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What Women Want

Written by Fanny Blake

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FANNY BLAKE

What Women Want



blue door

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To Robin, Matt, Nick and Spike

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1

'I'll get out here, thanks.'

Bea cursed as she stepped out of the taxi into the sweltering chaos of Shaftesbury Avenue. July was always hell in central London. She could feel her trousers sticking to the back of her legs. She was already five minutes late and the traffic had slowed to a virtual standstill. If only her meeting had finished on time, she would have reached the restaurant first, just as she'd planned. She wanted to be sitting calmly, waiting, so that she could size up her lunch date as he crossed the restaurant to join her. But Jade, one of the editorial directors, had made such a fuss about which photograph was used on the jacket of an autobiography by another twenty-something D-list loser of whom Bea had never heard that the meeting had overrun by nearly half an hour.

The summer heat was draped over the London streets like a thick blanket. The slight but insistent throb of a headache was an unpleasant reminder that she had drunk too much the night before. Had she? She tested herself by running through the exact route the taxi had taken home from the party. Mmm. Slightly hazy. As she picked her way

through the pedestrians, walking as fast as she could without actually running, she could feel a familiar prickling warmth rising from somewhere in her chest and spreading up into her face, around the back of her neck and down into her arms. Not now, please. She had at least to arrive looking like a woman in control. Like a woman who was desirable. Not like a menopausal wreck.

She slowed down, trying to restore her cool. He – she'd been told his name was Mark Carpenter – must have paid £125 for this date too. That was the deal when you signed up to Let's Have Lunch, a discreet dating agency for the over-forties. Having been interviewed by a woman in her twenties who, given her immaculate streaked blonde hair, flawless skin and dazzling if vacuous smile, couldn't have any idea what it was like for someone her mother's age to be looking for love – or even just sex, Bea wasn't choosy – you parted with £750 in return for a pitying glance of appraisal and the guarantee of being 'matched' with six possible partners. Six! Any of us should be so lucky, thought Bea. Yes, he'd wait. Dwelling on the fact that she was about to rendezvous with a man about whom she knew nothing apart from his name, she almost tripped over a knot of American tourists turning their *A—Z*s upside down as they tried to match the streets of Soho with the map.

Cantina Italia was just up Frith Street, past all the cafés overflowing into the street with tables occupied by countless young men in white sleeveless T-shirts and girls wearing spaghetti-strap tops. If only she still had the body to carry off so few clothes with such aplomb. That was the trouble with being a few (OK, more than a few) pounds overweight.

She still cared about what she looked like so wore clothes to cover up and ended up too hot, unwilling to rid herself of the layers that should be so easy to strip off and reveal all. Oh, where was the 'longer, leaner, looser' her that she'd been promised would begin to emerge after only ten Pilates sessions? So far all she'd managed to do was rick her back when attempting a new exercise on the reformer.

She was aware that the cream linen suit, which had started the day so well, had lost its original snap. As the morning had gone on, her look had deteriorated from the fashionably creased to the unfashionably unironed. But short of taking a forty-five-minute detour up to Oxford Street to buy something new, there was nothing she could do about that now. Remembering all she'd been taught, she pulled in her stomach – skirt would hang better – and held herself upright. 'Imagine a string pulling you up from the top of your head,' echoed the voice of her Pilates teacher, as Bea pushed open the restaurant door, aware that the imaginary string must have melted in the heat.

The restaurant wasn't wide but it stretched back beyond a central table carrying a large arrangement of twirling bamboo, brilliant orange birds-of-paradise and scarlet ginger blossoms. She couldn't see a man sitting alone. Maybe she'd got there first after all. Good. That meant she had time to go to the Ladies and check the make-up she'd jerkily repaired in the back of the cab on the way there (almost stabbing herself in the eye with her mascara) as well as compose herself. There was no point in being nervous, she reassured herself. It was only lunch, not . . .

'Let's have lunch?' The voice came from behind her.

Bea turned to see an effete young man in a loose white shirt of the finest linen, the sleeves rolled up, well-cut dark trousers and expensive shoes. Surely this wasn't him – a more perfect 'match' than she could ever have hoped for. Or was a younger man picking her up before she and Mark Carpenter had even had a chance to sit down?

'I'm sorry?' Say it again, please.

'Let's have lunch?' he repeated, with the slightest of smiles, encouraging her to agree.

She hadn't misheard. Unsure what to say, she tried a rusty attempt at a flirtatious smile. 'Normally I'd love to, but unfortunately I'm meeting someone. Another time, perhaps.'

'No, no, no.' His face spoke volumes. Of course he wouldn't make such an obvious pass at her. She was old enough to be his mother, for God's sake. 'I meant the table booking,' he explained, a little too patiently. 'Is it under Let's Have Lunch?'

She had forgotten that the girl who had rung her about the date had explained that she would book the table for them under the company's name. The entire restaurant staff must know why she was here. Were they all looking at her and whispering, laughing at her mistake? Flushed with embarrassment, but stifling a laugh, she murmured an apology. Hardly hearing his reply, she followed him between the tables of chattering lunchers to the dimmest reaches of the room where her eyes fell on Mark Carpenter for the first time.

He sat with his back to the wall, his head bent as he concentrated on cleaning his fingernails with a toothpick so she had a clear view of the top of his scalp through his

thinning dark hair. The maître d' pulled back her chair and her lunch-date looked up. A pleasant face – a little on the baggy side, if she had to be critical. She didn't, of course, but she couldn't help herself. As she sat down, still mortified by her initial mistake, Mark attempted to stand although there wasn't enough room to do so without tipping the table towards her. She snatched at a wobbling glass.

'Hallo. I'm Bea,' she said, wondering what on earth had possessed her to sign up for all this. That stripy City shirt with the white collar and the navy pin-striped trousers immediately told her that this was not going to be a match made in heaven. She had been quite specific about her taste in men when filling in the questionnaire – no City types – but the agency had ignored her.

'I know.' He gave a nervous laugh but Bea was concentrating on the sweat beading on his upper lip, telling herself not to be so bloody judgemental. She knew sweat was beading on her forehead too, as another flush swept over her. She could feel the dampness at the nape of her neck and running down the small of her back. She tried willing herself to cool down. No dice.

As Mark sat down again, he reached behind him, whipped out a single red rose and put it in front of her. His smile revealed a mouthful of slightly overlapping teeth that Bea stared at as she tried to take in the significance of his gesture. How ridiculously over-the-top. This is just lunch, she reminded herself, not some full-blown long-term romance. You can leave whenever you want to. But, of course, she couldn't. That would be too rude. Imagine if her date took one look at her and announced he wasn't

hungry after all. It would take weeks to recover from the blow to her self-confidence. She couldn't do that. First impressions weren't always everything so she must make the effort.

'Thank you. That's so sweet.' She put the rose deep into her capacious bag where no one could see it, at the same time imagining what her close friends, Ellen and Kate, would say when she told them.

The waiter was standing over them, asking if he could bring drinks. Bea's resolve to stay strictly sober flew out of the window. 'A glass of Pinot Grigio would be lovely. Yes, a large one.' And make it quick, she prayed silently.

'And a sparkling water for me.' A nice voice with the trace of an accent she couldn't place. 'I don't drink,' he added, by way of explanation.

'Oh. Why not?' Bea was wishing she had stuck with her resolve. He'd probably think she was a lush, drinking at lunchtime. Oh, to hell with it. Either he'd like what he'd paid for or he wouldn't. There were always the other five.

'Not during the working week. Need to keep a clear head for the job. You can't play around with other people's money without one.'

'But it's Friday. Surely you can have one to keep me company.'

'No, I don't think so. The markets don't stop trading when I have a drink. I wouldn't risk it.'

'But you drink in the evenings?' Bea was hoping for the reassurance that he was one of her sort, racing to open a bottle of wine as soon as he'd taken the key out of the front door at the end of a hard day.

'Only at weekends. It's a slippery slope otherwise.'

'Oh.' Bea was silenced. Studying the menu, she wondered what was the least she could eat without seeming rude. The sooner she could extricate herself from this disaster, the better. Could she get away with only one course? Just a starter, perhaps? No, she was firm with herself, she couldn't. Come on, Bea, play the game.

'What will you have?' He broke the silence as the waiter returned, pad at the ready.

'I think I'll go for the goat's cheese salad and then the grilled Dover sole.' There. Simple, not too much and lowish on the calorie front.

'I'll have the scallops and pea mash. Thank you.' He sat back, looking, Bea thought, a touch on the smug side.

'But that's just a starter.' Bea couldn't stop herself. 'Won't you have something else?'

'No. That's plenty for me. Got to watch the weight, you know.' He patted his no doubt lean and muscled stomach. She looked at his thick chest hair growing out of the neck of his shirt. What would he be like in bed? she wondered. After all, that was one of the reasons they were meeting – there was no getting away from it. If things went well . . . He looked like one of those men who brought his own tissues and thanked you afterwards. Stopping herself going further, Bea took a swig of wine.

The lunch seemed interminable. Conversation dragged and every time Mark asked her a question, Bea seemed to have a mouthful. She ate her salad, then he picked his way through his four tastefully arranged scallops floating on a pea-green island as Bea filleted her sole with the cack-handedness of a

ten-year-old, despite a lifetime of having done it without any difficulty. What was wrong with her? In desperation, she ordered another glass of wine, choosing to ignore Mark's raised eyebrow. They trailed across all the obvious topics, never stopping on one long enough to become too confidential – where they came from (she from London and him from Northumbria); where they lived now (Islington and Clapham); their marital status (both awaiting divorce); children (one to her – Ben, now sixteen; two to him – Bella, thirteen and Stevie, fifteen); where they were going on holiday (hadn't decided because always left it to the last minute; golf and fishing on the Spey with two friends), favourite books (anything by Anne Tyler; *Fever Pitch*) and films (*When Harry Met Sally* – sad but true; anything starring Jackie Chan – even sadder).

The only time Mark became really animated was when he talked about his job as an investment banker. But he did so in such detail, bringing in all his colleagues and the negotiations they'd recently completed, that she soon lost the thread and began to think about the drive she was going to have to make the next morning to see her mother in Kent. What time should she leave to avoid the worst of the traffic out of London? Everybody leaped into their cars the moment the sun came out and drove towards the coast like lemmings. And she was going to join them. Was it all right to leave Ben on his own since he had refused point blank to go with her? Or did that mean she was an irresponsible mother?

Then she drifted on to her own work as publishing director of Coldharbour Press, an imprint of the giant

publishing conglomeration Rockfast. Perhaps she should tell Mark more about that, but it would be hard to match his work-related animation. She'd lost her hunger for the business a couple of years ago – although she was anxious to get back to the office after this was over. Something was obviously happening: too many shut doors with senior execs in secret conferences. Someone had started the rumour that an announcement was going to be made this afternoon. That would be typical. Get the announcement off management's chests so they could have a conscience-free weekend while all the workforce would spend theirs worrying about their future with the company.

'Shall we?' His voice suddenly interrupted her train of thought. Oh, God, what on earth had he just said? To ask would only show she hadn't been listening at all.

'Er, yes,' she agreed uncertainly.

'That's wonderful. I'll be in touch then.' He reached across the table and took her hand, oblivious to the alarm that was registering on her face. What on earth had she agreed to? 'I'm so glad we've met. To be honest, I was worried that you might be a proper ball-breaker but I've really enjoyed myself.'

'Gee, thanks. I do my best.' How condescending she sounded. 'No, seriously. I've enjoyed meeting you too. Would you mind if I skipped coffee?' Once she'd got out of here, she need never see him again – whatever it was she'd agreed to.

'Not at all. I have to get back too. I'll just be one moment.' He extricated himself from behind the table and, after pulling a black bag from under his seat, headed for the

Gents. At least they didn't have the awkwardness of establishing who was going to foot the bill. Let's Have Lunch settled up for them. So they damn well should, given the little they had to do for their money, mused Bea. Perhaps Mark wasn't so awful, really. She must try to be less demanding. He wasn't bad-looking, just a bit humourless. She imagined he might be quite a considerate lover, if not very inventive. She was a fine one to talk. What would she bring to that particular party? She was much more out of practice than she cared to remember.

'Are you ready?' At the sound of Mark's voice she looked up to find herself eyeballing a Lycra-covered crotch that revealed much more than she wanted to know about any man outside the privacy of the bedroom.

'I should have warned you,' said Mark, looking understandably sheepish. 'I must apologise for what isn't the most attractive look. But cycling is much the easiest way to get around London.'

'Mmm. Breathing in those traffic fumes must be so good for you.' Her mother's words rushed into her head: 'Sarcasm is not the finest form of wit, especially from you, Bea.'

Bea assumed his trousers had been in the bicycle pannier bag that had been hidden under his seat throughout lunch. His shirt must be in there now having been replaced by an old white T-shirt that had long ago lost its shape. On its front was a washed-out photograph. Bea peered more closely. Yes, below the words 'The World's Best Dad' was the near invisible image of Mark with his arms round two indistinct young children. Bea swallowed. 'Yours?' she asked unnecessarily.

But Mark didn't hear her. He was already striding out into the street where she could see what must be his bicycle, chained to a lamppost. By the time she had caught up with him, he was ready to go. Bea yanked her eyes from his pale over-muscled and extremely hairy calves to his face, now crowned by a royal blue crash helmet – never the ideal fashion accessory. Mark removed the impenetrably black goggles over his eyes and leaned forward to kiss her cheek, catching the side of her head with the helmet. 'So sorry, Bea. Stupid not to wear it, though.'

'Yes, yes, it would be. Of course it would.' For once in her life Bea was lost for words, torn between hysterical laughter and tears. How could the agency have made such a mismatched pairing? You couldn't have invented it. But wait. Perhaps she should consider, just for a moment, the impression she had given the agency. Perhaps she actually looked like someone who would find this sort of person attractive. Impossible. Much more likely was the dearth of right-aged men on the market. There can't be many who specified they wanted to meet a woman when the shine had rubbed off a bit. Most of them found themselves a younger model within weeks of ending a relationship – or before. She knew that from bitter experience. What was it they said? When a relationship comes to an end, the man finds another woman while the woman finds herself. She wasn't in a position to be picky.

'So, do you have a card? Then I can email you with a when and where.' Suddenly he looked so vulnerable, the hope in his face contrasting with the faded vision of youthful certainty on his chest. She knew then that she couldn't

disappoint him. What had she got to lose anyway? Whatever she had agreed to do, it couldn't be that bad. She delved into her bag, scratching her hand on a thorn of the rose, whose existence she'd forgotten, and failed to find her cards in the jumble at the bottom.

'I'll have to scribble my details on this.' She knew she was probably committing herself to more than she wanted. But what the hell? He took the slip of paper then, to her surprise, offered his hand and gave her a vigorous handshake and replaced the goggles. Bea prayed that no one from the office had seen them together. In some disbelief she watched the back of what, if Let's Have Lunch had their way, might be her future cycling off towards the City, then turned to look for a cab back to the fray.

2

As Bea tapped in her security code, the plate-glass doors to the editorial and publicity floor clicked open. She walked past the reception desk, where the young temp manning it while Jean was on holiday was busy multi-tasking – nails, book and interrupting her too-loud conversation with her boyfriend to connect outside calls. Impressive as a feat of juggling, maybe, but not exactly what one looked for in a receptionist. Bea made a mental note to mention it to HR. The shelves in the reception area were crowded with Coldharbour's latest books, primed for the bestseller list. In our dreams, she reflected wryly.

All the team knew that whatever the promises made to earnest young novelists or ego-bound celebrities, the reality was that only a few would really get the marketing push they'd been promised and only one or two might, just might, make it to the holy grail of the bestseller list. All the team knew the chances of making it were remote. The ratio of disappointment to expectation in her job was much higher than when she'd been an eager young editor twenty years ago. Back then she could take a punt on an unknown

writer and expect to be supported. Calculations were done on the back of envelopes and editors shaped the profile of the publishing list, rather than accountants and salesmen. Was it any wonder that she had her increasing moments of disenchantment?

Only a few steps towards her office and Bea could sense the tension in the air. Something had happened since she'd left for lunch. Unusually, all four assistants in the open-plan area were at their desks, half hidden by piles of manuscripts, boxes of books and the low dividing screens pinned with postcards and notices that made up each workstation. The excited buzz of conversation tailed off as she approached and the girls looked up at her expectant as she walked by. Puzzled, but desperate to take off the new red suede peep-toe shoes that were killing her, she smiled at them and carried on, willing the blister she could feel burning on the side of her right big toe to subside. She was surprised to see that Stuart and Jade, the two editorial directors, were still there. In all the years she'd known them, they'd believed that, whatever the emergency, their weekends began at Friday lunchtime. They were huddled in Stuart's glass-sided goldfish bowl of an office, door shut, intent on their discussion. Stuart looked up as she passed and said something. Jade glanced at her too. Bea ignored them, too anxious to get comfortable.

She reached the sanctum of her office, kicked off the beautiful but offending shoes and hung up her jacket with relief before turning the air-con up a notch as yet another flush threatened. Surrounded by the books that, over the years, she had brought to fruition, whether by acquiring

them from American publishers or by gently prising from the authors the best book they could write, she felt at ease. This was where she belonged. Editing, working with authors, was all she wanted to do. If only it didn't come with all the additional admin that she found so trying. Once she had dreamed of being a writer herself but that had retreated into the distance as she'd seen what a precarious existence it could be. As she sat at her fashionably curved desk, which gave her a view across the rooftops of central London, she longed for the days when she'd had a secretary who would tidy her desk whenever she went out to lunch, putting everything in order. No longer allowed such a guardian angel, this afternoon she was faced with God knew how many unread emails and assorted muddled papers – a half-read manuscript, minutes from various meetings, costing forms and the still unopened post.

As consolation, she opened her desk drawer and selected a pink-and-brown-wrapped square ganache chocolate, Earl Grey Tea flavour. Every girl needs a particular passion, she thought, as she popped it into her mouth – and hers was good chocolate. It had begun seventeen years earlier when she was thinking about getting pregnant and needed consolation after she'd cadged her last cigarette (she'd given up buying them months before). But, over time, she'd exchanged the bars of Fruit and Nut for specialist brands, so good they demanded she ate less of them (or so she'd convinced herself). The pocket box of chocolates from Demarquette had been a present from an agent who'd found the most direct way to her heart. As her mouth filled with the divine bitter-sweetness of the chocolate suffused with the delicate

citrus undertones of bergamot, she turned to the task in hand.

She tried to live by the maxim 'only touch each piece of paper once'. It had been shared with her by someone much more successful than herself. Since then she had struggled to deal with or delegate each one as she made herself take it from her in-tray but it just didn't work for her. So often she'd be interrupted in the middle of dealing with something and would succumb to the temptation to slip that piece of paper into the pending tray – her desk's graveyard. Once there, nothing ever came out. Of course, there was less paperwork now than there had once been. Welcome to the world of the email. She sighed, noticing that forty more had accumulated during her brief absence. She clicked on the first just as her door opened.

'Bea. What's going on?' Stuart shut the door behind him and, without waiting to be asked, cleared the unsteady pile of manuscripts off the extra chair and sat down. The rich slightly acrid scent of his sweat reached her at the same time as she noticed the damp stains in the armpits of his shirt, which was grubby at the cuff and neck. He was a good-looking guy of about thirty-five, one of the most astute and commercially minded editors she'd come across, but his personal hygiene left something to be desired. His rather brutal haircut and the razor-thin white scar that ran from his right ear to the side of his nose suggested an aggressive streak that she had never, in the three years they'd worked together, come across. If anyone asked him how he'd got the scar, he just smiled and said it was 'one of those things'. As a result he retained a slightly mysterious aura that clearly

made him extremely attractive to some, judging from the comments that Bea had overheard in the Ladies.

'Not a clue. Why would I know anyway?' Bea's attention was suddenly caught by an email from Let's Have Lunch and another from Mark that had just pinged their way into her mailbox. Damn. She'd have to open them later.

'Come on. You're always the first to know everything. Stephen's always in and out of here.' Stuart's anxiety to find out whatever was going on was bordering on desperate. He pulled his fingers one after another so they cracked.

'Do you mind not doing that? I honestly don't know what you're talking about. What's happened?' She hated the way everyone assumed that her long-standing friendship with the managing director meant she knew everything there was to know. Though she hated it even more when she didn't.

'Piers arrived just after you left, looking like thunder. He came straight up to Stephen's office and they've been in there ever since. They pulled the blinds so they couldn't be seen.' Stuart's voice rose with excitement as he described the unexpected arrival of the chief executive of Rockfast. 'Then all the directors were called in, one after the other, and Jan's been looking for you. They all came out looking absolutely stony and won't talk to anyone.' He leaned forward as if expecting Bea to share whatever secret there was.

'I've no idea what's happening.' Bea hated confessing her ignorance. 'Nobody's said anything to me.' Only because she'd been a bit late getting back from lunch, dammit.

'But Stephen tells you everything,' Stuart sounded outraged that Bea hadn't got the answer.

'Not this time.' But why not? Bea asked herself. She knew that Stephen was talking to the management about retiring early some time next year because he'd decided he wanted to concentrate on his silversmithing. He'd always kept the one thing he was passionate about in second place to his career while his kids were growing up but now they were in their twenties, as he'd told Bea, 'I'm desperate to give it a proper go before it's too late.' Bea had wanted to protest, but she could see he had a point. She had only to glance in the mirror to be reminded that she had her own ticket on time's winged chariot. So that was next year. If there was something to do with the business, she was sure she'd have got wind of it somehow – smoke signals always drifted off the fire in the end.

'Here's Jan now.' Stuart's excitement was almost infectious as Stephen's PA put her head round the door.

'Bea. There you are. Where have you been? Stephen and Piers wanted to see you urgently.' Jan's face was almost hidden by a sheet of blonde hair that she swept back with a perfectly manicured hand to reveal a perfectly beautiful face, and a smile that revealed a set of perfectly even white teeth.

'At lunch, of course,' Bea was immediately on the defensive. 'What was it about anyway?'

'Can't say.' The smile became more like a knowing smirk. 'Anyway, it's too late now. I've been asked to get everyone into the boardroom in ten minutes.'

'What? It's Friday afternoon.' A meeting on Friday afternoon was unheard of. 'I'll go and see them now.' Underneath the desk, Bea's feet felt about for her shoes. The pain in her

blistered toe as she stood up was excruciating but her desire to find out what was going on overrode it.

'I think it's too late, Bea.' Another of those slight self-satisfied smiles accompanied Jan's withdrawal.

Irritated both by Jan's cool assumption of control and superior knowledge, and by Stuart's evident disappointment in her ignorance of what was going on, Bea picked up the phone and called Stephen. Engaged. Outside her office, the rest of the staff were moving towards the boardroom in the corner at the far end of the floor. Annoyed that her Let's Have Lunch date had been today of all days – and how pointless it had been – she followed the last of her colleagues into the room.

The long modern table had been pushed up against the floor-to-ceiling windows so there would be enough room for everyone. Some perched on its edge, others occupied the chairs that had been randomly spaced around the periphery of the room while everyone else sat on the stained carpet. Bea took a place in the corner by the door, leaning against the wall so she could take the weight off her painful foot. Even turned up full, the air-conditioning couldn't prevent the room becoming a sauna with that number of people crushed into it. Ties were loosened, jackets were off and pieces of paper flapped as people fanned themselves. Voices rose as speculation mounted. Could Rockfast have sold off the Coldharbour imprint? Surely someone would have heard. Perhaps Rockfast was going under. No, there'd have been word about that too. Perhaps they'd acquired another imprint. Bea stood quietly, as mystified as everyone else, batting away questions as if

she knew what was going on but couldn't possibly say while feeling cross that she was the only director in the room excluded from whatever it was.

Eventually Piers and Stephen came in, followed by the financial, sales, marketing, art and publicity directors, all of them looking particularly serious. Bea caught Stephen's eye as he mouthed, 'Sorry.' At that moment, loud alarm bells began to ring in her head, but she still didn't know why. How come Bea was the only one to have gone out that lunchtime? Piers stood. He was the only man in the room wearing a suit, rather a natty Armani, Bea noted, but he still maintained his cucumber cool in the heat. His peachy tie was set off by a lightly striped blue shirt while his dark hair was fashionably short, slicked up and back with just the right amount of gel. Quite the image of an executive who had reached the top and was going to stay there, Bea reflected, as Piers directed a taut smile at the assembled team before beginning to speak. He kept it brief, to the point.

'As you all know, Coldharbour Press has been in trouble for a while. Despite adjustments to the publishing programme, the turnover has fallen again. The board has decided more drastic action is necessary. As a result, I have both good news and bad for you. The good is that Adam Palmer from Pennant Publishing is starting on Monday as the new MD.' The bombshell dropped. The few who knew of Adam Palmer and his reputation for ruthlessness looked stunned – Bea among them. All heads turned to Stephen, who stood with his eyes fixed firmly on his old brown suede shoes unable to look at his staff. 'Stephen will be taking early retirement as of August the thirty-first when he has

completed the handover to Adam.' There was a collective gasp. That was less than a month away. Bea couldn't believe her ears. Stephen had never suggested this might happen. But Piers hadn't finished.

'We have also come to an agreement that Louis, your sales director, will be leaving while Sam Spooner will be promoted from his position as sales manager with immediate effect.'

Sam Spooner! He was barely out of nappies. The backstabbing little toe-rag, thought Bea.

'Obviously this means that there will be a number of changes to get used to over the coming weeks but I know we can rely on you all to do your best to accommodate them. The Rockfast board is convinced that they will be crucial if we're to turn the company around to perform in the way it should. All I can add is that, apart from replacing Stephen and Louis, whom I would like to thank for all they've done for the company, no other changes are envisaged at this time. Thank you. Have a good weekend.' He left the room followed by the directors, with Bea on their tail.

Stunned, the staff left the room in silence, a few holding back tears. Only a few of them knew or cared much about Adam Palmer at that moment. What they cared about was that the close team that had worked together over the last few years was changing. If the results hadn't been everything they might have been, wasn't that because of market forces, rather than specific individuals who had worked so hard for the company? Change was always unsettling but the more so when it was announced as unexpectedly as this. As the staff filtered back to their desks, they began to talk

again, wondering what on earth could have happened to prompt this and why the change had been handled in this way.

Bea went back to her office, fending off questions by inventing an urgent call she had to make. She needed a few moments on her own to think. She shut the door, feeling hurt and confused by the announcement. What did it really mean? What were the implications for her, as one of Stephen's appointments? She thought she did a good job as publishing director although, if she were honest, perhaps not quite as good a job as she once had. She was uncomfortably aware that recently she hadn't been responsible for as many sure-fire successes as in earlier days.

She picked up her phone and dialled Stephen. No reply. Had he left the building on Piers's coat-tails? That would be so like him. He always kept a strictly professional distance from his colleagues and would never stop and gossip. That was one of the things everyone respected him for. He knew every member of staff by name and would help or advise any of them at any time, but when the clock struck six, he shut the door on his office and went home. His professional and private lives were kept entirely separate. She tried his mobile. No reply.

She saw Stuart coming towards her office and swiftly picked up the phone again. When he popped his head round the door to invite her to come to the pub for a post-mortem, she signalled she was mid-conversation. 'Hang on a minute,' she said to the dialling tone. 'I've got quite a lot to do, Stu, so I think I'll finish up here first. If you're still there when I leave, I'll join you then.'

It was true. She had got a lot to do but she knew that there wasn't a cat's chance in hell of her doing it now. But she wanted to talk to Stephen if only she could find him. Once she could see the main office was deserted, she went along to his office on the off-chance and knocked quietly on the door.

'Who is it?' He sounded exhausted.

'Stephen, it's me, Bea.' She pushed open the door to see him sitting with his head in his hands, alone at the round table where he held meetings.

'I'm so sorry, Bea.' He looked up and Bea could see he was as tired as he sounded. She hated to think it, but suddenly he looked old.

'But what happened?' She went over to sit with him.

'I wanted to tell you but Piers acted so fast, there was no time. He and the other Rockfast directors have obviously been planning something like this for ages and then Adam suddenly stepped into the frame. Piers knew I was ready to go, and as for Louis – a casualty of war, I'm afraid.' He ran his hand through his thinning grey hair. 'Piers warned me on Monday that they were talking to Adam but I didn't take him seriously. Then he turned up here today and told me the plan. He'd even spoken to Sam and Louis during the week without mentioning it to me, swearing them to silence. I was just the last nail they needed to hammer in. Big pay-off. I couldn't say no.' Bea could see how shocked he was by the way his career had ended so abruptly and, more importantly, out of his control. Deciding to quit when it suited you was one thing. Being sacked according to someone else's agenda was quite different.

'What do you think is going to happen? Is it going to be

the long night of the P45s?' Bea moved over to the desk where she knew Stephen kept some whisky for emergencies in one of the drawers. Pulling the top one open, she took out the bottle and poured them both a large one. She sat down again.

'Well, I'm going to have to play the game and show Adam the ropes but . . . honestly? Adam is bound to have his own ideas about how to run the place. I don't think the changes will end here.'

A penny half dropped. 'Me?' Bea felt a rush of anxiety.

'Maybe. But don't spend the weekend worrying. We'll just have to see what happens next week.' He downed his whisky in one gulp. 'Bea, I'm sorry but I'm going to have to get off. I've got a lot of things to talk about at home.'

'Of course. I've got to get back too.' Bea left Stephen as he took his old blue cord jacket from the back of his chair and picked up his battered leather book-bag.

'Call me if you want to talk about anything over the weekend.'

'Of course. Thanks.'

Back in her office, she sat thinking. Don't spend the weekend worrying. How could she not, for God's sake? On the other hand, nothing she could do would affect what happened next week, so best just to follow Stephen's example and go home. She didn't feel like joining the others at the pub although, by the time she got home, Ben would probably be on his way out for the night. That would give her time to think more carefully about her conversation with Stephen. On the verge of shutting down her computer, she registered the flashing icon that alerted her to new emails.

Of course. She opened her mailbox. Before she went, there were two she wanted to check. First Let's Have Lunch. Their communication was brief.

> Can you make lunch on Tuesday? If yes, Tony Castle will be expecting to meet you at 1 p.m. at Belushi's in Jordan Street, WC2.

Sod it. Why not? Life couldn't be much worse. Fine. I'll be there, she typed.

She opened the one from Mark.

> Enjoyed meeting you very much. I thought we might have a drink at the Grape Pip, off Regent Street. Friday week any good? All best, Mark

What harm could one more meeting do? She'd go for a drink with him and see what happened. Besides, she told herself again, she must try not to judge too quickly. Give the guy a chance. She might at least try to get her full £125 worth.

Great she typed. I enjoyed lunch too. (A small white lie in the interest of good relations.) Let me know what time's best for you.

With that, she shut the screen down, grabbed the manuscript of the novel that she had to finish editing before meeting the author the following week, and walked out.