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Opening Extract from...

Positively Yours

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POSITIVELY YOURS

Amanda Hearty



TRANSWORLD IRELAND

1

Beth Prendergast sat at her desk overlooking Dublin's leafy St Stephen's Green, its trees ablaze with autumn colours. Out of her window she could see tourists, children and mothers streaming into the city-centre park, with nothing but an afternoon of relaxing, playing and feeding ducks in front of them.

She turned back to work, as her computer screen flickered with numbers and incoming emails. The offices of Burlington Stockbrokers were loud and busy. All around Beth her team were taking phone calls from clients or preparing presentations. As a senior portfolio manager, it was her job to make Burlington's long list of private clients even wealthier. The markets might be jittery now, but investing huge amounts of money around the world still made her heart beat faster.

Each morning as she walked into the office, a

takeout coffee in her hand, the *Financial Times* in the other, her assistant handing her minutes of the previous day's meetings, she had to pinch herself. She still couldn't believe her luck! Beth knew how hard it was for women to scale the ladder in this industry. And she'd had to sacrifice a great deal – nights out, holidays, romances and relationships – to get to where she was now.

As she checked the Dow Jones index, one of the directors, Tom Maloney, walked by, and stopped at her desk.

'Can I talk to you?' he asked.

Beth looked at her boss. Tom Maloney had been one of the founding partners of Burlington Stockbrokers. Twenty years her senior, he was feared in the industry as being one of the toughest you could meet. When she had started working in the company she had heard all the stories about him surviving on two hours' sleep a night, getting through fifteen secretaries, and firing employees for arriving half an hour late for work. But his strength, hard-working attitude and determination to succeed made Beth respect not fear him, and over the years this respect had grown – leading to other feelings too, unfortunately.

She followed him into his large plush office.

'We are pitching to the CEO of O'Brien Construction tomorrow morning,' he said. 'You've shown your expertise with that German property portfolio,

and we could really do with you in trying to win this guy over. We want his firm, they're huge,' he said.

Beth listened. Picking the right investments and the perfect moment to buy or sell involved a lot of research and judgement – but she loved it.

'Apparently David O'Brien didn't like the way his last stockbrokers managed his investments, so it's important we impress him,' said Tom. 'The meeting is at 8.30 a.m. I'd like to meet you in the conference room at 7 a.m. to go through possible suggestions for him. I presume that won't be a problem?'

'Seven should be no problem, boss, unless someone keeps me out late tonight!' Beth gazed at Tom in his Armani suit, scarlet silk tie and well-polished shoes. He might be fifty-five, but Beth thought he could hold his own in any group of young men.

He closed his office door, lowered his voice and let his stern face relax.

'Oh, I won't do that! You might be up till the small hours, but we will be indoors all right! I've booked a room at the Shelbourne, their top suite. Why don't we meet there at 9 p.m.? I'll organize the food and wine, you just need to bring your gorgeous self.'

Beth smiled. Suddenly his phone rang, and with that it was back to business for Tom. Beth walked out of his office. She was aware she should know better, and that having a relationship with Tom was wrong. The company disapproved of employees dating each

other and doing so could jeopardize her job and the position she had worked long and hard for. But every time she went to finish things with Tom, she just thought about the other guys out there and knew none of them could compete with him, even if he was a divorced man in his fifties.

As she sat back down at her desk, she looked back out the window at the children, grannies and mothers in the park, thinking that kind of life couldn't be further from hers. Then her phone rang and she got back to what she knew and did best – work.

2

Beth found it hard to concentrate on her early morning meeting with David O'Brien, the CEO of O'Brien Construction. She hadn't had far to walk to work that morning, what with the Shelbourne Hotel being only yards from her office, but she had been up late drinking expensive wine with Tom Maloney, and was feeling the effect of it now. As Tom chatted away to David O'Brien, her mind wandered back to the night before, and their dinner in the privacy of the hotel suite. She was falling ever more in love with Tom. He was exactly the kind of man she had always wanted: successful, confident, charming and knowledgeable on everything from stocks to fine art. Beth had never even thought of dating a man from work before, but Tom was no ordinary man or employee.

Until Tom, Beth's love life had been going nowhere

fast. She'd had a few boyfriends and been on plenty of dates, but no one had seemed willing to put up with her long working hours and ambition. And as she had risen through the ranks in Burlington Stockbrokers, she had seen how her success was a threat to men who didn't work in that culture. Initially it would attract them. They'd be pleasantly surprised to see she had brains to go with her tall, blonde good looks, but when they realized her annual work bonus was worth more than their yearly salary, their jealousy and old-fashioned belief that a man should earn more than a woman would get in the way of romance. Even men who worked in the same field felt threatened by her because she knew more about the financial world than they did.

Beth had hated all this, and had dated less and less as her career had taken off. Instead she had used her spare time to search for a wonderful apartment. She'd known her friends had been jealous when, just as everyone else in Ireland was complaining about outrageous house prices, she had been able to buy an apartment outright, no problem. She remembered the excitement of signing the paper for the two-bedroom home in Sandymount. It overlooked the Strand and Dublin Bay, and Beth had been so happy to finally find a place she could call home. Having been at boarding school, then having rented flats with friends for years, she had longed for somewhere

that would be all hers, with no more sharing of bathrooms, fridges, sofas or car-park spaces. And even though she had felt a bit lonely the first night, opening a bottle of expensive champagne on her own to celebrate the move, she had hoped that one day she would have a partner to sit with her and enjoy the view of the waves and water.

Unfortunately that day still hadn't come. And as the years went by, even Beth's expensively decorated apartment became less appealing. With no man in her life, she had started spending more time at work, and soon the office felt like her home. It was while working all those long hours that Beth had come to Tom's notice. He was attracted to her brains as well as her looks, and liked the way she had a similar work ethic. And after weeks of working closely on a big deal with a new client, which ended with them having to spend a night together in London, their mutual attraction had become irresistible. Before Beth knew what she was doing she had fallen hook, line and sinker for Burlington Stockbrokers' top man.

Beth watched Tom charm the CEO of O'Brien Construction, and knew how David O'Brien felt. After that night in London, she'd had misgivings, but somehow Tom's charm had made it all OK. He wasn't threatened by her career or salary, and he made her feel proud of her achievements. Of course his six

foot four athletic build, dark brown hair and green eyes helped, and every time he looked at her she felt a flush of excitement. And now, one year later, she was still excited each time he booked a night away or a romantic dinner. She knew she should expect more than just the little time he had left over after work. Dating a workaholic wasn't fun, but Beth was in love with Tom and, having no other men in her life, she put up with the problems.

Tom didn't do the obvious, and pretend their relationship would lead to marriage and kids. He often reminded her that he had done the whole rearing babies thing years before, and still had two grown-up children to keep an eye on. Beth tried to convince herself that being thirty-five years old, and with a man who didn't want to settle down, was madness. That she was getting too old to mess about, and that getting a regular boyfriend would be a whole lot more sensible and better for her. But even so, she still found herself melting when she looked into Tom's green eyes. Maybe you can't have the perfect apartment, job and man all at the same time, she thought. But, as she wasn't willing to give up the first two, she had to put up with the fact that even though her love life wasn't perfect, Tom was. Almost!

3

Erin Delany stared at the display of buggies and prams in the Little Tots shop. She was drawn to the denim-coloured Bambino Pramette buggy. It was one of those cool three-in-one travel systems – a buggy, pushchair and car seat. She pulled the buggy on to the shop floor and began opening and closing it.

'Can I help you?' asked an eager-looking assistant.

Erin turned to the girl while balancing the car seat in one hand and buggy in the other.

'I'm just trying to see how this works, and how easy it is to actually open and close the buggy. It is important to be able to open it using only one hand, as the baby will be in the other one, obviously! It seems good, though.'

'Oh, it is,' reassured the shop assistant. With a twist of her fingers she began transforming the buggy into

a pram, and reeling off the pramette's selling line that worked on all mums-to-be. 'This is a unique, revolutionary new concept that combines a traditional pram with a practical, lightweight pushchair. Versatile and comfortable, the pramette is suitable from birth and grows with your child into their toddler years.'

'It seems perfect.' Erin smiled, impressed.

'And the handles extend, too,' the young girl explained. 'So, when is your baby due?' the assistant went on.

Erin suddenly felt herself freeze.

'I'm not actually pregnant,' she replied quietly, trying to control her voice. 'Not at the moment. I'm researching baby products for when I am.'

She sounded lame and stupid, and she could tell the assistant was not impressed. She took the car seat from Erin's hands.

'Well, as you can see, we are very busy, and we try to save the staff time for displaying buggy options to people who are actually about to have a baby.'

'I'm sorry,' Erin managed to whisper back to the young girl, who was now returning the buggy to the display.

Erin was about to explain to her that all she wanted was a child – and to spend every weekend in stores like this, discussing cot, buggy and nursery options – but she could see the girl was annoyed. So she turned and walked towards the shop door. As she left she

could see the girl pointing her out and talking to another assistant. No doubt they are discussing how crazy I am, shopping for a buggy when there is no baby in sight, Erin thought.

She caught a glimpse of herself reflected in the busy South Dublin baby shop window. Her white face and big sad brown eyes stared back at her. She debated going to the hairdresser to get her long brown hair blow-dried before going out for dinner tonight with her husband and friends, but after the embarrassment in the baby shop, she decided to head home. She looked back at the mums and mums-to-be entering Little Tots, and couldn't help feeling pangs of jealousy. All she wanted was to be pregnant. She placed her hand on her flat stomach.

'When will it be my turn?' she asked out loud.