

Chapter one

Twenty-nine shopping days to Christmas

If it wasn't for the flier that had glued itself to Bea's shoe, she might never have found out about Declan. It was one of the three Santas that had been dining at Bea's usual table who brought it to her attention. There were other tables in Hartleys's staff canteen but Bea was a creature of habit. She peeled the flier from the sole of her shoe. Damp and dirty, it stayed intact as though refusing to be ignored. Still she paid it no heed.

'Wait. You've a little speck of ketchup there.' Bea wagged an index finger at Santa's luxurious beard. The Santas employed by Hartleys were required to be impeccable in appearance at all times.

'Thank you. You will definitely have all of your wishes granted this Christmas.' Santa winked, and for a magical moment Bea imagined that he was the real Santa Claus. Then, the table was hers and she had thirty blissful minutes alone, a respite from having to think. Bea needed these breaks so that she could retreat into her own world. Like going backstage after a performance, shedding the costume and wiping away the face paint. Bea the stylish and competent sales assistant could become just Bea. It was exhausting being Bea.

The flier might have been cleared away by the catering staff, and she would never have known. But, it clung to the edge of the table. It was only as she gathered her things to leave that Bea saw the photograph of Declan with his impish face and dimpled grin. Bea detached the flier and sank back into a chair. *Missing. Declan Connor of no fixed abode, but known in the Kings Cross area, went missing two weeks ago. If you have any information on his whereabouts call this number...*

It couldn't be – not Declan. Declan, with his funny sayings and silly jokes. The photograph must have been taken before he became homeless, because he didn't look sad, or the way she thought homeless people would look. Starved and grey. The colour of

pavements. How many times had she walked past a homeless person without even glancing at them? She could have walked past Declan. He would have called after her. Wouldn't he? Bea bit her lip to suppress feelings that she didn't understand: a lump in her throat and a prickling of tears. Of course she was sad, but this response was more than concern for a missing boy. There was something else, a dark demon, an emotion that threatened to engulf her. A recognition that she was responsible for this. Oh God, what had she done? Bea closed her eyes to try to block out the sights and sounds of the restaurant. She wanted to run away and hide, bury her head under her duvet. She took deep breaths; she couldn't fall apart here.

Bea pressed the heels of her hands into her eye sockets, but the images kept coming: Declan packing his bag. The way he looked at her before leaving. If only she could wind back time and do things differently. A chair scraped as someone sat down opposite her.

'Mrs Barone said I could go to lunch as you were due back.' It was Sophie, one of the junior sales assistants.

Bea uncovered her eyes and flinched at the brightness of the lights. Sophie rolled her eyes.

'A migraine,' Bea lied. She stood on shaky legs and attempted a smile. White Christmas, came around again on the playlist. 'I'd better be getting back then.'

She was responsible for Declan becoming homeless. When Bea discovered that he had been sleeping in the store overnight, she had told her manager. It seemed like the right thing to do, but evidently not, because she became even less popular than before. The junior sales girls and delivery boys talked about her, not bothering to lower their voices when she was in earshot. Following her allegation, Declan had lost his job and the temporary roof over his head. Bea had no idea that he would become homeless – that she had made him homeless.

And now he was missing. Anything could have happened to him and it was her fault. What had she done?

Mrs Barone's gravelly voice startled Bea. 'We have a VIP shopper this afternoon, Suki Dee. Miss Licious will be received in the Exclusive stylist suite with her assistant. I've asked Mrs Jackson to take a selection of undergarments to the suite when we get the call.'

'Thank you for informing me, Mrs Barone. I will make sure that all runs smoothly whilst Jemima is upstairs.'

'I know you will, Miss Stevens. Mr Evans has two excellent senior sales assistants from which to choose my successor.'

Head of department was what Bea had been working towards for the past three years. It was in her first year at Hartleys that she had ratted on Declan. Blood rushed to her face as she remembered that day.

Mrs Barone frowned and Bea realised that something was expected from her. She felt sick and a little dizzy. It was important that she say the right thing. Bea closed her eyes to concentrate and then said, 'When do you think we will hear who he has chosen?'

'Well, it will have to be before Christmas when I retire.'

Pippa, who was waiting to ask Bea something, overheard and supplied the one thing that Bea should have said. 'Mrs Barone, nobody could replace you. We're going to miss you so much.'

'Nobody could...' Bea parroted, but Mrs Barone had turned away, her attention now on the boys in black, so called for their uniform of black T-shirt and jeans, who had arrived with armfuls of silk and lace garments held high above the floor to stop them trailing.

Somehow, she had to try to forget about Declan, at least until she finished work. Bea followed the boys in black to see that the supplies were displayed to their best advantage. Pippa was laughing and chatting with the boys.

‘The hosiery shelves need restocking,’ Bea told her.

Pippa flashed angry eyes at her, but Bea was too preoccupied to care. How had the flier come to be on her shoe? It couldn’t be a coincidence that she lived in Kings Cross and...that’s right. A man, a homeless man, had thrust a piece of paper at her outside the station. It must have fallen out of her bag when she retrieved her purse to pay for her lunch, and then she stepped on it.

‘Miss Stevens?’ Mrs Barone interrupted Bea’s thoughts. ‘Please could you take over from Mrs Jackson as she’s wanted upstairs?’

Bea jumped to attention. ‘Of course, Mrs Barone.’

Jemima was gathering a flurry of gowns: feather trim, satin and lace, a cloud of cream, white, and coral. She arranged them on a rail, waiting for the completion of her sale.

‘Sorry, but you’re wanted in the Exclusive stylist suite,’ Bea said.

‘I know. I’ll just finish here.’

Jemima’s party of Arab ladies had meandered away and were now looking at bra and panty sets. They both knew that customers needed time and could spend thousands more, so long as they weren’t rushed.

‘I’ll look after them,’ Bea said to Jemima with what she hoped was a reassuring smile.

An hour later, Bea rang up twenty-six thousand pounds on the till and took her commission of the sale. Jemima would be disappointed, but it wasn’t Bea’s fault. Sales staff were not allowed to interfere with the commission process. Whoever rung up the sale took the commission; it was Hartleys’s rule. One of the junior sales girls was staring at her, making an ugly face. Was she meant to ignore the rules? Other people seemed to know when to bend them, but it didn’t make sense. Why have rules if there was another set of unknown rules about when to ignore them? However hard she tried, she never seemed to get it right.

Mrs Barone left her station in the corner of the department and approached Bea with a frown. ‘Could you go and help Mrs Jackson? Our VIP has a wardrobe malfunction.’

Bea took her department manager to one side. ‘Could you be more specific?’

‘Apparently, the bodysuit that Mrs Jackson thought would work under the dress that our VIP plans to wear at an awards ceremony is not to her liking. It gives the appearance of nudity in all the right places, but our VIP was hoping for a little more cleavage and lift.’

‘Understood.’ Bea selected a silicone skin cleavage enhancer and as a backup a voluptuous silicone lift bra in a double G.

Jemima sighed audibly when Bea arrived with the garments. They could hear Suki Dee’s meltdown from the expansive consulting area out front. The dressing room was almost as big as Bea’s entire flat – more like a penthouse suite, without a bed.

‘I thought the U-plunge, backless body was perfect, but apparently it’s not.’

‘I know. Not enough cleavage. If you want to get back to the floor, I can take it from here,’ Bea said.

Jemima’s face lit up. ‘Oh, would you? I was hoping to be quick.’

‘Yes, go.’ Bea hurried her away before realising that she might be hoping to complete her sale. ‘Jemima, I’m sorry but...’ Too late – the door had swung shut.

Bea handed both of the garments to Suki Dee’s dresser with an explanation as to how they should be fitted. ‘I think that the cleavage enhancer is the best solution, but if Suki Dee isn’t comfortable wearing it, the bra might work.’

More wails and cries of despair. Then, the dresser reappeared red-faced. ‘I can’t seem to get the hang of these. Would you mind?’

Bea took the silicone mounds from her. ‘Well, you sort of do this and this.’ She demonstrated how the cups enclosed each breast and then the tape was adjusted to create

cleavage. ‘It’s tricky to get a good grip; you have to kind of anchor it down and then pull it over –’

‘I read the instructions but it’s not working and Suki is going mad in there. *Please.*’

Bea went hot and then cold. She searched for someone – *anyone* – to step in and offer to help. There was no way that she could fit silicone cups onto the celebrity’s naked boobs.

‘*Please.*’

Suki Dee was a customer and it was Bea’s job to serve her.

‘Okay.’ Bea took a deep breath and prepared to enter the sacred chamber.

It wasn’t hard when you knew how, and Bea had become something of an expert.

Suki Dee was thrilled with the effect of the adjustments and Bea had to admit that she looked amazing in the backless and almost frontless dress. It had been a bit embarrassing coming into such close personal contact with the star, but she managed to complete the task sparing Suki Dee’s dignity. And Bea noted she had gone a whole hour without thinking about Declan. Then she felt guilty for not thinking about him.

Chapter two

Twenty-eight shopping days to Christmas

Bea's shift was midday until eight in the evening. Then, there was Mr Evans's Christmas reception for the fashion floor sales staff. On any other night anxiety about an impending social event would have kept her awake, but last night all she could think about was Declan.

Every day on her way to and from work, Bea had walked past the homeless people sprawled around the entrance to King's Cross Station, barely taking any notice. Overcome with chagrin, she had taken a good look last night. There were several, huddled in sleeping bags and cardboard boxes. One of the men had a pile of cases and bags strapped together with a bungee cord, and another, a woman, had carrier bags. Bea had taken peeks as she strolled by, searching for a man handing out fliers, as she had no other clue to his identity. It could have been any one of the men; she had paid him no attention at the time.

Bea squirmed as she reflected on her callous disregard for people like Declan. It wasn't Declan's fault he became homeless; she knew exactly where to lay the blame. This morning, on her way into work, she would ask about the man handing out fliers. If she was to find Declan and put right her wrong, this was the best place to start. But what would she say? It was scary enough talking to any stranger but homeless strangers were on a different level.

Before stepping out of her door, Bea checked for the third time to make sure the notes she had made weeks ago were in her bag. If Evans announced the new head of department at his Christmas reception, she might be asked to make a speech. The thought both terrified and excited her. It was as well to be fully prepared. No surprises.

That morning, the sky was blue and the air crisp as Bea, in stiletto heels, navigated the icy pavement, as though walking a tightrope. On the days she had a late shift, it was her morning ritual to buy an Americano and skinny oats from Denny's and take them back home to enjoy with a magazine. She loved releasing a magazine from its cellophane wrap, the waft

of fresh print, the slip and slide of gloss. The December issue of *Vogue* was waiting for this indulgence, but today it held no attraction.

As she approached the station, Bea's heart beat a little faster. The man was back, handing out his fliers. She had to speak to him to find out what had happened to Declan, but she couldn't; she was afraid. Maybe if she googled 'how to talk to homeless people'. The internet had come to her rescue before, when she had googled 'how to make small talk'. *Ask open-ended questions and show that you are interested in the person*, it had said. A homeless person was still a person and so that advice should be good. But how could she start a conversation about Declan?

Just say, *Hello, a bit frosty today*. No, that wasn't open-ended. Bea had walked straight past him. She couldn't do it. But she had to; this man was no different to Declan. Bea pirouetted with tiny shuffles and retraced her steps. Commuters passed him by, ignoring his outstretched hand. Couldn't they see he was handing out fliers, not begging?

The man looked straight at Bea and her stomach knotted. His gaze was bold and commanding, as though he knew all about her. She had to be brave; this was her opportunity to ask him about Declan. Bea took a deep breath and closed her eyes, willing herself to find the right words. But when she opened her eyes, he was still staring.

'Why are you looking at me?' That was the trouble. If she didn't prepare herself, the wrong things came out of her mouth.

The man dropped his gaze and shook his head. Now she had offended him. Bea tried again. 'What do you think of this weather?' She tilted her head and frowned slightly to show that she cared about his reply.

The man looked up through a fringe of matted hair, his face scrunched up. 'I think that if it gets much colder, it will freeze my...' He stopped himself from completing the sentence. 'Don't you have a pair of snow boots or something?'

Bea followed his gaze; he was staring at her Jimmy Choos. 'I do, but I always wear high heels to work.' So that's why he was staring at her.

He had an Irish accent just like Declan.

'Why are you handing out those fliers?' Her heart was beating too quickly.

'Ah, so you're going to be telling me I need a licence.' He shook his head and his eyes crinkled, but she couldn't see whether he was smiling or snarling beneath his beard.

'No. It's just... Well, why are you trying to find Declan? Do you know him?' It occurred to Bea that he could be giving out fliers on behalf of a charity to earn some money.

The man straightened his back, a look of expectation in his eyes. 'Do you know something? Have you seen him?'

Now, Bea felt stupid. There was nothing that she could say. To explain how she knew Declan, and why she was concerned for his well-being, would mean admitting to this stranger that she had made him homeless.

'No. You gave me a flier yesterday and I just wondered.'

'Wondered why it mattered that a homeless guy went missing, you mean?' He slumped back against the hoarding. 'Sorry, didn't mean to bite yer head off.'

'It's okay. I just wanted to help.'

The man sighed and went back to handing out fliers.

'I was just going to get a coffee. Would you like one?' That's what she should have said all along. Kind and compassionate and at the same time practical.

'No thanks.'

'Oh. Okay.' So that was that. But Bea was reluctant to walk away. This man was her link to Declan and somehow, she had to find him and put things right. 'What's your name?'

'Ryan O'Marley.' He grinned, exposing surprisingly white teeth.

'I'm Beatrice Stevens but people call me Bea.'

‘Pleased to be meeting you, Bea,’ he said.

There was something about his expression that Bea couldn’t read. It was as though he was amused by her but she didn’t know why. Feeling awkward and a little snubbed by his rejection of her kind offer, she continued on to Denny’s, all the while sensing his eyes on her back.

When she arrived at work, the store was even busier than the day before. Mrs Barone called her over, just as she was going to take her break.

‘Mr Evans wants to see you in his office.’

Bea studied Mrs Barone’s face for a clue as to what this might be about. The tone of her voice had given nothing away. It was impossible, and so Bea asked, ‘Do you know why?’

Mrs Barone smiled. ‘I do not and neither will you unless you get up there.’

‘Do you think it’s about his decision on your successor?’

‘I have no idea. Just go.’ Mrs Barone dismissed Bea with a wave of her hand.

As Bea took the lift up to the fourth floor she imagined announcing her promotion to her family at Christmas. At last they would see that her obsession with fashion, as they called it, had paid off. She had a fifty percent chance of getting the job. Excellent attendance, always on time, and an exceptional sales record. But Jemima was more popular. She desperately wanted to believe that this was going to be good news but past experience filled her with self-doubt.

‘Come in, Miss Stevens.’

He didn’t look happy but neither did he look sad. Bea wasn’t sure how to arrange her face. She settled for something between solemn and cheerful.

‘You did an excellent job with our VIP yesterday, well done.’ Mr Evans checked his computer screen. ‘An impressive sales record too.’

Bea glowed from within. Her hands were sweaty.

‘As you know, Mrs Barone is leaving us after many years of service.’ He gently drummed his fingers on the desk. Bea wished he would speed things up, as she was finding it hard to remain calm. The expression on her face was feeling a bit tense and awkward.

‘I’ve spent a long time giving due consideration to which of her senior sales staff should be promoted to head of lingerie and wanted to take the opportunity to give some feedback to each of you. A staff appraisal if you like. Tea?’

Bea had been concentrating so hard, the question threw her.

‘Would you like tea or coffee?’

They were evidently going to be together for some time. Long enough to drink a cup of coffee. Did that mean that he wanted to prepare her for the new role? Surely, if he was going to let her down, he would come straight out with it.

‘Coffee, please.’

Mr Evans reviewed his notes. ‘Mrs Barone thinks highly of you. She has been impressed by your knowledge of the lingerie collections and your creativity in bringing together compatible products from across different departments to please our customers. Apparently, the lingerie buyers seek you out as you’re well informed on what sells well, not just in Hartleys but in our competitors’ stores.’

Mr Evans’s PA distributed their drinks and Bea allowed herself to relax. This was all good; he was just building up to make his announcement. Words of acceptance formed in her head.

‘These are admirable qualities, as are your dedication and commitment. Since joining Hartleys, you’ve exceeded our expectations.’

Bea smiled and her heart swelled with pride.

‘However.’ He paused and Bea held her breath. ‘Head of department requires different skills and attributes, and I am sorry but I don’t believe you have the capacity to excel in that role.’

The words she had prepared a few minutes ago felt like stones in her mouth. Her voice came out hoarse. ‘I don’t understand. Why don’t you think I’m suitable for that position?’

She didn’t say, *What about the hours I’ve spent learning Russian, the careful studying of competitors’ displays and pricing, the researching of sales patterns, the keeping ahead of new trends?* Every day of her life, for the past three years, she had been working towards this goal and now he was telling her that she didn’t have the skills and attributes required.

‘What is it that I lack? What should I have done differently? Tell me. I’ll learn.’

Mr Evans dropped a sugar cube into his tea and stirred. ‘I don’t think that you can learn these things.’ He coughed. ‘Um, maybe...’ He picked up the teaspoon and put it down again. ‘Perhaps you’d like to see our occupational health doctor, get some advice as it were? Maybe see a psychologist?’

Now Bea was angry. Really angry. This was how it had been at school. The constant referring to something considered missing. As if she needed to be ‘fixed’. When she was younger, Bea found it hard to control the rage that this sparked, but now that she was older and wiser, she understood that it would do her no favours and she was better rising above his thoughtless remark.

‘I appreciate that you are trying to help but an explanation of what you see lacking in me would be more beneficial.’

Mr Evans went a little pink and coughed. ‘Of course. Yes, I see. Um. Let me put it this way, Mrs Jackson is a team player. She notices the little things, remembers our customers by name, even remembers some of our regulars’ birthdays and the names of their

children or grandchildren. The other staff work well with her; she knows how to motivate them. A leader. To be frank I don't think you can learn that, Bea.'

The change from Miss Stevens to Bea did not go unnoticed, but he wasn't going to soften her that easily. 'Thank you for being direct with me, Mr Evans. I don't necessarily agree that the attributes you mention can't be learnt and I will make every effort to develop skills where I am lacking.'

Having dropped this bombshell, Evans leaned back in his chair. 'Hartleys is a temple of retail. We have a reputation across the world for our customer care. Shopping at Hartleys is a luxury experience. One that is enjoyed by royalty and showbiz stars as well as the man in the street. Yes. It is all about our customers' experience.'

Bea knew all of that. She could have written the script. But whilst Evans spouted, it gave her the chance to think about what he had said and to try to regain a sense of calm.

When she returned to the shop floor, Bea couldn't look at Mrs Barone or Jemima. Had her failings been discussed with them? It was so humiliating. In a few hours there was the Christmas drinks reception where Mr Evans was bound to announce Jemima's promotion. She considered feigning a stomach bug but when the announcement was made everyone would guess the reason for her absence. No, she had to go. And hold her head high.

Bea was sipping a glass of champagne when Alastair from the PR department joined her.

'Thanks for sorting Suki Dee's wardrobe malfunction. Her PA was gushing about you. Anyone would think that you had brought about world peace.'

'Maybe it felt like that for her PA. Celebrities can't be easy people to work for.' Bea threw back the champagne and plucked another glass from a passing tray. She just had to stay long enough to hear Mr Evans's Christmas speech and then she could crawl away.

‘Her publicist wants us to host a big charity event. Something that will link Suki’s name with a good cause. She’s going for an Angelina Jolie image to shake off the glamour girl one.’

‘If that’s the case, I wonder why she was so fussed about her cleavage,’ Bea said. Alastair chuckled, although she hadn’t meant to be funny.

And then, the tapping of a glass brought them all to attention.

Bea smiled and clapped when the announcement was made and Jemima looked sheepish, like she didn’t know it was coming, but Evans must have prewarned her. Bea imagined the conversation that Evans would have had with Jemima. The conversation that Bea had prepared for. When had Evans met with Jemima? Before Bea’s meeting or after? She swiped another glass of champagne from the tray of a passing waiter. It was an automated response, as she tried to act as though she wasn’t falling apart. But her head was beginning to swim and the drink tasted too acidic. There hadn’t been any plates of food circulating for some time.

Bea lurched her way to the ladies’ toilet. Oh dear, she felt a bit sick. It was having no food in her stomach. Sitting in a cubicle, head in her hands, Bea heard Pippa and Sophie talking about Jemima’s promotion.

‘Well, I’m not surprised Bea didn’t get it. She may sell a lot of stuff but she’s a bit self-centred. I don’t think the management below stairs rate her; she doesn’t have a good word for any of the delivery boys or the despatch staff and you have to get on with everyone as head of department. Bea’s only interested in Bea.’

She waited until the door closed behind them and then sat awhile longer. Bea was fourteen again. That time it had been Hetty Chambers and Davinia Grayson laughing about the way she wore her hair – with an Alice band – and the length of her dress, apparently it was too long and her shoes frumpy. So much had changed since then, her dress sense for a

start. But still it wasn't enough. It was true that she was focused. Focused and determined to succeed. Not just for herself but for Hartleys. *Deep breaths. They don't matter. Be strong.*

But Mr Evans's opinion could not be so easily dismissed. Okay, if he wanted her to be more of a people person, she could do that too.

Chapter three

Twenty-eight shopping days to Christmas

Bea stumbled out of King's Cross Station and into the scene from a Christmas card. Powder soft snow, already a few inches thick, coated everything. A scattering of footprints was fast disappearing as more snow fell. She saw Ryan, the man with the fliers, straight away; he was helping an old woman create some shelter out of cardboard boxes.

'You can't sleep out here,' Bea slurred as she carefully planted one foot in front of the other, her feet sinking into the new snow. Nobody should need to sleep on the street in this weather.

'Careful.' Ryan reached out his hand to Bea and she jolted away.

A heel skidded and she landed hard on her bottom. Cold, wet snow stung her calves and thighs.

'I saw you going, but I was too late.'

What was he talking about? If he hadn't tried to grab hold of her, she wouldn't have fallen and now she was sprawled, legs akimbo.

Ryan bent over her, as though *she* were the one in need of help. *Oh God, the humiliation.* 'It's okay,' Bea said as she struggled up.

'I told you it was snow boot weather.' Ryan held up one of Bea's shoes and in his other hand, the heel.

Bea used the railings to hoist herself up; the sting of ice on her shoeless foot was unbearable. How long did it take to get frostbite? She'd get chilblains, for sure. Bea slid back down the railings and landed on Ryan's sleeping bag.

'It's not fair. I work bloody hard. Nobody appreciates me. And now this!'

The old woman muttered something and then burrowed into her cardboard shelter.

'Life's shit. But you have to make the most of what you have and you –'

‘Are a selfish cow. I know. Everyone thinks so.’ Bea’s throat clogged with tears.

Ryan was staring at her again – but maybe now he had cause to stare. She was making a spectacle of herself but Bea didn’t have the energy or will to control her emotions. Losing the heel of one of her Jimmy Choos wasn’t a catastrophe in itself but it felt like it on top of everything else she had endured that day. Then when she tried to be a good Samaritan – to show this man the compassion that she would have wanted Declan to experience – he bloody well threw it back in her face.

‘Why didn’t you let me buy you a coffee this morning?’ she wailed.

‘Because I don’t drink caffeine.’ Ryan spoke softly, a lilt to his voice.

Big flakes of snow that reminded Bea of ones she had cut from paper in school rested and then melted on her nose and eyelashes. They felt like tears, and maybe they were. Bea buried her face in her scarf, wishing that she could curl up and go to sleep right there. Let the snow bury her.

Ryan coughed. ‘I don’t want to seem inhospitable but you’re sitting on my bed and it’s getting late. Maybe you should go home and sleep it off.’

Her mother would be appalled. She was slumped on a homeless man’s bedding at eleven thirty at night, on the street at King’s Cross. *Bea* was appalled. She scrambled to her feet. The snow was falling thick and fast.

‘I’ll put something over the cardboard, Sal, make it waterproof,’ Ryan said to the old woman.

It was almost impossible negotiating the snow with one heel missing, but Bea could not bear the feeling of ice on the sole of her foot. She headed for Denny’s because that had been in her mind when she got off the train – to buy a strong coffee. But when she was at the counter, Bea had an idea. Hot chocolate. A hot chocolate would warm Ryan and Sal up and

make amends for her bad manners. Hot chocolate didn't have caffeine. Then she would go home to bed.

When Bea returned balancing two large hot chocolates, Ryan was securing thick bin liners over the cardboard shelter. Triumphant in her act of generosity, Bea held up her offerings. 'I got you both a – ouch!' The lid slipped off one of the cups, scalding her hand, and Bea lost her grip. Almost in slow motion, she watched both cups tumble through the air. The brown liquid made an arc before landing on Ryan's sleeping bag.

'Jesus Christ!' He whipped up his bedding but it had already absorbed the hot, sticky drink.

'I'm so sorry.' Bea tried to help but he elbowed her away.

'What's the matter with you? Can't you just mind your own business like you usually do? Why pick on us?'

'What do you mean – like I usually do? You don't know me.'

'Maybe I don't, but once Declan pointed you out to me, I noticed you. Okay?'

Was he saying that Declan had sat outside this very station, watching her walk past every morning and evening? How could she have walked past without seeing him? It was official, she was a selfish bitch. 'No, it's not okay.' Her voice was a whisper.

'Ah not like that. Don't be getting any ideas, you're not my type. Or Declan's, for that matter.' He gave a half laugh. "'Twas just a game between us. Declan would make me laugh, trying to get you to notice us, but no – you always strutted past, nose in the air. Until today. Now why, I'm asking you, why all of a sudden can't you just let us be?' He shook out his sleeping bag. The stain was like a map of Kenya. Bea watched as the southernmost tip trickled downwards, like a river finding crevices in the folds of nylon.

Ryan didn't know. Declan hadn't told him how he knew Bea. Every day Declan had been waiting for her apology, for her to understand the consequences of her actions. Bea covered her face with her hands. 'Oh God. I'm sorry. How can I make this right?'

'It'll dry, to be sure. Don't be getting yerself worked up on my account.'

If he knew what she had done, he wouldn't be so kind. The map of Kenya was being rolled away as Ryan packed up his ruined bedding. 'Come on, I'll walk you home.'

'But where will you sleep? You'll freeze.'

'I'll be fine. I've a little hidey-hole that'll keep me dry. Here, lean on me.' He offered his arm and Bea took it, as she was finding it hard to balance with just one heel.

'Have you known Declan for long?' Bea asked as they swayed across the square towards the welcoming glow of lights from her apartment block.

'A few years now. He's a rare one.' Ryan paused as though lost in thought.

Bea's foot slipped and Ryan caught her. They continued to meander at a slow but steady pace. 'I've never met anyone like Declan. He would do anything for anyone; there really isn't a bad bone in his body. That boy's like a brother to me.'

'Oh.' They had reached her apartment block. 'When did he go missing?'

Ryan looked into the distance and then dropped his head, as if the emotional weight of losing his friend was too great to carry. 'Eight days ago. Thursday, last week.'

'And you've no idea where he might be?' Bea felt the fug of alcohol lift a little. It could have been the effect of the freezing cold night or Ryan's unsaid words that something bad might have happened to Declan.

'I'll find him,' Ryan said.

It was time to thank Ryan and say goodbye, but Bea couldn't send him away into the night with a cold, wet sleeping bag. She had failed Declan, but she could show some compassion to his friend.

‘Why don’t you sleep in my spare bedroom tonight?’ Bea blurted out and immediately regretted it. She didn’t know anything about him. But he was a close friend of Declan, and she owed it to Declan. It was too cold for Ryan to sleep outside.

Ryan looked as though he too was surprised by her suggestion. ‘Because you’re a single girl. A slightly inebriated single girl. I’ve got a little sister, about your age. I would be telling her not to let a strange man into her home on any account – no matter what the circumstances.’

But he’s not a stranger, Bea thought, and then she decided if Declan trusted him, then so could she. ‘Please. It would make me feel better about spilling hot chocolate on your sleeping bag. I could pop it in my washing machine and it’ll be dry by the morning.’

‘I’m not sure. This’ll be the booze a talking. You’ll wake up, forget you invited me in, and scream blue murder.’

They looked at each other, each weighing up the risks. The snow whirled in the light of a street lamp and Ryan pulled his jacket closer around him. ‘I’d better be off. This isn’t going to let up.’

‘That settles it,’ Bea said. ‘Come inside before we both freeze to death.’