riz looked at her. 'You sure?'

Alexa nodded. 'Yeah. It's a lovely gesture, don't you think?'

He smiled, slowly. 'I see. Yes. *Lovely*.'

Alexa pulled out her chair and was only half surprised to find an A3 poster of a glamour model, spread-eagled, staring up at her with a wanton expression.

'Am I to expect . . . quite a few of these little treats?' she asked, unsticking the poster from her seat and folding it inside-out, only to find another image on the reverse, this one of a blonde on all fours.

He looked at her, one eyebrow raised. 'You're not at *Hers* any more.'

Alexa watched out of the corner of her eye as Riz returned to his desk, allowing herself a quick moment to wonder what might be going on two floors below. It was nearly half-past eight. Annabel would be sifting through the post in her slow, dreamy way, waiting for the kettle to boil for her herbal tea. Deirdre would be moaning about over-crowding on the Central line and Lily would be printing off knitting patterns. Riz was right; she wasn't at *Hers* any more.

Logging on was a predictably slow, painful process that involved a multitude of error messages and three phone calls to the IT help desk. It was while she was on one of these calls that she realised she was being watched. The office had been slowly filling up with boisterous young men and until now, Alexa had kept her head down, waiting for a full house before she started to make her introductions. But it was becoming increasingly hard to ignore the man in his early thirties who was bearing down on her from across the desk. He had shoulder-length, oily brown hair and a small tuft of stubble at the base of his chin.

'Oi oi!' he cried, as she put down the phone.

'Hi,' she said, smiling up at the man. She couldn't help thinking that he might be reasonably good-looking, if it weren't for the hair or the goatee.

'I'm Derek,' he bellowed, despite the fact that Alexa's ear was no more than a metre from his mouth. 'And you must be our new managing director.'

He said the last two words slowly, with emphasis, as though expecting some kind of applause. Alexa looked over his shoulder and realised that, in fact, the deputy editor did have something of

an audience. Half a dozen young men from the nearest bank of desks were looking over, smirking. Derek Piggott clearly had a following.

Alexa rose to her feet with what she hoped was a mixture of grace and poise, offering out her hand. It was only as she did so that she realised how incredibly short the man was. He couldn't have been more than five foot six.

'Alexa,' she declared, as boldly as she dared. She had a feeling that Derek was not the type of man who liked to be talked down to, but there was little she could do about the practicalities of the situation.

'Well,' he replied loudly, having offered a surprisingly weak handshake. 'I look forward to seeing your *managing* and your *directing*.'

She held his fake smile. This was bad. Already there was hostility between them and she had barely taken off her coat. Alexa wondered again about the contents of that email. Perhaps Derek felt that she was partly to blame for his demotion. He obviously saw her as some kind of threat.

'I'm looking forward to working together to monetise all the great content you produce,' she said calmly.

Alexa instantly regretted her choice of words. They were too condescending. She could see that in the way Derek turned his back on her, clearly pulling a face to the other members of the team and sitting back down at his desk, which, she realised with dismay, was the one diagonally opposite hers.

'Oh,' he said, in the same oratory tone. 'Alexa, the kitchen's down the corridor, on the left.'

There were sniggers from the nearby band of desks. Alexa could hear the laughter travel through the office like a wave. Her cheeks burned, her whole body starting to shake with a mixture of rage and embarrassment.

What was the appropriate response? The longer she stood there, the more she felt like a freak: tall and conspicuous, the butt of the joke. Sitting down now would be to concede defeat. She had to say something. But what? She didn't understand the office dynamics yet. It seemed very much as though everyone looked up to the deputy editor. In her head, she could hear the voice of Miss Calder, her old English teacher: *Do you find something funny? Hmm? Would you care to share the joke with the rest of the class?* The last thing she wanted was to come across like Miss Calder.

Eventually, after what felt like hours of standing in mute panic, Alexa was saved. She didn't need to say anything, because, she realised, nobody was looking at her any more. All heads had swivelled towards the peroxide blonde who was sashaying across the office in a pair of gold hotpants, stilettos and a push-up bra.

'Hi,' the girl purred, winking flirtatiously at the rather unattractive redhead on the near bank of desks and sliding into the seat next to Derek's. Alexa could just make out the sight of her round, tanned buttocks, slowly escaping from the shiny hotpants as she logged onto her computer.

It took a while for Alexa to realise that she was the only one left staring at this spectacle. The men, of which there were now seven or eight, had reverted to throwing parcels around, playing with gadgets and flipping through newspapers. Occasionally, eyes would return to the girl's backside, but there was no sense that the sight of it was anything unusual. Slowly, Alexa sat back down, wondering whether she had had all the conversations she was going to have for the day. Only two men had bothered to make eye contact so far – and in Derek's case, it was only so that he could set her up for public humiliation.

She opened up her email and pretended to scan her empty inbox, glancing sideways at Sienna Pageant. This, she thought, was her PA. Or at least, this was the 'Editor's PA/Editorial Assistant', according to the credits in the magazine, which was all she had to go on. Once she had agreed to the role, Peterson had become distinctly vague about how exactly the power share would work between Derek and herself.

'PADDY.'

A loud, robotic voice fired out across the office. A scruffy-looking lad in shorts was talking through some kind of voice-distorting megaphone.

'GET THE COFFEES IN.'

A lanky young man with wild, curly hair and braces sprung to his feet in the middle of the office.

Alexa watched as, to her surprise, the young man bounded towards her.

'Nice t'meetcha,' he said. He was Irish. 'I'm Paddy.'

'Nice to meet you too.' Alexa smiled, grateful for the non-confrontational human contact. 'What do you do here?'

'Anything they tell me.' He jerked a thumb in the direction of the man with the megaphone. 'I'm the office gopher. D'you want a tea or coffee?'

'I'm fine, but thanks for the offer.'

'Not a problem.'

'PADDY! COFFEES!'

Alexa risked a smile as she watched the lad spring off towards the kitchen. Again, her thoughts were drawn to what was probably happening two floors down. At *Hers*, they took turns to make the coffee. Nobody bellowed when they wanted a drink and the juniors were treated like valued members of the team. Still, Paddy didn't seem to mind. He didn't even look put-out when someone from the sports desk tried to garrotte him with an elf hat as he passed.

Alexa jumped as her phone buzzed on the desk.

Go get em, Lex!

Good luck with Day 1. Kx

She looked back at her empty inbox, trying not to let the situation get to her. She wondered how Kate would react, in her shoes. Alexa was pretending not to notice, but it was clear that the redheaded man on the next bank of desks was talking about her to one of his colleagues. They kept looking up at her and then nudging one another, muttering quietly and sniggering.

Would Kate put up with this? Would she have remained silent in response to Derek's joke? It was unlikely. In fact, by now, Kate would probably have reprimanded the deputy editor and the redheaded man like a parent with a child, alienating them and anyone else who dared cross her path. That was the difference between Alexa and Kate. Kate didn't care what people thought of her. Alexa cared too much.

The office continued to fill up. Alexa opened a browser, trying to decide the best way to get to know everyone. At *Hers*, she had held a company meeting and played ice-breaker games before holding a brainstorm to generate ideas for reviving the title. Somehow, that didn't seem like a viable tactic here. She needed to meet the section teams individually. She needed some introductions.

Alexa leaned across the desk, catching the attention of the busty blonde.

'Hi. Is it Sienna?'

The girl's plump, red lips melted into a false-looking smile. 'That's right.'

Alexa swallowed. It was like talking to a lap dancer.

'I'm Alexa. It's nice to meet you.'

It was difficult to know whether a handshake was appropriate, given not only the volume of clutter between them but also the potential for a wardrobe malfunction on the part of Sienna's low-cut top. Alexa opted for a cheery wave.

'Can I ask a favour?'

'Sure,' she said, batting her eyelashes for the benefit of Derek, who was making no secret of the fact that his foot had worked its way over to Sienna's side of the desk and was foraging for a playmate.

'I . . .' Alexa tried to focus. The deputy editor was playing footsie with his PA. 'Can you tell me whether any meetings have been set up for this week?'

'Meetings?' She jerked sideways, trying not to smile.

'Yes. You know, introductory . . .'

'Oh. Right. Um . . .' Sienna glared playfully at her male boss. 'Not that I know, no. Ow!'

Alexa thought for a second. She didn't want to start throwing her weight around but she really did need some help setting up meetings for all the departments. It would take hours to trawl through the names and send out blind invitations to all the people she had never met.

'Could you . . . might you be able to help set some up for me? Introductions with each of the teams?'

For a moment it looked as though Sienna was too preoccupied with her under-the-desk touse to hear the question. Then she looked up. Suddenly, she was no longer smiling.

'With all due respect, Alexa, that's not my job.'

'Oh.' Alexa recoiled, suddenly wondering whether she'd misread the credits. Perhaps Sienna wasn't a PA after all. 'I'm so sorry. I must have made a mistake. What . . . What *is* your role?'

Sienna glanced salaciously at Derek, who grinned back at her.

'Editorial assistant.'

'Oh.' Alexa frowned. She wanted to grab a nearby copy of *Banter* to check. 'I thought you were also the editor's PA. Perhaps I—'

'I *was*, but we agreed to drop the PA bit, didn't we, Derek?'

Derek was no longer looking at Sienna, no longer grinning. His eyes were resolutely fixed on Alexa. 'That's right.'

'But . . .' Alexa was struggling to understand. 'Who does the administrative work?'

Sienna shrugged slowly. 'I guess we don't really have much, do we, Derek? We all just *muck in*.'

Alexa was about to reply and then stopped herself. The situation was impossible to navigate. Derek had accepted Sienna's effective promotion because, presumably, he was getting sexual favours in return. It was not in his interest to restore her official title and Alexa already knew that sexual favours or no sexual favours, Derek would not be siding with her in an argument. But she needed a PA.

The question was, should she go in heavy-handed and demand that Sienna do what she was paid to do, or should she accept the situation and just *muck in*?

'Look,' she began, preparing to lay down some terms. Behind Sienna, she noticed, the redhead and colleagues were passing around pieces of paper, looking in her direction and collapsing in fits of hysterics. Alexa tried to concentrate. She opened her mouth to address the PA and as she did so, she thought of an alternative. 'I'll ask Peterson for the headcount to recruit a PA. Someone who can do the administrative work.'

For a fleeting moment, Sienna lost it. 'Wait!' she spluttered, before quickly recovering her composure. 'There's no need. I'll do it. I'll set up your meetings, no problem. I just meant, *generally*, we don't have much admin.'

Alexa smiled. 'Great. Thanks.'

She was about to set off on an introductory tour of the office when something occurred to her.

'Sienna?'

The girl looked up with a fake, breezy smile. 'Mmm?'

'Can you please thank whoever gave me my gift?' She nodded to the giant dildo on the window sill.

Sienna glanced sideways at Derek, then back at the pasty-faced redhead, both of whom were pretending not to be listening.

'Sure,' she said, with another false smile. 'I'll pass it on.'

Chapter 5

'Just remember, don't mention my job.'

Matt rolled his eyes, glancing sideways through a wisp of blond hair as they waited for the lights.

'Sorry.' Alexa waited for him to look round again, so she could show him how grateful she was for putting up with her neuroticism today, but the lights were about to change and Matt was clearly intent on making a quick getaway. Not that any getaway was ever slow in the Aston Martin DB9.

The lights went green and Alexa's head jerked back against the seat. She wondered what her parents would think when they saw the car. Her mother would instantly want to know one thing: was it paid for with earnings or family money? She would probably spend the whole afternoon trying to work it out. Her father would probably pretend not to care, while secretly yearning for a ride. Maybe Alexa would engineer some sort of outing for Matt and her father, if the opportunity arose. That might give her a chance to break the news to her mother about the job, too.

'Why are you so stressed, anyway?'

'I'm not stressed.'

Matt gave a half-smile and put his foot down, propelling them onto the motorway.

Alexa closed her eyes, feeling slightly sick. Annoyingly, Matt was right. She felt stressed. It was partly the new job, but mainly, she knew, it was the prospect of telling her parents about the new job.

'You're jiggling,' he pointed out.

Alexa looked down at her bare knees and clamped them together, forcing the involuntary movement to stop.

'Why is it such an issue, telling your folks?'

Alexa shrugged. 'It's just . . .' She tried to think of a way of putting it. 'They're quite old-fashioned.'

'So? Shock them. No big deal.'

She said nothing. Matt hadn't met her parents. He hadn't met her mother, or witnessed the power that she still exerted over her daughter. To be fair, it was Alexa's fault that Matt didn't understand. She was the one who had put off the introduction for so long. It wasn't that she was ashamed of her boyfriend. Nor was she ashamed of her parents – despite her mother's overbearing manner and embarrassingly loud voice. No, she was ashamed of *herself* and the crushing sense of impending failure she felt every time she saw her mother. She knew how absurd it would seem to a handsome, confident city lawyer that a twenty-nine year old woman still lived by her mother's rule book and *that* was why it had taken seven months for her to summon the courage.

'Would it be better if I wasn't here?' asked Matt.

'Of course not!' Alexa recoiled at the thought. 'That's the whole point of the barbecue. Mum and Dad want to meet you. Anyway, *I* want them to meet you. I think Mum's worried I might be gay.'

Matt whipped round, his blue eyes squinting at her in the sunlight. 'Why would she think that?'

Alexa forced a shrug, wishing she hadn't said anything. 'I dunno.'

She did know, but she wasn't going to tell him.

Matt accelerated up the slip road and onto the dual carriageway that led to her parents' village. He still looked perplexed.

For a moment, Alexa considered explaining the truth – that he was the first boyfriend to meet her parents, the first to make it past the two-month mark. But she couldn't bring herself to do it. Again, it was something she couldn't explain – not just because she didn't want to ruin her chances with Matt but because she didn't *know*. She was as keen as her mother was to work out why her relationships had never lasted more than a few weeks in the past.

It wasn't that Alexa chose to break up; she didn't get through men in the same way that Kate did. This was something that happened *to* her. It was like a recurring nightmare, always ending the same way: a note or a text message or a painful conversation to say, 'it's not working out.' Never a full explanation, never an opportunity to patch things up.

Alexa reached out and touched the sun-bleached hairs on Matt's forearm, stroking it as he changed down a gear to turn into Elm Rise. This time, there would be no note or text message or painful conversation. This time, it was going to last.

The satnav was lost, she noted, smiling. There was no reception of any kind in the village. Usually, that annoyed her, but today it seemed like a blessing. Her mother thought Alexa's BlackBerry addiction was bad, but she hadn't seen Matt's.

They drew up outside the pebbledash exterior of number twelve.

‘So.’ Matt turned to her. ‘If in doubt, talk Girl Guides or band camp, right?’

Alexa smiled. He had obviously been listening. Her mother was involved in just about every community activity within a twenty-mile radius of the village: Averley Youth Club, the Green Streets project, North Surrey YMCA, Kids’ Canoe Club and the local nature reserve. And those were just the ones that Alexa could remember. She secretly wondered whether her mother was attempting to fulfil her own ambitions through the members of her various groups in the same way she had done with Alexa.

‘I don’t think there’s a band camp, but I may be wrong.’

‘Can’t hurt to ask.’ Matt pulled on the handbrake, smiling. Then he placed a hand on her thigh, pinned her back against the seat and gave her a quick, hard kiss. ‘You should wear dresses more often,’ he said, glancing down at her legs before swinging himself out of the car.

The front door opened before they’d even reached the garden gate. Alexa’s mother had clearly been waiting.

‘Hi!’ she cried, at a volume that might, thought Alexa, feeling anxious and paranoid, have been more for the benefit of alerting the neighbours to the expensive car than for greeting them. Averley was a reasonably affluent village, but nobody here drove an Aston Martin.

Alexa raised her right hand, feeling grateful for Matt’s hot, strong grip around her left. Her mother had had her hair done for the occasion, she noted, taking in the flash of auburn between the wands of wisteria around the door.

‘How are you, darling?’ cooed her mother, before they had even made contact. ‘And you must be Matthew? Lovely to meet you! Did you have a good journey?’ There was the briefest of pauses for air-kissing. ‘Goodness! Is that your car out there? Super! Is it new? Are you hungry? Shall we go through to the garden? Let’s go through to the garden.’

Alexa squeezed Matt’s hand as her mother led the way through to the small patio at the back of the house, which appeared to be filling with a bluish smoke. She tightened her grip on Matt’s hand and felt her way over to where her dad was haphazardly fanning flames on the barbecue.

‘Hi, Dad.’ She put her spare arm round his shoulders and squeezed. She was taller than him now, she noted. Either he was shrinking or – God forbid – she was still growing. ‘This is Matt. Need a hand?’

‘Darling! Come and meet Matthew!’ cried Alexa’s mother, unnecessarily, adding, in a noisy hiss, ‘*I think you’ve used too much charcoal!*’

Alexa grimaced, wondering why her mother had been so intent on holding a barbecue in the first place. A pub lunch would have been perfectly adequate and they all knew that Dad wasn’t famous for his culinary skills. In fact, thought Alexa, he wasn’t famous for much at all, now that he was retired – except perhaps being the most hen-pecked man in Averley.

Poor Dad. She didn’t remember things being like this before, when she was growing up. Although, thinking about it, Alexa realised that this was probably because he’d spent most of his time at the office, preferring company accounts to the company of his wife. Alexa felt bad for thinking such things, but it was true. Her mother was a control freak. She had never been able to trust other people to get things done. Alexa had learned this at an early age. One of her earliest memories was of her mother dropping her off at a gym lesson and then reappearing in the doorway, giving pointers to her daughter from the back of the room. Eventually, the instructor had asked her to leave, but that hadn’t seemed to deter her. Music, swimming, art and virtually every other extra-curricular activity that had featured in Alexa’s privileged upbringing – as well as most academic ones – had involved input from her mother. She meant well, Alexa knew that, but she had trouble letting go.

Matt had moved over to the barbecue and was talking quietly to her dad.

‘... the air vents ...’

‘... wasn’t sure ...’

‘. . . slide that along?’

Alexa smiled as the air began to clear.

‘Well! Marvellous!’ Alexa’s mum clasped her hands together in jubilation. ‘I’ll go and get the drinks! What would people like?’

Drinks were served, with only a small mishap involving the wobbly garden table, and after a couple of glasses of Pimm’s, Alexa felt herself starting to unwind. Her dad also looked more relaxed, she noted. In unspoken agreement, Matt had taken the seat nearest to the barbecue and was discreetly tending to the smouldering coals as he sipped his drink.

‘So, Matthew! That’s a very nice car out the front. Is that a family heirloom?’

Alexa felt like screaming. She wanted to launch herself at her mother and tell her to stop being so *obvious*. How could a DB9 be a family heirloom? How, mathematically, given the model of car, would that be possible?

‘No,’ replied Matt, unable to resist a little smile. ‘I bought it with my bonus last year.’

‘Oh!’ Alexa’s mother gave a nervous laugh, clearly impressed and a little overwhelmed. ‘*Gosh.*’

‘I was lucky,’ he explained modestly. ‘We had a bumper year for deals last year.’

‘Yes. Right.’ Alexa’s mother nodded, raising her eyebrows at her husband, who was trying to look through two sets of windows to catch a glimpse of the car.

More questions followed. Where had Matt grown up? What had he studied? Did he have brothers or sisters? Which area of law was his focus? Matt passed with flying colours. He kept up with the questions, laughed at Alexa’s mother’s jokes and masterfully down-played his lifetime achievements, even managing to weave in a reference to his time doing pro-bono work for a local children’s charity. The only slight hiccup came when Matt had pulled out his phone to check the name of his old scout group and noticed the lack of message alerts.

‘Oh. Don’t you have any reception around here?’

‘No,’ replied Alexa’s mother, suddenly caustic.

‘Amazing.’ Matt shook his head, clearly not picking up on the vibe. ‘I didn’t think there were places like that left . . .’

‘I hope you’re not addicted, as well?’

Alexa took it upon herself to step in. She hadn’t warned Matt about this. ‘It’s not an addiction, Mum; it’s communication. It’s the way things work these days.’

Her mother leaned over to Matt, speaking directly to him.

‘She’s addicted,’ she said softly. ‘Don’t you think? She can’t stop looking at that thing.’

Matt smiled tactfully.

Alexa said nothing. She knew that she ought to move on, to think of a neutral topic of conversation, but she couldn’t. She was so angry with her mother.

It wasn’t simply that she was imposing her old-fashioned views on people who didn’t want to hear, or that she was insulting her guest for doing something as innocent as checking his phone. It was that she was so damned *contradictory*.

If there was one personality trait that Alexa attributed to her mother, it was her drive to succeed. Where else had it come from, if not the woman who had allowed her only educational toys as a child – the woman who had withheld her evening meal until her homework was done? Alexa could still remember the time her mother had denied her a place on the Year 11 post-exam holiday to Barcelona – could still feel the wrench of disappointment in her gut as she took in her mother’s words. It was all because of the B she had attained in her Geography coursework – and it hadn’t even been her fault. The teacher had slipped up and set an unsuitable piece of work. *Nobody* in her class had got anything higher than a B grade. It was no wonder Alexa had found herself working her way into a top university, desperately seeking out a top graduate job and flinging herself into every piece of work in a desperate attempt to succeed. It was no wonder that now, ten years later, she was still feeling the same compulsion to achieve, achieve, achieve – yet her mother *did* wonder. She wondered why

Alexa was continually checking her email. It seemed so hypocritical that Alexa wondered whether she might have missed something along the way – whether she had misinterpreted her mother's words of 'encouragement' over the years.

She reached out and topped up her father's empty glass. Her hands were shaking.

Matt stoked the coals on the barbecue. He had picked up on it now.

'Nearly time to put the meat on,' he said, cautiously. 'Five minutes, I'd say.'

Nobody moved.

Eventually, Alexa could bear it no longer. The pressure inside her was too great. She got up and stormed inside, locking herself into the downstairs bathroom. Flipping down the lid of the toilet, she sat, head in hands, waiting for the rage to pass.

Her mother didn't say those things to annoy her, she knew that. That was the ironic thing. She said them because she *cared*. She was worried about her daughter turning into a workaholic and failing to keep hold of Mr Right – risking a life of lonely, work-fuelled celibacy. Like most mothers, she just wanted her daughter to have it all. She couldn't see, of course, that it was *she* who had created the workaholic. Alexa *was* addicted to her BlackBerry. She *was* wedded to her career. She *did* have trouble holding down a boyfriend and, frankly, it was unlikely that she would succeed in 'having it all'. Did anyone, these days? What did that mean, anyway?

She thought about her friend, Kate – the only person she knew who stood a chance of having it all. In a year's time, barring disasters, she would be a partner at TDS. She would continue to churn through men, keeping an eye out for husband material and then once she decided on 'the one', she would engineer a proposal and a year later, they'd be married with their first kid on the way. Knowing Kate, she probably had it all mapped out in an Excel spreadsheet.

It wasn't so simple for Alexa. At least, it didn't feel simple. Matt was the only man she had been with for more than a couple of months and every day, she felt privileged to still be with him. She couldn't pick and choose like Kate. Ironically, from her mother's perspective, Alexa had become so afraid of failure that she found it almost impossible to focus on anything other than upcoming challenges in the workplace. She *tried* to loosen up when it came to relationships, but it wasn't something that came naturally.

Alexa breathed deeply and exhaled, slowly. She felt calmer now; the shaking had subsided. Rising to her feet, she studied her face in the mirror. The sun had brought out the freckles on her cheeks and her eyes looked paler in comparison. She watched as her reflection started to smile back at her. She was ready to face the world again.

The scene to which she returned was unexpected. It was as though she had turned up at somebody else's party. Matt and her father were chatting happily by the barbecue, her father threading kebab meat onto skewers while Matt turned the slabs of steak, and her mother was flitting from kitchen to garden, humming as she arranged the salads.

'Can I help?' Alexa asked lamely.

The men were lost in conversation and didn't reply. Her mother stood for a moment, appraising her handiwork on the table. Then she turned, as if suddenly remembering something.

'Yes – yes, you can. Come and fetch a couple of things from the kitchen, will you?'

Alexa was familiar enough with her mother's tricks to know that there was no urgent barbecue-related mission awaiting her in the kitchen. She tramped inside, wondering which of her mother's lectures she was about to hear. On the plus side, she thought, at least by being alone together in the kitchen, there might be an opportunity to tell her mother about the job.

'So!' Alexa's mother pressed the kitchen door shut behind them 'Oh, Alexa, you're stooping.'

Alexa straightened up, pushing a wisp of fringe out of her eyes. It was a criticism she had heard so many times, over the years. She tried so hard to be proud of her looks – all five foot ten of them – but too often, it just felt more comfortable to be at eye level with others. Not that that was an argument worth having with her mother.

'I just wanted to say,' her mother began, in a whisper that equated to anyone else's normal speaking volume, 'I think Matthew is wonderful. So does your father. He gave me the nod, just now.'

'Good. I'm glad you think so.' Alexa smiled hesitantly. *The nod*. It was as though Matt had come under scrutiny by virtue of his association with her. 'I think he is, too.'

She waited with trepidation as her mother continued to wring her hands.

'And . . . well, I just want to say . . . try to make time for him, won't you? I know what you're like, always rushing around, working all hours . . .'

Alexa frowned. She couldn't quite believe these words were coming out of her mother's mouth. Make time? *Time?* Coming from the person who believed that productivity was the ultimate goal, that life was all about using time efficiently?

Alexa found herself nodding, too stunned to object. 'He seems like a perfect match,' her mother went on. 'Obviously very ambitious.'

Alexa nodded again. The hypocrisy was astounding. What did they *want* from her? Was ambition seen as a good thing or not? Throughout all of her life so far, Alexa had been working on the assumption that ambition was good – that it was an essential ingredient of a fulfilling life. Matt's ambition was being lauded and yet, here was her mother, effectively telling Alexa to take her foot off the gas and to 'make time'. Making time meant borrowing it from other activities, of course. There was only a finite number of hours in the day and Alexa's waking ones were already filled – her mother had made sure of that. So what exactly was her mother trying to say?

'You're coming to the end of your contract at the magazine now, aren't you? Perhaps you can take it a bit easier for a few months?'

Through the blur of confusion, Alexa spotted an opportunity.

'Actually, my contract has—'

'Have we got any more peppers?' Her father appeared in the doorway. 'Just need a half or so for the last kebab.'

'Try the bottom of the fridge.' Alexa's mum moved over to the sink and started scrubbing a burnt pan – a good use of six seconds, thought Alexa, watching in annoyance.

'Alexa, don't leave your guest out there on his own. Go on – you go and entertain Matthew. We'll sort out the food.'

Alexa toyed with the idea of telling them now, both at once, but it didn't feel right. Her mother would overreact, she would get angry again and her dad wouldn't know how to respond, and all the while Matt would be outside on his own.

'Oh, Alexa?' Her mother called out as she made her escape. 'I meant to ask. You remember Lara Fielding, don't you? The little girl you used to babysit, from the village?'

'You mean the spoilt brat who would only eat food that was pink?'

'Well, yes. I'm sure she's grown out of that now. I was talking to Janice the other day and she mentioned that Lara has just finished a Media Studies degree and is looking for work! So, naturally, I said that you might be able to put in a good word with the ladies at *Hers*.'

Alexa sighed. She wouldn't inflict Lara Fielding on anyone – especially not her friends on the third floor.

'I'll see what I can do.'

Matt raised an eyebrow as she re-emerged.

She shook her head. 'Got interrupted.'

He looked unimpressed.

'I *will* tell them,' she said, 'just—'

'Tell who what?' her mother asked breezily, reappearing with a bowl of chopped peppers.

'Oh.' Alexa panicked. 'Just . . .' She couldn't say it. Not yet.

'Alexa has some news,' Matt said, unhelpfully.

'I . . .' Alexa said the line in her head, but she kept getting stuck on the word *Banter*. 'I have a new job,' she managed.

'Do you?' cooed her mother.

'Do you?' her dad echoed.

'Yes.' She pressed on. 'It's a managing director role, a bit like my last one, but for a men's title.'

'Oh! Congratulations!'

'Which title, darling?'

'Um . . . it's . . . well,' Alexa looked at the patio. Matt was looking at her, eyebrows raised. 'It's . . .' She tried again to push the word out, but she just couldn't do it. 'A niche magazine,' she said, eventually. 'You won't have heard of it.'

'Well!' cried her mother, clearly perplexed that the news wasn't more significant, given the build-up. 'That's . . . fabulous!'

She didn't look as disappointed as she might have done, thought Alexa – presumably because she saw the role as offering more potential for her daughter to make time for Matt. Within seconds, she was popping the cork on a bottle of champagne.

'Well done, Alexa!' she cried, filling the glasses.

'Hear hear!' said her dad. 'Well done.'

'Yes,' Matt added woodenly. 'Well done.'

Alexa held up her glass as the toast was made, feeling shaky and slightly sick.

Chapter 6

'Pig Out?'

'Hogwarts?'

'Pig Headed?' Derek sniggered and scratched his goatee, clearly finding the whole thing hilarious. 'No, hang on, how about Pigs Might Fly? Ha!'

Alexa sighed. They were nearly two hours into the weekly editorial meeting and they'd barely scratched the surface of features. For the last ten minutes, conversation had revolved around possible funny headlines for Paddy's first editorial assignment – a trip to a Suffolk pig farm. Alexa suspected that the location had been carefully chosen by the other members of the team to ensure maximum ridicule for the junior writer.

'How about Pig Tales!' roared Derek, looking around the table for a response.

Marcus, the ginger-haired news editor, guffawed appropriately and Sienna let out a girly squeal, rearranging her blouse to display a little more cleavage.

Alexa cleared her throat. 'Shall we move on? I'm sure the features team will come up with something suitably funny.' She looked at the balding, energetic features editor who nodded back at her. 'Neil? What else?'

Before Neil could speak, Derek leaned forward, his head cocked aggressively to one side.

'How about,' he said, in a slow, condescending tone, 'we carry on going round the table, like we've been doing, shall we? That's tends to be how we do it, see.' He smiled patronisingly at her.

Alexa managed to nod, despite the burning rage inside her. There were so many things she wanted to say. They *weren't* going round the table; they were going through the magazine, section by section, as was customary in such meetings. She had looked to Neil because, as features editor, he was best placed to summarise the next topic of discussion. And to use that disdainful tone in front of the entire staff was not just unprofessional; it was *pathetic*. Alexa remained silent.

'Er . . . same as,' said the scruffy young man next to Paddy, who, for reasons unknown to Alexa, was known as Biscuit. She remembered him from her first day; he'd been the one brandishing the voice-distorting megaphone. He was responsible for the jokes pages of *Banter*.

'Any news on the Guy Thomas thing?' asked someone.

Biscuit screwed up his face. 'He's threatening to sue.'

'Bastard.'

'Fucker.'

Alexa looked around, perturbed. 'Sorry . . . could someone explain the *Guy Thomas thing*?'

Derek sighed, loudly. 'Could someone please explain the Guy Thomas thing, for the benefit of our *managing director*,' he said, in a tired monotone.

'We, um, printed a "fun fact" about him in the Celebrity Banter section,' said Biscuit, not meeting Alexa's eye. 'Said he had a phobia of peas. He's claiming it's not a phobia, it's an *aversion*.'

'He's going to court over an aversion to peas?' Alexa frowned.

'He always threatens.'

Derek leaned forward again. He had the same look on his face as before.

'Round here, you see, lawsuits come with the territory. Not a lot you can do about them.'

Alexa disagreed, but said nothing.

'Anyway! Good news,' said Neil, tactfully changing the subject. 'We've had Ricky Lewis confirmed as our lead feature next week. Got the green light for a "Love Rat Tells All" piece.'

'Fan-fuckin'-tastic,' said Derek, shaking his fist in what Alexa could only interpret as a display of jubilation. There were nods of respect from all round the room. A couple of men punched the air.

Alexa said nothing. She didn't share their enthusiasm. Ricky Lewis was a premiership footballer whose exploits, as far as she knew, included: drink-driving, speeding, cheating on his girlfriend with a teenage prostitute and then walking out on said girlfriend, who had taken him back and was five months pregnant with his child. Was it right, she wondered, to splash heroic images of such a man across the pages of a magazine aimed at impressionable young lads?

'Love the angle, too,' added Derek. 'Really get him to talk – you might get some juicy tit-bits.'

'Some sordid truths about the wife, maybe?' someone else suggested.

Neil nodded and jotted it down. Alexa nearly spoke out, but stopped herself. She was new to this market. There was clearly a lot for her to learn about what worked and what didn't. If this was a feature that pulled in the readers, she could hardly speak out against it.

'Other stuff . . .' Neil was taking the lead as Alexa had suggested, she noted, his shiny pate bobbing from side to side as he skimmed down his list. 'Ah, yes. This week's Ten Sexiest is nurses, which is always a winner. I think there was only one that didn't get her baps out, so that brings the nipple count to eighteen, from just the one feature.'

Alexa joined in with the general noises of appreciation, finding herself inadvertently glancing down, checking that her own nipples were hidden away under the dark, shapeless top – one of five almost identical garments that had become her own unofficial uniform since the day one *faux pas* with the suit. She felt uneasy. Did they seriously use nipple count as a metric to gauge an edition's prospects?

'Then we're just deciding on whether to do a men's summer diet feature – "The Mankini Diet", we were thinking – or just a how-to on barbecuing. Or maybe some sort of how-much-sex-do-you-need-to-burn-off-the-calories type thing.'

Alexa tuned out as various suggestions were bandied about. It amazed her, how differently things happened here compared to two floors down. At *Hers*, features writing was seen as an art form. It was hard enough just to think of a theme that was topical – not just appropriate for the time of year, but based on real-life global trends. On discovering that, say, a wave of fifty-somethings were taking up extreme sports, or that refugees were crossing the channel and moving in with local pensioners, the challenge would be to find a hapless features writer willing to find a fifty-something mountain-biker or a Dover landlady harbouring immigrants. At *Banter*, it seemed, features were plucked from thin air. Funny surnames, whacky hair-dos, tasty breakfast cereals – anything would do.

The discussion eventually ran its course and Alexa looked around hopefully. She wasn't going to bring the meeting to a close – not with Derek sitting three seats down.

'One more thing,' said Neil, just as Derek started noisily bashing his papers against the desk in a conclusive manner.

'Mmm?'

'As usual, we've had a shockingly bad set of Banter Confessions in this week.' He pulled a face. 'I was hoping Sienna might have time to write a few?'

All eyes turned to the peroxide blonde next to Derek.

'I reckon I could fit it in,' she replied, with extra emphasis on her last three words.

Alexa frowned, ignoring the ripple of smutty laughter that was travelling across the room. 'Sorry,' she said. 'But shouldn't we be getting real girls to send in their confessions?'

Derek rolled his eyes. 'That's the *idea*, yeah,' he said. 'But like Neil said, we don't always get enough and most of them are too crap to print. Sienna does a much better job, don't you, darling?' He turned to his PA and winked.

'Apparently I do a very good "compliant",' explained Sienna, smiling demurely at Alexa as the dirty laughter flared up again.

'I just wonder . . .' Alexa feared that she might already be testing Derek's patience, but she wanted to get something straight. 'I was just wondering *why* we don't get more confessions in. We offer a fifty pound incentive for the best one, right?'

Derek nodded reluctantly. Marcus rolled his eyes. The pallid redheaded news editor always seemed to side with Derek. It was as though they had some secret allegiance. Alexa persevered, nonetheless.

'We have nearly fifty thousand female readers . . . But we have trouble eliciting *three* decent confessions from them each week?'

'Yeah. Look, this isn't exactly a new problem.' Derek rolled his eyes impatiently and exchanged a look with Marcus. 'It's just the way it is.'

Alexa disagreed, again, but this time she was willing to speak out. Something was ringing bells.

'Last year,' she said, 'when I was working at *Hers*, we noticed a massive drop-off in letters coming through to our agony aunt.' She looked around. Sienna was inspecting her nails. Derek was spinning a pen around his thumb. Marcus was trying to do the same only failing and most of the others looked half-asleep. Only Neil and Riz seemed to be listening.

'We realised that the drop-off coincided with the new editor mugshots. Our agony aunt's new photo made her look about twenty years younger and a lot more attractive. It was putting the readers off. They wanted to see someone they could relate to. What mugshot are you using for the confessions?'

Neil looked up immediately. 'It's a picture of a random lad, looking kind of curious. I've always thought it's a bit seedy, actually. My wife thinks it looks like a paedophile. Maybe we should change it? We could pitch it as "send your confessions to our secretary, Sienna".'

'Hey,' Sienna pouted, pushing her breasts a little further onto the desk. 'Not if it means an ugly mugshot.'

'It doesn't have to be ugly.'

'Medium-ugly,' said Marcus, raising a ginger eyebrow.

'Oi!'

'Tell you what.' Neil was obviously adept at spotting potential deviations. 'We'll make someone up. Give her a medium-ugly mugshot and create a fake email address for her, then we'll see what she brings in.'

'Hallelujah!' cried Derek, rolling his eyes. 'Thank *God* that's sorted. Real girls confessing to a fake secretary, saving Sienna about . . . what, half an hour a week? Fucking marvellous.'

There was silence for a moment. Alexa managed to maintain some semblance of a smile and then, since Derek was preoccupied with throwing his arms about and pulling stupid expressions, she checked for any other business and dismissed the team.

The deputy editor was one of the last to leave the room.

'Derek?' She caught his attention as he passed. 'Can I have a word?'

Derek stopped in his tracks, holding his position in the doorway as though deliberating over whether to heed or ignore the request. Eventually, when everyone else had returned to their desks, he turned to face Alexa.

'I'd *love* to have a word with you,' he sneered.

Alexa could feel herself tense up as she watched him return to his seat at the head of the table. They were now separated by four chairs, which seemed odd, but she didn't comment.

'I just wanted to say . . .' Alexa took a breath and pushed out the words. 'Well, I thought it would be sensible to talk about our roles and responsibilities.'

'Our *roles and responsibilities*,' he echoed mockingly.

'Yes, let's.' Alexa thought for a second. She had known that this wouldn't be easy, but she hadn't quite anticipated the extent of Derek's resentment towards her.

'So, to clarify,' she persevered. 'In my mind, you are still the acting editor of this magazine.'

Derek snorted. 'I don't know what the fuck is going on in your mind. All I know is that a few weeks ago, I was demoted to *deputy editor* for no apparent reason and then you come along with a fancy title and start talking about *rejuvenation* and *engagement*.'

Alexa sighed. So this was what it was all about. Derek blamed Alexa for his demotion. It wasn't exactly a revelation, but at least there was no longer any room for doubt. Alexa wished she had spoken out when Peterson had told her of his plans. She ought to have foreseen this problem; she should have realised from Peterson's cryptic mumblings that Derek Piggott would prove to be a problem. She should have advised the chief executive not to demote him. Inflated egos were far easier to deal with than crushed ones.

'Look,' she said, picking up on Derek's last few words. 'We *need* to get this magazine back on its feet. That's why I'm here, and as soon as I've done my job, I'll be out of your hair.'

'Back on its feet?' Derek stared at her, nostrils flaring. 'Who said it wasn't on its feet?'

Alexa was about to reply and then stopped.

He had no idea.

For the last few weeks, she had been working on the assumption that Terry Peterson had told Derek about the Americans' plans to dispose of the title if it didn't improve its profitability. She had assumed that he was being discreet by not mentioning it around the office. She should have thought. Derek wasn't capable of discretion. Peterson had clearly kept him in the dark on purpose.

'Sorry,' she said, watching Derek tug irritably at his goatee. 'That was melodramatic. I just mean, I'm here to try and help *Banter* hit its April targets. I'm not here to run the editorial side of the magazine.'

Derek just stared at her, shaking his head.

'Primarily,' she said when it became apparent that nothing more was forthcoming from the man, 'I see this involving new channels for the existing content – *your* content. But it's inevitable that at times, there may be a need to look at the content itself, maybe make a few changes.'

Derek continued to stare hatefully at Alexa, slowly shaking his head.

'For that, I need your support.' She could hear the desperation in her voice. 'I need to feel that you trust me to get involved. I need to . . .' Alexa faltered. This was the real reason she had called him in. She could barely bring herself to say the words. 'I need to know that you won't undermine me in front of the team.'

Initially, there was no reaction from Derek. Then he sat back, slowly, still looking at her through the dark slits that his eyes had become. All of a sudden, he launched himself forwards. Alexa jumped.

'*Banter*,' he spat, pressing his face right up to hers, 'is a fucking good magazine.'

Alexa nodded mutely. He was so close she couldn't breathe. 'I *know* that,' he said, through gritted teeth, 'because I've worked here for *six years*. So when some *bint* in a suit comes in here on some crazy salary and starts telling me how to run my magazine and how to talk to my team . . .'

He sniffed loudly, angrily, only millimetres from her face, 'then it's hardly surprising when I don't take too *kindly* to her. *Is it?*'

Alexa shook her head, saying nothing.

Eventually, Derek threw himself back into his chair, shaking his head and looking into the main office with a cold, hard stare.

Alexa slowly exhaled. She was about to say, tentatively, that she wasn't trying to dictate how he ran his magazine or talked to his team, but as she opened her mouth to speak, Derek threw back his chair and stood up, marching out of the meeting room and slamming the door on his way out.

Alexa sank down in her chair and pressed her fingers against her closed eyes. She was so close to crying, but something inside her was blocking the tears. She *couldn't* cry. She wouldn't allow it. This was just part of the challenge, she told herself. This was the lion's den Matt had warned her against. This was the all-male environment Leonie had been so worried about. She had to stay strong. She thought about Kate's reaction to the girl in her boyfriend's office who had let her tears show. She wasn't going to be like that.

Alexa grabbed her notepad and stood up. She was going to go back into the office and continue to do what she was being paid to do. She was going back into the lions' den.

Chapter 7

The photographer squinted critically at his digital display.

'Okay, that last one again, if you don't mind. Yeah, move your hands about, that's it, like you're really enjoying yourself.'

The girl grabbed her breasts with fresh gusto, flicking her long, dark hair to one side and pouting at the camera. Alexa swallowed nervously, wondering whether the girl actually was enjoying herself. Going by the shaky knees and the look of forced ecstasy on her face, Alexa suspected not.

Kayleigh Williams was nineteen years old. This was her first modelling shoot – a fact that Alexa could probably have deduced by the girl's demeanour, had it not been written on the call sheet in front of her. She couldn't help thinking that it might also be the girl's last.

It wasn't that Kayleigh didn't have the looks: she was tall and curvy with dark eyes and glossy, chestnut-coloured hair that cascaded in waves down her back. Her breasts, as noted on the call sheet, were a sizeable 32DD. The problem was the way she held herself. It was her confidence – or lack thereof. The girl looked petrified.

'Can you move a bit more slowly, Kayleigh?' Jamie, the pictures editor, obviously felt compelled to intervene. 'That's it. Much more sexual, yeah.'

The videographer gave a nod of approval as he changed angle.

This was why amateur photographs never looked anything like those in the magazine. Aside from the photographer there was a photographer's assistant, a lighting guy, a junior lighting guy, makeup and a young lad whose job it was to run around the set looking busy and repeatedly offering drinks. For this shoot there was also a videographer. *Banter* now filmed, as well as shot, all of its most popular features, for the website and *Banter* TV.

The 'Brainy Banter' feature was up there among the readers' favourites. The concept was simple: get a female university student to take off her clothes and then ask her some trivia questions that she would inevitably get wrong under pressure, then print the airbrushed pictures beside her incorrect answers, thus offering the readers a dumb, compliant bimbo with a perfect body. It wasn't exactly a fair representation of the female student population, but then, nothing was ever a fair representation. *Banter* was no different from other publications when it came to manipulating the truth.

'We call that the hand-bra,' whispered Jamie, leaning over.

'Right.' Alexa nodded awkwardly as the girl leaned forward, lightly clutching her heavy breasts.

'Got to get plenty of nipple-free shots, for the website and so on,' he explained softly.

She nodded again, feeling distinctly uncomfortable. It wasn't just that she was sitting, watching another woman grope her own breasts; it was something else. She couldn't quite put a finger on it, but Alexa didn't feel right.

'Makeup?' Jamie was talking at full volume again, which wasn't particularly loud. Unlike most of the staff at *Banter*, Jamie had a quietly authoritative manner. He was boyishly good-looking, with high cheekbones, plump lips and piercing blue eyes that shone out from beneath long, blond lashes.

The makeup artist emerged from a far corner of the room, munching on a sandwich.

'Can you try and do something about the mark on her thigh?'

The makeup artist brushed the crumbs from her hands and bent down, grimacing at the sight of the girl's leg. 'Hmm.' She looked up. 'Is that a birthmark?'

Kayleigh nodded apologetically.

The woman screwed up her face. 'I'll see what I can do.'

The makeup artist retreated and started rummaging through her enormous kit bag, leaving Kayleigh standing self-consciously under the lights wearing a G-string and a pair of stilettos.

That was it, thought Alexa. That was what made her feel so uncomfortable: it was the fact that *Kayleigh* looked so uncomfortable. The girl didn't *want* to be exposing her every pimple and blemish to the nation, to be scrutinised by two hundred thousand strangers. True, she had volunteered for the shoot – probably encouraged to do so by a boyfriend who saw it as some kind of trophy to show his mates – but it was clear from the way she was hugging her chest that now that she was here, she felt over-exposed.

Alexa felt a surge of pity for the girl. *She* wouldn't stand up there, half naked, in front of a bunch of strangers. Even though she understood the rationale for appearing in *Banter* – that it was flattering to know that men saw you as a source of sexual stimulation – she still couldn't imagine herself doing it. Alexa wondered what it was that was stopping her. What made her different from Kayleigh?

A thick layer of foundation was applied to the offending birthmark, rendering it invisible to the camera – although from where Alexa and Jamie sat, it looked like a bad cement job. Close-up, the girl wasn't as gorgeous as she initially appeared. Beneath the streaky tan, her skin was pitted and her front teeth were stained brown with nicotine. Alexa couldn't help wondering whether this modelling shoot was some kind of ironic attempt to boost the girl's self-esteem.

Alexa thought about this for a moment, wondering whether she had hit on something. Was it self-esteem that made her different from the nineteen-year-old standing in front of her? Or self-respect? Alexa squirmed uncomfortably as the makeup artist surveyed her handiwork. She was trying to work out who had more self-respect: the woman who took her clothes off for a lads' mag, or the woman who refused to do so. She couldn't help thinking that the last six weeks had done something to dent her confidence.

'Have you got enough clean stills?' asked Jamie, jolting Alexa out of her thoughts. 'I was thinking, we could do a couple of hair-bra shots – you've got lovely hair, Kayleigh.'

Kayleigh giggled nervously. 'Thanks.'

The photographer nodded. 'Good idea. Let's give it a go.'

'Maybe using the props?' Jamie suggested, nodding at the desk by the window, which supported a selection of pens, papers and books that were presumably there to remind the reader that Kayleigh was a student.

The props helped, Alexa noticed. Kayleigh looked almost sassy, crawling along the desk on all fours, her buttocks raised in the air and her breasts hanging low, obscured by a thin veil of hair. On the photographer's advice, she played with the various items of stationery provided, sucking pencils, slapping rulers against her backside and pretending to read while donning a pair of fake glasses.

'That's great!' cried the videographer. 'More please!'

'Awesome.' The photographer nodded at Jamie. 'We've got something here.'

Alexa felt a vibration in her pocket and pulled out her phone. She had two text messages.

Of course I remember
Loopy Lara. Didn't she
only eat pink food or
sting? Horrible little
brat. Wouldn't wish her
on my worst enemy. xL
Alexa smiled and opened the message from Matt.
Is she hot? Would
U be tempted . . . ?

She stifled a laugh. Matt had seemed genuinely concerned about the risk of Alexa being 'converted', having latched on to some bizarre idea that girl-on-girl action was something that happened quite frequently, out of the blue. He had obviously been reading too much *Banter*, she thought wryly.

She's young. Currently
posing for a 'knee bra'
shot. Extremely turned
on. Ax

Alexa tucked her phone away and refocused on the action. Jamie seemed to be pleased with how things were going.

'Well done, Kayleigh. That's really great. Are you okay to do a few topless shots now?'

Kayleigh nodded, slowly reaching round and gathering the dark locks of hair to reveal her full, heavy breasts.

'That's good,' said Jamie, under his breath. 'They're real. The readers prefer real ones.'

Alexa nodded, watching as the photographer directed Kayleigh to sit on the chair, open her legs and straighten her back. She didn't feel right. Perhaps it was the muted references to various parts of the girl's body that bothered her. Jamie seemed respectful enough, but Alexa couldn't help noticing the way his brief exchanges with the photographer centred around Kayleigh's hair, thigh or breasts as though they were parts of a mannequin in a window display.

'Okay!' The photographer eventually ran out of poses and started checking through his shots. 'I think we're done.' He beckoned for Kayleigh to take a look. 'Loads of great stuff here.'

Kayleigh grabbed her bra from the floor and pulled it on, her inhibitions visibly returning.

'Oh my God!' Kayleigh gasped as she caught sight of herself on the screen. 'I look like a real model!'

The photographer smiled modestly, flicking through a selection for the girl to see. Alexa wondered what it must be like to see topless photographs of yourself, knowing that in a couple of weeks' time, they would be plastered across the back pages of a national magazine. She couldn't help feeling a shudder of panic on Kayleigh's behalf.

The videographer caught Jamie's eye. 'Can we do a few words to the camera?'

'Oh yes, of course.' Jamie wandered over to the tripod and gently interrupted. He was very genteel, noted Alexa. They all were. She didn't know what she'd been expecting, but perhaps she had foreseen an element of seediness in today's shoot – a lewd remark or possibly some inappropriate gestures. There had been nothing like that. The only crudeness at *Banter*, as far as she could tell, went on behind women's backs – in the office upstairs.

The videographer checked the settings on his camera and looked at Kayleigh, who was subtly plumping her breasts inside her bra.

'I want you to say "Hi, I'm Kayleigh and you're watching Banter TV." Okay?'

Kayleigh nodded, looking down to check on her cleavage. She suddenly looked nervous again.

'Ready when you are.'

'Hi, I'm Banter TV and . . . oh, sorry.'

'That's okay.' The videographer smiled. 'Try again.'

'Hi, I'm Kayleigh and – sorry. What was it again?'

'Don't panic. Just take it slowly. It's "Hi, I'm Kayleigh and you're watching Banter TV."'

'Okay.' Kayleigh took a deep breath and looked down the barrel of the video camera. Then she turned away, flushed and exasperated. 'Oh God. I can't do it!'

Jamie wandered over, offering a glass of water.

'Hey, Kayleigh, there's no rush. We can take all afternoon if you like.'

Alexa admired his tact. She knew how much work Jamie had on his plate upstairs; he was always the last to leave the office at night. He certainly wouldn't want to take all afternoon.

With a shaky hand, Kayleigh returned the empty glass to the pictures editor and flashed him an apologetic look.

'Tell you what,' said Jamie. 'Just do a dry-run. No pressure; we'll leave the camera off and you can just practise what you're going to say.'

'Okay.' She nodded. 'Right.' Kayleigh looked darkly into the camera and in a slow, sexy voice, growled: 'Hi, I'm Kayleigh and you're watching Banter TV.'

The videographer smiled. 'Got it.'

Kayleigh frowned. 'What d'you mean? That was a practice.'

'Oh, I must have left the camera running by mistake.' The videographer glanced at Jamie. 'That's lucky, isn't it?'

Alexa had to stop herself from laughing. Kayleigh was an ideal candidate for 'Brainy Banter'.

She looked at her watch. Strictly speaking, they were ten minutes into Kayleigh's 'exam', but the junior editor who was supposed to be asking the questions had wandered off in search of a pen and hadn't been seen since. She was about to suggest popping upstairs to find the young man when the door flew open to reveal a windswept-looking Paddy, towering in the doorway, panting.

'Hey!' He made a half-hearted attempt at taming his wild, curly hair as he looked around the room, his eyes settling on the lingerie-clad student. 'Sorry I'm late. I'm stepping in as exam master. Had to track down some questions.'

Kayleigh smiled timidly. Alexa breathed a sigh of relief. Paddy, she was beginning to realise, was one of the gems shining out from a mixed team at *Banter*. She raised a hand to the lad in a gesture of appreciation.

'I'm Paddy,' he said, bounding over. 'Pleasure to meet you.'

'Kayleigh,' she replied, shaking his hand.

'You can put your clothes on if you like,' suggested Jamie, quietly.

Quickly, Kayleigh slipped on a translucent white blouse and a leather skirt, perching nervously at the desk, opposite Paddy.

Alexa wondered whether it was fair for her to stick around while the questions were asked. The photographer and videographer were already packing away. She doubted that exam conditions were necessary, but it didn't seem fair for her to listen in. Her phone buzzed.

I knew it. I will have
to remind U tonight of
what U would miss if
you turned . . . Mmm,
looking forward to it.

Alexa hid her smile as she tucked away her phone. Paddy had already started the exam.

'You're at Leeds Uni, right?' he asked. 'Studying Sociology and hoping to get . . . a third?'

Kayleigh nodded.

'And most importantly . . . you're a 32DD, right?'

Alexa watched as the junior editor glanced approvingly at the girl's flimsy top. There it was again: the blatant reference to parts of Kayleigh's body as though they were joints of ham.

'Okay . . . let's begin. What is the main ingredient of the German dish, sauerkraut?'

'Um . . .' Kayleigh's face crumpled. 'Sausage?'

Paddy smiled. 'That'll go down well with the readers.'

Alexa followed Jamie out, trying not to cringe as Kayleigh struggled to decide whether a baby fox was called a cub or a puppy.

'Jamie?' she said, as the lift started to propel them up to the fifth floor. 'D'you think, generally, we'd do better to get some higher-calibre models in for our features?'

He looked at her, raising an eyebrow. 'You mean models with a higher IQ?'

Alexa shook her head. She knew that intelligence, sadly, was not a desirable trait for the girls.

'No, I mean . . . more professional models. Ones that know how to love the camera.'

Jamie started to smile. 'You don't have any brothers, do you?'

She frowned. 'No.'

'I only ask because if you did, then you'd know that the thing about *Banter* and all the other lads' mags – the thing that makes them sell – is *not* using chic glamour models who love the camera.'

'What?'

'They want photos of the girl-next-door. Or rather, they want photos of *their fantasy* of the girl-next-door. Chicks like Kayleigh . . . perfect.'

'But . . .' Alexa was struggling to understand what he meant. 'All the airbrushing and touching up that you do . . . surely that's because the readers want pictures of the perfect woman?'

Jamie motioned for Alexa to exit the lift before him. He was shaking his head and smiling.

'Nope. They want her to look sexy, but approachable. They want to believe that they can get their hands on tits like Kayleigh's – that girls like Kayleigh will let them into their pants.' He leaned forward and yanked open the door. 'Sexy, but rough. That's what we do best.'

Alexa headed back into the office, lost in thought.

'And the best bit?' he said, eyes twinkling.

She looked at him.

Jamie smiled. 'We don't have to pay them a penny.'

Chapter 8

Alexa laid out the cuttings on the desk in front of her, re-reading the headlines that were splashed strategically across backdrops of nipples and flesh.

The 'Win Your Girlfriend a Boob Job' competition had been the most popular one of the year. That was closely followed by the search for the nation's horniest girlfriend, and at number three was Chick Strip, an appeal for readers to send in videos of their other halves undressing – a contest that probably could have performed even better, had it not been curtailed by some women's rights group declaring it 'insulting to women'.

Alexa pushed the cuttings aside, thinking about the campaigners' argument for a moment. Was it insulting? She was a woman and she didn't feel insulted. But then, she wasn't one of the subjects of the video footage. She tried to imagine how she would feel to be one of the girls in the winning clips, having her body subjected to scrutiny by hundreds of thousands of hormonal young men. It was difficult. She wasn't likely to find herself in such a position. Alexa turned back to the blank document on her screen. 'Competitions', she typed. Carriage-return. She drummed her fingers against the keyboard.

It wasn't that she didn't know what to say. She knew, conceptually, what she needed to recommend to Peterson in the way of features and competitions. She knew that they needed greater reader engagement: more blogging, more uploads, more general banter. They needed to run more contests with compelling incentives – although Alexa was not convinced that cosmetic surgery for girlfriends was necessarily the right way to go on this. No, the problem was not a lack of inspiration. The problem was that she was completely demoralised.

More than a month had passed since Alexa had first set foot in the *Banter* offices. For weeks, she had read, watched, assessed and observed, pulling together recommendations and starting to make small changes where possible. She had no doubt that she could make an impact, perhaps even meet the ambitious April targets, given the chance – but that was the problem. She wasn't being given the chance. The weight of resentment felt by certain members of the team was such that she *couldn't* make an impact, however hard she tried. Changes couldn't be made by Alexa alone; they had to be instigated by the senior editors. Of the five senior editors at *Banter* – Derek, Marcus, Neil, Jamie and Riz – the most critical two were ardently opposed to Alexa's very existence. It simply wasn't possible to turn things around with only half of the team on board.

Alexa sighed. It was a quarter to seven. Her brain had given up for the night. She closed the document, emailed it to herself, realising that yet again, she would be opening up her laptop after dinner. Matt would be disappointed. Already, Alexa had downgraded his suggested 'drinks and dinner' to a takeaway at her place and now she was effectively writing off any chance of a relaxing evening by committing herself to more work. Her thoughts flitted back to the advice her mother had given her: *Make time for him*. Where was this time supposed to come from?

'Not watching the game?'

Alexa jumped. She had assumed she was the only one left in the office. Riz was standing halfway between her desk and his, a sports bag slung over one shoulder and his hair spiky and wet. He must have been to the gym.

'Um . . . no.' Alexa blinked. She had heard the guys talk about some match tonight, but nobody had mentioned it to her directly. 'I'm . . . working late.'

Riz nodded casually. 'Well, we'll be in the Eagle if you manage to get away. See ya.'

Alexa lifted a hand. 'Goodnight, Riz.'

She waited for the door to slam before she exhaled, feeling embarrassed and ashamed on top of everything else. Riz was being charitable. She probably should have felt grateful to him for trying to include her in the team's plans, but all she could think about was the fact that she'd been left out in the first place.

Alexa started to shut down, her eyes glazing over as she waited for the programmes to close. She looked across the office, wondering vaguely why her outlook seemed more restricted than usual. There was a remote-control helicopter, obscuring a large part of the features desk, but that wasn't it. Then she realised. On Sienna's desk was a stack of old copies of *Banter*. They were piled up, she realised, in a way that completely obscured Alexa's view of Sienna and of the news desk beyond that. Sienna had erected a barrier between them.

Alexa reached down for her bag, wondering whether there was anything she could have done differently with regards to the surly assistant. It was never going to be easy, walking into a situation like this. Sienna had spent two years carving herself a cosy little niche, being the only female amid a bunch of alpha males who enjoyed her presence on their desks, in their laps and anywhere else they fancied. Here was Alexa, diluting her minority, ignoring her female wiles and restoring her role to the administrative one she was being paid to do. It was probably fair to say that no amount of lenience or kindness would persuade Sienna to switch her allegiance from the lads to the new, female MD.

Alexa trod forlornly towards the lift. Derek was her biggest problem. Derek had been knocked off his perch, just as Sienna had, but he had further to fall. Not only that, but he had more influence within the team. Whereas Sienna was seen as the office totty, Derek had respect. He was the deputy editor and people listened to him. His attitude towards Alexa had infected the minds of others.

Alexa could see it happening around her. She knew that most of the news desk saw her as some kind of joke – thanks to Marcus, the news editor who worshipped Derek's every movement. Louis Carrillo was just one example. Loud, sexist and one of the team's most senior writers, he laughed openly at Derek's laddish remarks that were clearly designed to offend Alexa. Then there were others, in the middle ranks, who clearly didn't know what to think.

Raising a limp hand in the direction of the security guard, Alexa pushed through the glass doors and took in a lungful of warm, polluted air. Her phone was ringing.

'Hey, it's me.'

A smile formed on Alexa's lips, despite her mood. 'Still on for a takeaway?' Matt's voice sounded tired, but warm. 'Yeah.' Alexa stopped just outside Senate House, staring at the words on the mock Tudor building opposite. *The Eagle*, read the gold lettering. Below the name hung a banner, announcing that Premier League games would be shown on Wednesdays and Saturdays throughout the season.

'I'm just finishing up now,' said Matt. 'Shall I come straight over?'

Alexa continued to stare at the gold lettering, thinking about what might be going on inside.

'Um . . .'

That was the problem. If she was going to make an impact at *Banter*, she had to get the team on her side – and to do that, she had to *know* them. She had to bond with them. Turning a business around wasn't just about changing business models or distribution channels; it was about changing *minds*. She had to face up to the likes of Derek and Marcus and persuade them that she was a force for good. She had to go across the road and watch the football with them.

'I . . .' Alexa pictured her boyfriend's face. His blue eyes would be narrowed questioningly, his tanned brow furrowed. 'The thing is, I'm going to have to work this evening.'

Matt sighed quietly. Alexa wasn't sure what to do. Her heart was telling her to salvage the date, to reverse the disappointment she had already caused and leave the *Banter* boys to watch the game. But her mind was telling her to cancel on Matt and cross the road. She loved Matt. She wished she could offer him something more than the distracted, exhausted wreck that was all that remained of her at the end of each working day. But that was the point. The only way she could ensure proper quality time with Matt was to get these things off her plate and then, once the teething problems were over and life at *Banter* developed more of a predictable rhythm, she would be able to devote herself fully to Matt.

She faltered for a moment and then made her decision.

'How about we do a proper date, this weekend?' she asked, as enthusiastically as she could with the guilt and shame weighing her down. 'There's no point in you coming round and falling asleep while I work.'

'I guess.' Matt sounded disappointed.

'Hey, we could go to that place in Mayfair – the one that all your colleagues were raving about.'

'Maybe, yeah.' He seemed to brighten a little at this suggestion.

Alexa smiled. She knew how important it was for Matt to keep up with all the ridiculously expensive new restaurants in town. It wasn't so much that he enjoyed the experience; it was more, as far as she could tell, that he liked to have something to talk about with his firm's wealthy client base.

'I'll make a booking,' said Alexa. 'See you on Saturday. Mine at six?'

'See you then.'

Alexa slipped her phone into her bag and stepped up to the road, waiting for a gap in the traffic. She was determined not to think about Matt, not to feel bad about letting him down. She had to leave that part of her behind, for now. It was time to mix with the lads.

The Eagle was a traditional pub with small wooden tables and benches that were nowhere near sufficient for the hordes of beer-fuelled revellers that filled the place. A giant screen had been erected on the end wall, directly above one of the tables, around which sat a group of girls who were clearly oblivious to the focus of attention above their heads.

It wasn't hard to identify the *Banter* team. They were by far the largest group in the bar, and the noisiest. Alexa watched from the doorway as Derek pushed a pint into Marcus' face, whereupon, to the sound of a slow hand-clap, the news editor gripped the glass in his teeth and downed it in about four seconds, hands-free. The clapping was drowned in a roar of jeering as the editor received

another pint as his prize. Alexa hung back, wondering whether this venture was wise after all. Sienna wasn't here, she noted.

The noise level swelled as a line of players in red kit filled the giant screen. She pushed herself further into the pub, one foot after the other.

Derek was the first to spot her, his expression morphing quickly from one of surprise to one of smug anticipation.

'Ahha!' he cried, pausing for a moment in the distribution of beers around the team. 'Our esteemed leader has arrived!'

All faces turned towards Alexa, who continued to venture towards them, ignoring the sarcasm. She couldn't meet anyone's eye.

'You getting the beers in?' she asked. Her approach, she had decided, was to be bold – not laddish; she didn't want to try and emulate the deputy editor – she just wanted to make it known that she too could drink beer and enjoy a game of football like the rest of them.

'What're you drinking?' asked Derek, reluctantly. There was a spot of beer froth on the tip of his goatee.

'Pint of Grolsch, please.'

Derek raised his eyebrows at the nearest team members, who responded with looks of amusement.

Alexa grabbed her lager and tried to retreat to the edge of the group, but Derek reached out and nudged her elbow with just enough force to spill her beer.

'Have to say,' he announced, competing with the TV for volume, 'I didn't think I'd see you here, Ms Long!'

Alexa turned to him, frowning. 'Ms—'

'Oi, Derek!' Marcus yelled from the group nearest the screen. 'You ain't got Lewis!'

'Don't need 'im to beat a bunch a poofers like you!'

Alexa pretended to find the exchange amusing. In fact, she felt mildly repulsed by the way men turned into inarticulate, fist-waving tribesmen the moment a competitive game came on. She wondered whether Matt was the same when he got with his rugby mates.

'Won't 'ave 'im for a while, most likely,' muttered Derek, wiping a bare arm across his mouth and removing the beer foam. 'Be partying too bloody hard, after the boost we gave 'im.' He laughed.

Alexa realised that in the din, she was probably the only person who could hear him. She wondered whether he might be making conversation.

'Ricky Lewis?' she clarified.

Derek looked at her. In an instant, Alexa realised that she had been mistaken. Derek's face was a picture of contempt.

'Yeah,' he sneered. 'You know? As in, the subject of a four-page spread in our magazine this week?' He rolled his eyes and strutted off towards the front of the group, where Marcus and other disciples were standing, bellowing at the screen.

Alexa fought back the tears of humiliation. She knew that Derek felt threatened – that they all did. They thought she was after their jobs. The irony was that she was here to *save* their jobs, not to steal them, but she had no way of telling them this. They had no idea how close they had already come to losing their livelihoods. Alexa could see why Peterson had kept the Americans' threats from the team; he knew as well as she did that fragile egos did not cope well under stress and that *Banter* would quickly collapse if news of the plans to fold leaked out. She couldn't, therefore, expect everyone to understand why she was there. But still . . . couldn't they see she was *trying*?

Having fought her way into the thick of the group, Alexa suddenly found herself standing by the bar, alone. One by one, her colleagues had pushed forward towards the screen, turning their backs on her. At first, Alexa had surged forward with them, but she couldn't help feeling that the further she pushed, the further *they* pushed, so that she was always left at the back.

She pretended to watch the game, forcing her face into various expressions as a player on either team made a run for the goal, occasionally joining in with the cries of exasperation as the shot went wide or the keeper made a save. She gulped down her beer, taking refuge in its cold, bitter taste and its mildly numbing effect. It was only her sense of self-preservation that was stopping the tears from flowing.

Alexa stood, her eyes blindly following the movements on the pitch, too scared to blink in case a tear leaked out. What had she expected? That she could win them over by turning up to a football match and drinking pints? That Derek's followers would suddenly start listening to a young female management consultant who had worked in magazines for all of two years? Alexa tipped back another slug of lager, slowly coming to the conclusion that there was no point in her being here. Expecting to command respect by coming over all laddish was no better than turning up in a low-cut top, Sienna-style, and joining in with the banter. Sienna wasn't a respected member of the team and nor was she. As a woman, was it even possible to command respect in an environment like *Banter's*? She drained her glass and took a step back, planning her exit. If she waited for half-time, Derek would almost certainly draw attention to her disappearance, but if she sloped off now then he'd do so behind her back, which was probably worse. Alexa stared at the referee, willing him to blow the whistle for half-time and wishing she were back at her flat, with Matt.

'Who d'you support?'

She looked round, still wearing her vague, open-mouthed expression from some player's attempt at goal. She shut her mouth and returned Riz's smile. Then she opened it again, realising that in the whole time she had been staring at the screen, she hadn't once thought to figure out who was playing.

'Well . . .' Alexa remembered her pledge to be bold and decided she had nothing to lose. 'Do I look like a reds supporter?'

He smiled. 'I'm glad you said that. I'm with Spurs, too. Way too many Arsenal fans in our office, if you ask me.'

Alexa laughed. She could have deduced one of the teams, she realised, from her conversation with Derek; Ricky Lewis played for Arsenal. She felt glad, somehow, that she and Derek were on different sides.

'Get it all done?'

It took a couple of seconds for Alexa to understand the question.

'Oh. Most of it,' she said quickly. 'I decided a game of football would help me think.' She laughed unnecessarily, wishing she could learn to stop filling gaps in conversation with noise.

He nodded. 'And the pint.'

Alexa smiled. They turned their attention back to the game – or rather, Riz did. Alexa's eyes were focused on the screen, but her mind was still on her sports editor. She couldn't work him out. Of all the young men in the office, Riz was the only one who spoke openly to her, like this. Neil, Jamie, Paddy and the rest – they spoke to her, but only in a professional capacity. Riz would just come up to her and ask how things were, seemingly oblivious to the sideways looks from the others. In fact, that was the strange thing: Riz's reputation didn't appear to be damaged by his conversations with the estranged MD. He wasn't best buddies with Derek, but they got on well enough. Riz seemed to have a way of getting on with everybody. Alexa wished he could impart his secret to her.

'Oh, shit.'

Alexa came to and followed Riz's gaze. Beneath the big screen, the group of girls were finishing their drinks, putting on jackets and hugging one another. They were in blissful ignorance of the obstruction caused by their heads and limbs as they said their farewells.

Alexa watched, amused, as the expressions on the men's faces around the bar became more and more irate. Then suddenly, a man lunged forward from the crowd.

'Get the fuck out of the way!' yelled the redhead, pointing at the screen with one hand and trying to force them aside with the other.

Riz groaned. Alexa closed her eyes, embarrassed and ashamed. The aggressive man was Marcus.

'Jesus.' Riz shook his head as someone from the news desk stepped forward and hauled his boss out of the way.

Alexa turned to see whether the commotion had alerted the bar staff. Remarkably, they seemed oblivious, too busy serving customers.

'Is that normal?' she asked.

Riz shrugged. 'I guess he has more respect for the game than for women.'

Alexa didn't reply. She couldn't tell whether Riz was joking, but she had a feeling he might be right.

The whistle blew for half-time and Alexa found herself lifted off her feet, buckling under the force of a hundred thirsty men, surging towards the bar.

'Drink?' she found herself saying, as Riz, swept up in the same surge, appeared at her side. The idea of disappearing back to her flat seemed both strategically unwise and physically impossible, all of a sudden.

'Go on then.'

Several minutes later, Alexa emerged with two pints of beer and two dripping, sticky wrists.

'Thanks.' Riz lifted his glass against hers, laughing as a drunk football fan stumbled between them. 'The downside to watching the game in a shit-hole, eh?'

Alexa frowned. 'What's the upside?'

'Well, er . . .' Riz looked slightly embarrassed. 'It means not going home. I'm living with my folks for a bit – between houses.'

Alexa nodded understandingly. She too had moved back with her parents the previous year, in an effort to save money to buy her flat. It had lasted six days.

They sipped their drinks, glancing instinctively at the ads on the screen.

'You're pretty young, to be a managing director.'

Alexa looked at him. For once, the words didn't sound like an accusation.

'You're young,' she returned, 'for a sports editor.'

'Thirty-two.'

'Twenty-nine.'

'See?' He nodded. 'Young.'

'I'm only an interim.' Alexa shrugged, making out that it was no big deal while secretly feeling flattered that Riz was taking such an interest in her career. 'Fixed contract, fixed targets. Then I'm out of here.'

'Like a Premiership football manager.'

'Do they have targets?'

He thought for a moment. 'Good point.'

Alexa smiled. This was incredible. She hadn't reverted to babbling.

'Maybe they should,' she suggested.

Riz nodded. 'I'll put it to our readers.'

The second half passed much more quickly and seemed significantly more enjoyable. As a newfound Spurs supporter, Alexa no longer made expectant noises as Arsenal players took shots at goal. She noticed things, too. Like, for example, the way the Arsenal players spat more and tended to writhe around, feigning injury after every tackle. From what she could tell, Spurs had the upper hand. They just needed to score.

With one minute to go, there were still no goals from either side. Alexa found herself willing the players on, muttering words of encouragement, desperate to see them win. She was about to ask

Riz what would happen if the score was nil—all at the end when she felt a vibration in her pocket. She pulled out her phone. *Mum – home*, said the display. After a moment's deliberation, she took the call.

'Hi!' she cried, above the din. 'Hold on a second.'

With hindsight, thought Alexa as she fought her way through the crowds, taking a call in the final minute of a local derby in a crowded pub was not the best idea. She spilled onto the pavement and looked at the phone, taking a couple of seconds to regain her breath.

'Sorry about that,' she said. 'Watching the football.'

'Oh.'

Alexa smiled. Bewilderment, disdain, disappointment . . . it was incredible how much could be conveyed in a single syllable.

'Is it urgent, or shall I call you back at the weekend?'

'Oh, well . . . it's nothing much.' There it was again. Watching a game of football was clearly not deemed a sensible use of time.

'Go on,' Alexa prompted.

'Well, I just wanted to find out whether you'd managed to talk to your colleagues yet. About Lara. Only I was talking to Janice at youth group and she said that Lara hadn't heard.'

'Sorry.' Alexa grimaced at the thought of her unmet promise. 'I'll do it this week.'

'Only if it's not too much trouble.'

A deafening roar emanated from inside the pub.

'No trouble.'

'Lovely. Thank you, darling. Um . . . how is Matthew?'

Alexa was already in the doorway, waiting to return to the game. 'He's fine.'

'Good. That's good. Do send him our love.'

'I will. Bye, Mum.'

'Right, yes. Bye, darling!'

Alexa took a moment before returning to the pub. She was beginning to realise that she didn't actually need to tell her mother about the job. It was only a nine-month contract, of which she had already served one. Her mother didn't need to know. She would be better off not knowing. Alexa could just imagine the pained expression on her mother's face whenever somebody from youth group or scouts asked what her daughter was up to. This way, her mother wouldn't have to lie. Alexa felt the relief engulf her as she came to terms with her decision. It was better for everyone this way.

Even before she got close enough to see the TV, Alexa knew that she'd missed a goal. The pub was alive with activity: men standing on chairs, fists clenched in exasperation, eyes fixed on the screen. The question was: which team?

Riz's expression told her the answer.

'You should disappear more often!'

Alexa laughed. The score was one–nil to Spurs and there were only seconds of injury time left to go. As she watched, though, an Arsenal midfielder lobbed the ball half the length of the pitch and Alexa watched, dismayed, as a waiting team-mate crossed it perfectly into the goal.

'Offside!' Alexa found herself yelling. She knew the rules.

'Fuck off !' shouted a man, very close to her ear.

Alexa reeled sideways and realised with dismay that the man was Derek.

'No way was that offside!' he bellowed aggressively, both hands flying into the air above his stumpy little body. He seemed to be shouting at both the referee and Alexa at once.

Alexa became aware of a movement in the crowd around her. Bodies were shifting, making a clearing around her and Derek.

'He was offside,' she stated, calmly.

Alexa knew that she had the upper hand, not only in that she had drunk fewer pints than the deputy editor, but in that she was right. On the TV, a slow-motion replay was indicating, quite clearly, that the Arsenal player had been hanging around by the goal, a long way from the nearest defender.

Derek seemed unperturbed. 'You're a woman!' he yelled. 'You don't even *understand* the offside rule!'

Alexa caught Riz's eye, incredulous. He nodded at the TV, where the referee was signalling for the goal to be disallowed.

'*That's bollocks,*' Derek spat in Alexa's direction as he turned, barging through the ring of onlookers and heading for the bar.

Alexa stood for a moment, waiting for her reflexes to catch up with what had just happened. Adrenaline flooded her veins and she realised that her pint glass was shaking.

'Wow,' said Riz, softly. 'You okay?'

'Nice one!' cried somebody behind her, more loudly.

Alexa turned to see a pasty white face framed with ginger hair.

'Good call,' said Marcus. He was a Spurs fan, of course. 'Very good call, Ms Long.'

'What?' Alexa frowned. That was the second time tonight she had heard that name.

Riz leaned over, smiling apologetically. 'It's your nickname.'

Alexa said it a few times in her head, rolling the words together. Ms Long. Alexa Long. *AlexaLong.*

'Oh. Right.'

The shaking began to subside. Alexa let out a shallow breath. For a nickname, she considered, it could have been worse – and besides, it wasn't the nickname that mattered. What mattered was the fact that one of Derek's disciples was standing in front of her, grinning from ear to ear and offering her another drink.

Chapter 9

'I thought Sienna and Derek were sleeping together,' said Alexa, topping up Matt's wine. 'But then I heard a rumour that Sienna and *Riz* were an item, which just seems wrong. Riz is too straightforward. He's . . . well, I just can't see him getting involved with such a—'

'Such a what?' challenged Matt, as she faltered. 'Go on, say it. Insult the poor girl.'

Alexa shook her head. 'Sorry. Slut, I was going to say.'

She felt bad. Sienna hadn't actually done anything to deserve such a name. It was just a combination of things. The way she dressed. The voice she used with the men. Her permanently puckered lips.

'Anyway,' she said, 'I heard another rumour on Friday, that Sienna was sleeping with *Marcus*.'

'Who's Marcus?'

'News editor. You know, the one I told you about. Piggy-eyed, ginger guy. I'd be surprised if anyone wanted to sleep with him, to be honest.'

Matt raised an eyebrow, pushing the remains of his prawn cocktail away. 'I hope nobody says that about me.'

Alexa rolled her eyes. She hadn't asked, but she was willing to bet that Matt had never been turned down by anyone. Even first thing in the morning, he was irresistible – as she had discovered on New Year's Day, nearly eight months ago. Alexa had woken in Kate's spare bed with a crick in her neck as a result of Matt's arm around her. She still remembered the look of surprise in his sleepy blue eyes, mirroring her own as they woke up and started to recall what had happened – still felt a rush of excitement when she pictured the scene.

'Have you told your parents yet?'

Alexa emerged from her daydream. 'I've decided . . . I'm not going to.'

'What?'

'Well, it's only a short-term contract. They wouldn't approve; they'd never see things from my point of view. There's no need to tell them.'

'Well . . .' Matt looked at her, slowly shaking his head in bewilderment. 'It's up to you, I suppose.'

They sipped their wine in silence. Alexa felt angry, all of a sudden. She resented the way Matt judged her relationship with her parents. He couldn't possibly know how it felt to be constantly striving to live up to her mother's standards. He didn't understand how appalled they would be to discover that their daughter was working for *Banter*. He just didn't get it.

'It is up to me,' she declared, 'and I've made up my mind. I just have to hit the fifty-four million, then I'm out of there.'

Matt nodded, leaning back to allow the waiter to remove his debris.

Alexa sat, staring into her expensive glass of wine, waiting for some kind of reaction to the mention of her ambitious target and realising, as the seconds passed, that she wasn't going to get one. Deep down, she wanted Matt to be impressed by the scale of the task she had undertaken. He knew that *Banter's* current revenues were only thirty-two million. The next eight months weren't going to be easy. But Matt didn't seem to care.

She took a large sip of wine and watched as the main courses were slid onto the table. It was becoming evident that the boutique Mayfair hotel specialised in exotic cuisine of miniature proportions. Alexa's plate, despite being one of the largest she had ever eaten off, was almost entirely empty. In the centre sat a twisted, glazed noodle and three slim, perfectly formed slivers of duck.

'Bon appétit,' said Matt, eyeing his steak with glee. He seemed to have ordered the only dish on the menu that came in a standard size.

Alexa busied herself dissecting the duck, trying not to let her frustration show. What she wanted, desperately, was to find out what Matt really thought of her job at *Banter*. She had noticed that whenever conversation turned to her work then something changed in him. He became curt, indifferent. He would feign interest, but Alexa often got the impression he was thinking about something else.

She moved on to her second sliver of duck, her frustration finally winning over her composure.

'You're not interested, are you?' Alexa looked at him. 'You think my job's a waste of time.'

Matt stopped chewing, recoiling in surprise. 'Why d'you say that?'

'It just seems as though you don't really care.' Alexa waited for him to meet her eye. 'I guess it's just loose change, for you . . . child's play.'

'No.' Matt seemed genuinely surprised. 'No. That's not true. Fifty-two million is fifty-two million. That's not child's play.'

'It's fifty-four million.'

'Sorry.' Matt flinched. 'That's what I meant.'

Alexa took a deep breath. She didn't want to come across as a psychopathic workaholic but she really, really wanted to know why Matt seemed so disinterested in the things that occupied her mind for half of her waking hours. It was looking less and less likely that his reservations were borne out of concerns for her wellbeing in the 'lions' den'. Tales of her battles with Derek or the stalemate she seemed to have reached with Sienna were greeted with the same vague nods as the mention of financial targets.

'I am impressed.' Matt was looking at her intensely. 'I'm impressed with everything you do. You're . . . you're amazing. I don't know how you do it – how you keep going the whole time, always . . .'

Alexa watched as he struggled to finish his sentence. She felt instantly guilty. Matt's blue eyes were looking intently into hers, pleadingly. He clearly meant every word.

'Always living up to your own high standards.'

Alexa reached out and locked fingers with him across the table. 'Sorry for being paranoid.'

Matt started to smile. 'So go on, tell me.' He was poised for a forkful of steak, but his eyes were still fixed on Alexa's.

She frowned. 'Tell you what?'

'How the hell will you make the fifty-two million?'

Alexa smiled. 'Fifty-four million.'

Matt winced. 'Sorry.'

'Well, if you really want to know . . .'

Alexa gave him one last chance to back out, but he didn't take it. So she told him. She told him about the proposed tablet app, her plans for rejuvenating Banter TV, the new feature ideas that she and Neil had devised and the ways in which she was going to 'up the nipple count'.

'Ah,' said Matt, nodding wisely as he polished off his steak. 'I like that idea. Reckon that'll net you at least ten million.'

Alexa smiled. It wasn't quite fair to say that Matt had shown no interest in her work in recent weeks. He had, she recalled, sat through at least an hour of Banter TV and scanned the 'Girls' section of every issue she brought home. He therefore considered himself an expert in such things as submissive positions and nipple counts.

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