

Chapter One

Bea

STUBBED OUT LIKE a cigarette butt. Bea had always imagined there would be a slow-motion moment before it all ended. She had expected there would be time to repent, confess or write a final note. But that's not the way it happened. There wasn't even blackness. She was gone before the dark could descend.

After the car collided with the oak tree, it took just a fifth of a second for the steering column to impale Bea's chest. Then her blood started rushing into her lungs. She'd never paid attention to the trees on Craychild Road, they were just a backdrop to her journey to work. Would they have been kinder to her if she had acknowledged they were there?

The accident happened on a Tuesday morning. Bea had woken in the light of a cooling autumn sun, just before her alarm. Anticipating the impending wake-up call, she'd kept her eyes closed, willing the time to bloat so she could stay in the cocoon of her covers for a little while longer. The unavoidable bell tolled at 6.30am and Bea started her transition into the day by thrusting her left leg out of the side of the bed. She never jumped into the morning with two feet; she didn't want to startle the day with a sudden entrance. She thought a graded exposure was gentler on everyone and always the safest bet.

But for all Bea's pussy-footing around to avoid offending

time, the Tuesday morning had done her no favours. It had presented no sympathetic tip-off that October 2nd would be the last day of her life. Even if she had hunted for it, she wouldn't have stumbled upon that all-important reprieving sign. There was no fate-changing epiphany to be hunted down. Instead, Bea went about her morning routine. It had been the same for years now. She would shower, put on her make-up and dry her thick coffee-coloured hair before making her way to the kitchen diner, where she would switch on the news and put a slice of brown bread in the toaster. Once the toast popped up, Bea would leave it an extra few minutes to cool. She didn't like it when the butter melted and made the bread soggy. After finishing her breakfast she would place the plate in the sink and return to her bedroom to get dressed.

On the last morning of her life Bea was not late. The butter displayed a satisfying degree of buoyancy on top of her toast. The news featured a balance of happy and sad stories. She had applied the correct amount of foundation to her nose to hide the splatter of freckles that the summer's sun had teased out of her skin. It had even been easy to choose what to wear. She'd decided upon a lead-coloured pencil skirt and a sky-blue shirt.

Bea parked her black Audi TT in a gated car park, three metres away from her front door. She'd driven the car for two years now. Inside, there was one extra seat and she liked the fact that she had the power to decide who got the exclusive rights to ride shotgun. The TT was Bea's second car. The first one had been a battered, dented, faded Vauxhall Corsa that she had bought in her second year of university. She had worked two jobs to buy the banger and eaten nothing but beans on toast for nearly a month to pay the insurance. The TT had been bought to celebrate her

first anniversary at work, two years later. She'd just walked into the showroom, paid the deposit and first direct debit instalment and driven the car home. She hadn't known that in eighty per cent of accidents death comes to the drivers of small cars. The satiny new paint was a sign of fertility to her, not a precursor to her death.

The journey to work had been the same for the last three years, so every flick of the indicator and turn of the wheel had become automatic for Bea. Right turn, left turn, two more rights and a mini roundabout got her to work in twenty minutes.

On the last Tuesday, she left the house on time at 7.30am. Dawn was still spilling onto the earth and the early morning streets were still paused. Inside the houses she passed, teeth were being brushed, kettles were boiling and fluffy dressing gowns were soaking up the sleep from drowsy bodies. The weather wasn't wintery yet, but the outside air was cold enough to make Bea's muscles brace. She hurried into her driving seat, quickly turned the key in the ignition and set the heater to high.

As she pulled out of the car park, a male breakfast show presenter bantered with a female co-host on the radio. The woman's tones were affectedly masculine, but what she had achieved in baritone, she lacked in wit, and she responded to every friendly jibe with a school-yard-quality response. She was rubber, he was glue. Bea changed the frequency.

As she approached the national speed limit sign on Craychild Road, Bea's attention turned to acceleration. Her patent black stilettos slipped slightly as she bore her foot down on the go-faster pedal. As the car reached fifty-five the chorus to Madonna's 'Material Girl' trilled through the car. Irritated, Bea reached for the tuning buttons and started to scroll through the stations. She had discarded a traffic

update and some aggressive classical she didn't recognise before she turned her attention back to the road she drove down every weekday.

But this Tuesday morning, the road was different. Adrenaline flooded into her bloodstream as the familiar scene was torn up by a modified VW Golf. The car was all blacked out windows, body kit and lowered suspension. The spoiler looked like it had been attached by a mechanic whose expertise stretched no further than a child's Meccano kit. Said spoiler was hanging to the boot in as fragile a manner as a wobbly baby tooth clings to a gum. To Bea's horror, the Golf had swerved over the central white lines and was throttling its way towards her 'T', like a bull to a matador. The front grill of the Golf smiled sinisterly. Like the released blade on a guillotine, it showed no sign of stopping.

Bea's arm muscles contracted. The steering wheel jolted to the left. Higher brain functions had snapped to 'off'. Reflex was in control. Her thigh muscle stamped her foot into the brake pedal. Suddenly Bea didn't know where she was. The car was taking off. Her confusion stopped her from seeing the oak tree before the car plunged head-on into it.

First the bumper crumpled. Then the grill collapsed. The bonnet rose as it wrinkled, splintering the glass in the windscreen. Bea was dead long before the car's frame buckled in the middle, smashing her head into the remainder of the flaking windscreen glass. Her swan song turned out to be the final chorus of 'Material Girl'. In her vanity, Bea had always imagined the soundtrack to her final moments would be much more romantic and profound.

* * *

On Bea's office desk, the square peel-off calendar still read Monday October 1st. Her colleagues hadn't the courage to change it. They had tip-toed around the entire work space as if it was contaminated with anthrax, as if they could catch the death that hung in the air there.

Regardless of what the desk diary said, today was Wednesday October 9th; Bea's funeral. By 9am her mother's black skirt suit had been laid out on the spare bedroom bed for fourteen hours. In the kitchen, her father was ironing his funeral suit, setting the folds with breathfuls of the 75 centilitre bottle of whiskey he'd drank last night.

At noon, Bea's neatly-dressed mother was polishing the sherry glasses for the third time and wondering whether she should relocate the wheelie bin from the patio to the bottom of the garden where no one would see it.

An hour later, her mother's doorbell had rung thirteen times, welcoming relatives, friends and close neighbours in to assess the shine on the sherry glasses and the placement of the bins.

At 1.30 the black hearse pulled up outside Bea's childhood home. A sherry glass fell from the cast iron patio table and scattered its splinters all over the stone paving. The glasses had been in the family for thirty years. They had been a wedding gift from a close colleague. When they were handed over in their velvet-lined casing, Bea's mother could never have known they would last longer than her daughter.

At 1.50 the final mourners were making their way into the church. If it had been an ordinary day, Bea would have just returned from a snatched lunch break. Usually, lunchtimes consisted of a mad dash to Gorge cafe, two streets away, for a grab-and-go sandwich. Bea had always liked the look of the crayfish and lemongrass mayonnaise bloomer, but she'd never had the courage to diverge from

her failsafe ham and mustard or the trustworthy cheese and pickle. *Better safe than sorry*, she'd thought. Looking back, she'd have been sorry she was safe.

Today, lunch would be triangular sandwiches, samosas, sausage rolls and salad, served at the Witch and Hound, a ten-minute walk from her family home. Bea had always thought the wine was a little stale at the Witch and she had never liked samosas, but these little details had been overlooked by the funeral planners, just like the spilt ale and five-year-old cigarette burns in the pub carpet would be overlooked by the mourners.

At twenty-five, Bea hadn't even thought about making a will, so she'd left no directions for how her funeral should be run. As a child, she had nightmares about being buried alive. Between the ages of four and six she would wake up in sodden pyjamas at least once a week after dreaming she was trapped beneath the ground. In her dreams, she could feel her muscles aching from cramp, crying out for a change of position. Her father had given her a plastic key to take to bed with her.

'Just keep a tight hold on this and you can unlock a secret door in the box you're stuck in. Then you won't be trapped anymore,' he had reassured her.

The technique had worked and, at twenty-five, Bea still kept the silver-coloured plastic key in her bedside cabinet. It would still be there when they lowered her casket into the ground.

The funeral service was led by Bea's childhood vicar, Peter. Measuring in at six foot five, Peter didn't look like an ordinary man of the cloth. He would have looked more at home in skin-tight lycra, jumping off the top rope of a wrestling ring. But beneath his hulk of an exterior there was a typical gentle giant. He kept chickens, spoke softly,

and never forgot a birthday. As he opened his bible to find Psalm 23: 1-6, he remembered that Bea had been an August baby. No doubt the result of a very happy New Year.

At Peter's subtle sign, the congregation settled, and his metronomic voice began to flow over the crowd.

'We are here today to celebrate the life of Bea Bridges. I'd like to start by asking you all to think about Bea, who she was, and what she brought to your life.'

Chapter Two

Missy

THERE WAS A lot of touching, rolling around and groping on the day Missy met Lee Wright. Neither of the couple-to-be were involved in it, though. The occasion was the annual inter-pub charity rugby tournament, in which regulars at the Old Cock, the Bull and Bear, the Griffin and the Witch and Hound all came out of sporting retirement to raise money for the local hospice. For want of something better to do on a Saturday afternoon, when the television was all snooker and *Columbo* reruns anyway, Missy had gone along with two old high school friends. Laura was a six-foot-tall Amazonian brunette with aquamarine eyes and a body defined by years of yoga, while Chloe was a short, plump, cupcake of a girl whose mint-green eyes were often overlooked in favour of her cantaloupe-sized breasts. At five foot seven, slim Missy was a welcome gap-bridger between the two.

Thirty minutes into the first match, Laura turned her attention away from the on-field action and started talking to a tall blonde-haired man who looked more like a rugby player than any of the wheezing, gasping, beer-bellied creatures on the pitch. During a lull in conversation, Laura turned to Missy to explain her lapse in attention from the game.

‘This is Lee Wright. We used to go to primary school together.’

‘Mr Right?’ Missy laughed. ‘I’m told you’re a hard man to find.’

‘Excuse me?’ Lee replied, pushing a caramel-coloured curl of hair off his face.

‘You know? Mr Right? Every girl wants to find one, but they don’t always have a lot of luck.’

‘Oh.’ Lee acknowledged Missy’s joke with a courteous but unimpressed smile. ‘I don’t want to rain on your Mickey-taking parade or anything, but if I had a penny for every time I’d heard that joke, I’d be a very, very, wealthy man. And, actually, the name’s spelt with a W, so I’m not the right kind of right.’

Lee’s voice trailed off, rendering the conversation dead. Missy hid her blushing face by draining the dregs from her pint of cider. Lee eyed up her empty vessel cynically.

‘Have you girls been on the beer for a while then?’ he asked. Missy’s tinge darkened from embarrassed pink to an angry red. Who had promoted him to the booze police?

‘Actually,’ she stated defiantly. ‘We’ve only just got started.’ With that, she grabbed Laura by the wrist and dragged her away to the beer tent. Her head span a little as she walked. The cider had started to take effect.

‘Catch you later Lee,’ Laura called from over her shoulder.

By the time ‘later’ came, Laura, Chloe and Missy were five pints of cider worse for wear and the Bull and Bear were half an hour into celebrating their victory over the other pub teams. Missy was leant on the bar, biting her nails, waiting to order the sixth round of ciders when Lee sidled up next to her.

‘Hello again,’ he said.

‘Mr Right with a W.’ Missy slurred, churlishly.

‘Can I buy you a drink?’ Lee asked. Missy was surprised, unsure of why Lee would want to buy her a drink after

the awkward silence earlier. She certainly didn't want to be caught up in any more of those.

'Ta, but I've just got them in. Can I get you one?'

'Ah, don't worry, I'm in a round.'

'Who are you here with then?' Suddenly it wasn't quite so difficult to talk to Lee. Maybe it was the five grown-up apple juices or maybe it was the dimples in Lee's cheeks that were oiling the conversation. By the time Missy had discovered that Lee had turned up to the rugby with a group of colleagues, one of which drank at the Bull and Bear, the fizz had started to escape from the three ciders in front of Missy. Shortly after she had found out that Lee worked as a territory sales executive for a pharmaceuticals company, fellow drinkers had started to tut over the space they were taking up at the bar. As the pair started chatting about Missy's growing up in the area, a thirsty-looking Laura had turned up at the bar looking for the missing ciders.

'I thought you'd gone AWOL,' Laura said.

'Keep your wig on. I've only been gone a few minutes,' replied Missy, wobbling a little on her feet.

'If, by a few minutes, you mean twenty, then you'd be about right. Chloe and I are spitting feathers.'

Missy looked at her watch in surprise. As Laura started to carry the pints away, Missy felt a pang of sadness that she had to stop talking to Lee.

'I best go,' she said disappointedly. 'I'll see you.'

As she turned to go, Lee placed a hand on her arm.

'When?' he asked. Missy was confused.

'What?' she stuttered slightly.

'When will you see me?' Missy was lost for words and started to spew out vowels.

'I. Aaaa. I.' Suddenly, she couldn't remember any of the twenty-one consonants.

‘How’s next weekend sound?’

‘What?’

Lee’s lips were curling up at the edges and the dimples were there again.

‘Do you fancy getting another cider next weekend?’

‘Yes.’ Missy managed. The digits of her phone number were easier to recall than the alphabet, which had all but deserted her. But Missy had always been better with numbers than letters.

‘I’ll give you a call then,’ Lee said, once Missy’s number was safely stored in his phone. As he walked away, Missy started sounding out vowels again.