

**IT'S A
MAN'S
WORLD**

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AVON

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.’

Lex 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

vener. '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.

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 toppled 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 onto 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.'

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 fine 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 half-hearted 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 girlfriend'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 of 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 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 onto 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*.'