

# ITS NEWS TO ME by R.G. Belsky

## EXCERPT

### CHAPTER 1

I met Brendan Kaiser, the owner of my TV station Channel 10 and about a zillion other properties, for lunch on a sunny spring day at a restaurant called Tri-Bar in lower Manhattan.

Tri-Bar is what's known in New York as a celebrity restaurant. In other words, whenever you read the gossip columns, there'll be an item about how "so and so said such and such over dinner last night at Tri-Bar . . ."

Robert DeNiro sometimes ate there. So did Jimmy Fallon and Alec Baldwin and Julia Roberts when she was in town.

I'd been to trendy hotspots like this a few times to see if I could spot someone famous. Mostly all I ever saw were a lot of other people like me hoping to see if they could recognize anyone. The closest I ever came to a celebrity was when I ran into Sally Struthers once in the ladies' room of a restaurant on the Upper East Side. It had been a long time since Sally was a big star on *All in the Family*. My last memory of her had been doing those late-night infomercials about world hunger, and she sure didn't look much like Gloria Bunker anymore. I decided not to ask for her autograph.

There was some kind of a maître d' standing at the entrance to Tri-Bar. He wore a black tuxedo like outfit, highly shined shoes, and white gloves. I had on a pair of tan Calvin Klein jeans, a chocolate-colored silk blouse, and beige sandals. I thought my outfit was pretty swell, but he looked me over coolly.

"Is there something I can do for you, ma'am?"

"I'm looking for Brendan Kaiser. My name is Clare Carlson."

"And?"

"I'm the news editor of Channel 10 News."

He still didn't seem too impressed.

Maybe he didn't like my color coordination.

“And what might your business be with Mr. Kaiser?”

“Well, I might be here to pick up his dry cleaning, but I'm not. How about I discuss my business with him?”

He scowled and picked up a phone to check with someone inside.

The truth was I wasn't sure why Brendan Kaiser wanted to meet me here. I'd had a few dealings with him in the past on big stories in my job as the news director for Channel 10—but he'd never invited me to lunch. Maybe he was going to give me a raise. Maybe he was going to tell me I'd been named Employee of the Month. All I knew is that when the big boss asks you to go to lunch with him, you go to lunch.

The maître d' still looked unhappy when he got off the phone, but he eventually directed me to a table inside. Brendan Kaiser was already there. Kaiser was in his 50s, with thick gray hair. Not a bad-looking guy, but he did have a bit of a paunch. I noticed it when he stood up to greet me. Probably from eating too many lunches at a place like Tri-Bar.

“Thank you for coming on such short notice, Clare,” he said. His office had just arranged the meeting with me a few hours earlier. “I hope I didn't interfere with any other lunch plans you had for today.”

“Well, until I got your call, my lunch plan had been to go for a Big Mac at McDonald's. That special sauce they put on it is to die for.”

He smiled.

We made small talk for a few minutes, and then a waiter came over and took our orders. Kaiser was having some kind of duck dish with orange sauce and shoestring potatoes. I went for the tortellini with a salad. According to the menu I'd scanned, this meal was going to cost a lot of money. What the hell—he was paying, not me. Whatever happened next, maybe I'd at least get a good meal out of it.

“So do you want to tell me what this whole lunch deal between me and you is all about?” I said after a bit more conversation.

“You do get to the point, don't you?”

“I'm a journalist. I used to be a newspaper reporter. I like to get to the lead of the story as quickly as I can.”

He nodded.

“The reason I asked to see you like this was to discuss a situation we need to deal with, Clare.”

“What kind of situation?”

“A situation involving Channel 10 News.”

“I didn’t know we had a situation.”

I took a drink of some iced tea I’d ordered with my meal. I wished now it was something stronger.

“Look, I think that everyone at Channel 10 news is doing a really terrific job,” Kaiser said.

“Glad to hear it.”

“Especially you as news director.”

“Glad to hear that too.”

“And you’re a star, besides being the news director. You’ve broken some big stories for us, gotten a lot of publicity and notice in the media world. The Charles Hollister murder case. The serial killer you helped catch. I appreciate that from you, Clare. I appreciate all of your success and all your hard work. I really do.”

“But?”

“Excuse me?”

“There is a ‘but’ coming here, right?”

“Yes, there is,” Kaiser sighed. “Despite all your hard work, the ratings—and, as a result, the advertising revenue—isn’t quite at the level we need at Kaiser Media to run a profitable news operation. I want to do better. I think we can do better.”

The waiter brought our food. We both ate in silence for a few minutes. I waited to see what Brendan Kaiser would say next. I didn’t really have anything to say. So I stuck my fork into the tortellini and bit into a piece. Pretty tasty. Good cream sauce too. Almost as good as the sauce on a Big Mac.

“I’ve decided to make some changes at Channel 10 News,” Kaiser said finally, nibbling on a shoestring potato.

“What kind of changes?”

“Changes at the top.”

“Wait a minute—are you firing me?”

“No, of course not.”

“Demoting me? Is that the reason for this lunch?”

“You’re still going to be the news editor.”

“But you said you were making changes at the top so . . .”

That’s when it hit me.

“Jack Faron?” I asked.

“Yes.”

Jack Faron was the executive producer at Channel 10 News. My boss.

“I’m replacing Faron. Jack’s done a good job, but he’s more old school than we need right now. I’d like to put someone in the job with more drive, more energy, more new ideas. So I’ve hired a new executive producer. Jack will still be with us at Channel 10 News. But moving forward, he’s going to be in a more . . . uh, advisory role.”

“Does Jack know about this?”

“Not yet. I know you’re close to him, so I wanted to make sure you were the first to hear about this.”

I wasn’t sure what to say. Jack Faron had been my mentor at Channel 10 News. The one who had hired me when the newspaper I worked for went out of business. The one that stood by me when my early on-air appearances as a TV reporter bombed. The one who promoted me to news editor and had backed me on every story and crisis since then.

And now he was not going to be there for me.

At least not in the same way.

I asked Kaiser the obvious question.

“Who’s replacing him as executive producer?”

“Susan Endicott,” he said. “Do you know her?”

“Not really.”

“I think you two will get along really well. That’s why I wanted to have this conversation with you. I want you to accept this. I want you to understand the reason for it. I want you to be happy. I want you to help make Susan Endicott feel welcome here. Are you good with all that, Clare?”

“Hey, you know me—I’m a team player.”

“No, you’re not.”

I sighed. “Yeah, you’re right, I’m not.”

“Let’s try to make this work, huh?”

I wasn't sure what to say next, but it turned out I didn't have to. I got a break. My phone rang, and—when I looked down at it—saw it was from Maggie Lang, my top editor at Channel 10 News.

“Where are you?” Maggie said.

“At lunch.”

I hadn't told anyone who I was having lunch with.

“We've got a big story breaking. A murder. Female college student found murdered near Washington Square Park.”

“Who is she?”

“Her name's Riley Hunt. She came here from Ohio to go to school at Easton College, not far from the park. Family has money, it sounds like. Her father's a doctor back in Ohio, her mother a lawyer.”

“All hands-on-deck for this one,” I said.

“Already done. We're gonna lead the newscast with it at 6.”

After I hung up with Maggie, I told Kaiser what was happening. I said I needed to get back to the station right away to direct the news coverage. That wasn't totally true, Maggie could have handled it on her own. But I wanted to get out of here, and this seemed to be the perfect excuse. I didn't like what was happening to Jack Faron. I didn't like the fact I knew about it before him. And I was pretty sure I wasn't going to like Susan Endicott, even though I'd never met her.

And so I did what I do anytime I can't deal with problems in my life. I threw myself into a big story. And this murder sounded like a big story.

I said goodbye to Kaiser, walked through Tri-Bar and out the front door to catch a cab back to the Channel 10 newsroom.

The maître d' didn't bother to say goodbye.