

BEATTIE CAVENDISH AND  
THE WHITE PEARL CLUB





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*To Seb and Raf*



# CHAPTER ONE

November 1948

The evening had begun well, with Ashley Bowen whisking her away in style in his Bristol convertible to the theatre in the West End. Ever since she'd homed in on him as instructed at Alicia Gainborne's engagement party three weeks earlier, she'd been waiting for his call. Finally, it had come. She'd worked damned hard at that party to ensure he was attracted to her, fluttering her eyelashes and flattering him until she thought she might die of boredom. He was a thin man in a well-cut dinner jacket, with blond, wavy hair brushed back off his forehead. His nose was pointed and his chin weak, and she decided he was appropriately named as his looks and manner reminded her of Ashley Wilkes in *Gone with the Wind*. But she knew she would have made an impression because after all, she, Beattie Cavendish, was good at her job.

The Terence Rattigan play had been excellent, and Beattie left the Phoenix Theatre feeling moderately cheered, despite the cold and the drizzle that greeted them outside. She pulled the fur jacket her mother had given her closer around herself, while Ashley offered her his arm.

'Bit dull, I thought,' he said, as they walked down

Charing Cross Road towards his car. 'All that soul-searching at the end. Too much of that really isn't good for you, don't you think? Mind you,' he laughed, 'my classics teacher was exactly like that – stern and boring. No fun.'

Beattie smiled to humour him. 'Really?' she said. This job could become tedious.

'Yes. Hated the subject at school. Preferred history and English.'

At last. Something in common. She tried again. 'Me too. Have you read Graham Greene's latest, *The Heart of the Matter*? It's such a . . .' She trailed off. Perhaps a novel about adultery and moral crises wasn't quite the sort of light conversation she was striving for. 'And then there's Ernest Hemingway,' she said instead. 'I love his writing, don't you?' She sighed inwardly. She sounded so banal.

'Er, yes?' He looked uncomfortable, so Beattie cast around for other subjects to talk about.

He cleared his throat. 'So, Cambridge?'

She nodded.

'What did you read?'

'Languages. As I told you, my mother is French and I seem to have an ear for languages. That's why I . . .' Beattie trailed off. Ashley looked more interested in the small round woman in an ancient coat singing 'Danny Boy' loudly but tunelessly to passers-by accompanied by a sorrowful man in a harlequin suit swaying mournfully to the woman's song. Ashley put a couple of pennies in the dancing man's proffered hat.

'Bit unusual, isn't it?' he said, nodding at the singing woman. 'For a girl to go to Cambridge?'

He had been listening. 'A little.' She would not tell him



how important it was for her to be independent, to be able to earn her own money. That was the other Beattie, not the one who was supposed to hang on to Ashley's every word.

'Clever old you. It wasn't for me, though.'

'No?' She knew this, but Beattie was glad to leave the subject of herself and get back to the subject Ashley was most interested in, namely himself.

'No. Wanted to contribute to the war effort, so I joined up but didn't see the fighting. The work I was doing was, you know, a bit hush-hush.' He gave a little laugh.

'Intriguing,' said Beattie, knowing full well Ashley Bowen had been posted to a safe place and an ordinary desk job thanks to his family's contacts.

'I can't really . . .' Another self-deprecating laugh. 'You know, talk about it.'

'Of course you can't.' Beattie injected ounces of sincerity into her voice. 'And now? Banking, I think you said?'

Ashley grimaced. 'Yes. A bit of a bore, quite frankly, but a man's got to do something to keep the wolf from the door in these times of austerity.'

'Of course,' agreed Beattie, also knowing he only worked two days a week at a bank owned by a friend of the family. 'And we all thought everything would be as it was before the war, and instead three years later we still have rationing and even more deprivation than before.' What was she doing? She needed to be light and positive and as if those things didn't matter at all. 'But never mind about all that. Tell me again about your summer holidays in Deauville before the war – my mother knows the town well.'

As she tuned out Ashley's voice, having heard about holidays in Deauville at the party where they met, she felt a kind of despair wash over her. Really, the conversation was as colourless as the London streets. She looked around and felt she couldn't wait for the 'dim-out' that had been in place since the beginning of the war to end. There had been a little hope, a lifting of spirits when the Olympic Games had been held in London in the summer, but now she longed for neon lights and brash colours advertising Craven cigarettes, Bovril and Schweppes, and for people to be hurrying and bustling and enjoying life. The shadows of war still hung over them all, together with the scent of decay and despair.

Oh, but she was being too maudlin. *Pull yourself together, Beattie Cavendish. You can do this. You've done worse.*

She stumbled, slipping on the wet, uneven pavement, cracked from years of neglect. Ashley caught her elbow.

'Pardon me, miss.' A skinny man darted around her, tipping his hat before jumping aboard a passing bus.

'Are you all right, Beattie?' asked Ashley, solicitous, not letting go of her.

'I'm fine, thank you. No harm done.' She smiled as she smoothed down her jacket with one hand, the fur comforting on her skin. Her feet were hurting in the new shoes she had bought for the occasion, a blister on each of her heels.

There was a shout from behind. 'Ash. Ash.'

She and Ashley turned and there was a young woman, waving. She had a sharp pixie haircut and was wearing an old greatcoat that swamped her figure. There was a

glimpse of daffodil-yellow underneath the coat. With her was a tall man with a neat moustache and goatee beard. He was dressed in a suit and open coat, made less formal by the jaunty addition of a scarlet scarf around his neck. He was at least ten or fifteen years older than the young woman.

‘Felicia,’ said Ashley warmly, kissing the woman on her cheek.

Beattie noticed Felicia giving her a sharp look up and down.

*Felicia. Ashley Bowen’s sister. Twenty-five. Lives in a flat in Soho. Single, no job. Dabbles in art.* Beattie remembered the words in the manila folder presented to her when she was first given the job of getting closer to the Bowen family.

Ashley turned and shook the hand of the man with the goatee beard. ‘Gerald. How the devil are you?’

*Gerald Silver, forty, sometime artist and playboy with a fondness for cocaine. Fought in North Africa. Single. Parents own a crumbling pile in the Cotswolds of which they can’t afford the upkeep. The family are old friends of the Bowens. Gerald is possibly homosexual.* She’d laughed when she’d read that line, written by men in suits and an observation that quite probably sprang from the fact Gerald was an artist.

‘And who have we here?’ Gerald eyed Beattie up and down. It took all of Beattie’s self-control not to roll her eyes. The man was so obvious. However, she smiled as demurely as she could and held out her hand. ‘Beattie Cavendish.’

Gerald bent and placed his lips on the top of her hand.

‘Ah, the young lady Ashley has barely stopped talking about. Delighted to meet you, Beattie Cavendish.’

‘Gerald,’ said Ashley, his face colouring.

‘I think,’ said Gerald, straightening up, ‘this calls for a drink.’ He peered up at the sky. ‘And we can get out of this wretched rain. Your place, Ash? What do you say?’

‘I thought we were going dancing,’ said Felicia, pouting.

‘Come on, Fee,’ said Gerald. ‘Have a thought for this old man’s health.’ He put a hand theatrically over his heart.

Felicia sighed, tapping her foot. ‘All right, then.’

‘Beattie?’ asked Ashley. ‘Will you join us?’

‘We are your chaperones,’ said Gerald, giving a theatrical bow.

Beattie thought longingly of a cup of cocoa, her nightie and her bed. ‘Lovely,’ she said, painting a smile on her face. ‘That would be lovely.’

If she said so herself, she was doing a damned good job at getting to know the family and friends of Ralph Bowen, Conservative Member of Parliament and Shadow Foreign Secretary.

## CHAPTER TWO

There was still a light rain in the air as the Bristol pulled up outside the Bowens' house in Chelsea. Justice Walk was a narrow road, a stone's throw from the river and lined with houses that whispered of understated elegance.

The night was dark, lit only by the weak light of the street lamps. As Beattie clambered out of the car she could smell the comforting smoke of coal fires and was aware of the occasional whiff of the Thames – a musty, dank smell of seaweed and decay – and she heard the distant hooting of the tugboats. She stood for a moment, never ceasing to appreciate the sound of peace, the silence of peace. The absence of noise from sirens, from fighter planes, from frenzied shouting. The absence of the glow of fires in the distance as more poor souls died or were made homeless. The absence of that twist of fear as she went where danger lurked. She welcomed the dark.

She looked up at the house, which was a three-storey eighteenth-century building with elaborate parquetry over the front door and a stone lion either side. Ashley Bowen had rooms on the third floor – he had, she knew, been bombed out of his own home but had not yet returned.

Beattie wondered if Ashley's father, Ralph Bowen, with all his money and privilege and standing, was really able to empathise with those who had come back broken from the war, those who had lost everything, families who scavenged amongst the remains of ruined buildings. No wonder people had voted for Attlee.

The rain came down harder. Ashley opened the door and they piled into the hallway, keen to get out of the wet.

It was beautiful inside, as Beattie had known it would be. The cream tiled floor gleamed and a staircase down the hall and to the left curved gracefully up to the floors above. A gate-legged table stood to one side, a silver salver sitting on its polished top. For letters, perhaps? Beattie imagined a butler handling the silver salver with white gloves, transporting important letters written by Ralph and his wife, Edwina, on thick, creamy notepaper.

'I do hope your father has a decent brandy, Ash,' said Gerald, droplets flying everywhere as he shook his head and brushed the rain off the shoulders of his coat.

Ashley grinned. 'I'm sure I can find you something to suit.' He led them into the drawing room, where a fire burnt brightly, and two lamps on polished tables cast long, low shadows on the walls. Beattie noted the fresh flowers and silver photograph frames on the oval table, a baby grand piano with its lid raised, and, hanging over the mantelpiece, the portrait of a young woman. Edwina Bowen, perhaps? A television set squatted on another table in a corner. There were richly coloured Persian rugs on the floor.

'Sit, sit.' Ashley waved to two heavily stuffed sofas covered in yards of red silk opposite each other near the

fire, a table in between. ‘Get warm, get dry.’ He walked over to the drinks cabinet and busied himself with retrieving glasses and bottles and decanters. ‘Martinis for you girls? And as it happens, I do have a decent brandy, Gerald.’

‘Excellent, never doubted it,’ said Gerald, relaxing back into one of the sofas, Felicia snuggled beside him. Beattie sat opposite, resisting the urge to perch on the edge in case she needed to make a quick exit.

Ashley put a tray of drinks on the table before dropping onto the seat next to Beattie. He handed her a Martini.

Beattie took a sip. It was delicious. Salty from the olive, sharp and dry from the alcohol.

‘A fine drop,’ said Gerald, holding his brandy up to the light.

Felicia sipped her drink. ‘I do hope Mummy and Daddy realise you use their rooms and drink their alcohol when they’re out, Ashley.’ Her barbed comment found its target as Ashley flushed.

‘They are happy for me to do so, yes.’

‘Hmm.’ Felicia put her drink on the table. ‘And when exactly are you moving back to your own house?’

Ashley frowned. ‘As soon as it’s ready. You know how it is, it’s difficult to obtain building supplies and so forth.’

‘And it’s far more comfortable here, eh, Ashley?’ Gerald grinned as he drank his brandy. ‘A cook, a housekeeper. So many people don’t have staff any more since they all buggered off to the munitions factories when war broke out. Don’t want to go back into servitude. But not here. Not at the Bowens’. Your father must pay them well. Marvellous, I do envy you.’

Ashley snorted. 'It's not as if your flat is exactly one of the new pre-fabs.'

'No, but sometimes the artist's life does pall.' He waved his hand. 'You Bowens wouldn't know anything about discomfort, though.'

'But your studio is so romantic, Gerald,' said Felicia, smiling with wide eyes. 'I adore the smell of oils and white spirit and creativity.' She had shed her greatcoat and was wearing a skirt – the daffodil colour Beattie had spotted earlier – together with a man's jumper, judging by its cut and the way it dwarfed her slight figure. The ends of the sleeves were frayed.

'Really, Felicia,' said Ashley. 'When have you ever been there?' It was clear from the look on his face that he didn't approve.

'Gerald has asked me to sit for him once or twice. And I can learn from him. Not that it's any business of yours, dear brother.'

'Now, look here—'

'It's all right old chap,' interrupted Gerald smoothly. 'As you know, your sister's quite safe with me.' He picked up Felicia's tiny hand in his large one and kissed her palm. Felicia giggled.

Beattie watched the exchange with interest, trying to work out the dynamics between the three of them. They had been friends for some time, though it was difficult to see where Gerald, being several years older than either Ashley or Felicia, fitted in. But there was an easy joshing between them that she would have expected, though also an undercurrent of something else too, something she couldn't fathom.



Early days.

‘Remind me where you two met?’ asked Gerald.

‘Alicia Gainborne’s engagement party,’ said Beattie, slipping back into character, smiling and flashing a coquettish look at Ashley.

‘I see.’ Gerald picked up the decanter Ashley had thoughtfully left in front of him and poured himself and his friend a drink.

Beattie sipped her Martini. She stood up and walked over to the table of photographs. ‘Quite the rogues’ gallery you have here,’ she said, nodding to the array of portraits.

‘That,’ said Ashley, joining her, gulping at his drink and pointing to one of a group of stiff and serious men and women in Victorian clothes and flamboyant hats sitting on a rug in a woodland glade, ‘is my grandmother and her extended family on their annual picnic.’ He grinned. ‘They don’t look as though they’re enjoying themselves very much, do they? And here’ – he waved at a sepia photograph in a second frame – ‘is me and Felicia.’ Beattie saw two chubby children sitting self-consciously on an ottoman. Ashley, the taller of the two, was in short trousers and long socks; Felicia was wearing an unflattering haircut and a fussy dress. There was not a smile between them.

‘So serious,’ said Beattie.

‘I can remember being made to sit on that damn bit of furniture for what seemed like hours on end.’ He shuddered.

‘And your father with Winston Churchill.’ She admired another photograph in a silver frame.

‘Oh yes. The obligatory one with the great leader. My father’s very fond of that one.’

‘You don’t approve?’

‘Of my father’s politics or Churchill? I neither approve nor disapprove, I’m afraid. It’s all too dull. Of course, it’s Father’s lifeblood.’

‘Has he always been a Conservative?’

‘Is the Pope Catholic?’ a voice drawled.

Beattie had almost forgotten about Gerald, who had obviously been listening to their conversation. He sat, a faint smile on his lips, one ankle resting on the thigh of his other leg, languid and louche. Yes, louche. That was the word for him.

Ashley grinned. ‘Gerald’s right. I think even the thought of being of any other political persuasion would give him the heebie-jeebies. What an odd question, what made you ask?’

Time to change the subject. She went over to the baby grand and stroked its polished wood. ‘And this is a beautiful piano. Does anyone play?’

‘The Steinway? My mother does.’ He took a silver cigarette case out of his pocket and offered it to Beattie.

She took a cigarette and leant forward as he steadied her hand and lit it. She inhaled a deep breath of smoke into her lungs, closing her eyes with pleasure. The taste and the smell took her back to another time, another place, another man. A time and place full of danger and love. She could almost smell the woodsmoke, hear the *rat-a-tat-tat* of distant gunfire, feel the hunger in her stomach. When she opened her eyes she found Ashley watching her quizzically.

‘I don’t think I’ve ever known a woman to smoke Gauloises,’ he said, as the pungent aroma wafted between them.

She blinked, dismissing the memories. 'A bad habit I picked up in France. During the war.' She smiled briefly. That much was true. She also knew he smoked Gauloises and saw it as an opportunity for them to have something in common.

'And what is it you did during the war?' said Felicia, her voice as sharp as her blood-red nails.

'Nothing too exciting,' Beattie answered lightly, looking down at her. 'A bit of driving here and there. Ambulances, generals, that sort of thing. And now' – she stubbed her cigarette out in the ashtray – 'I must go and powder my nose.'

'And what do you do now?' There was nothing friendly about Felicia's smile.

'I teach young girls to type and to be generally adept around the office. For the Civil Service.' It was her standard reply to questions about how she earned her living – well, she could hardly tell people she translated signal intelligence from Russia and various other allies and did a bit of spying on the side, could she? Though it was a particularly dull cover story, and she felt duller every time she told it.

Felicia's raised eyebrow was eloquence itself.

'I'll refill our glasses,' said Ashley, cutting through the silence. 'Up the staircase and second on the left.'

Beattie shut the drawing-room door behind her and stood for a moment. This was where she would like to go snooping, use her talents, the talents for which she'd been recruited, but she had to concentrate on the matter in hand. Get to know Ashley Bowen, and his family.

'You have the connections,' Anthony Cooper had told her, his gaze severe. 'You were at Cambridge with his

friend Julian Knight. That is your way in. Go to the party. But don't do anything rash.' *Leave the important jobs to the men*, had been the subtext of that particular remark.

*No meddling.*

She walked down the hallway, passing a door that was ajar. Something – she couldn't say what – made her hesitate.

The room inside was dark, though there was the occasional sliver of light from the street lamps outside, and there was a definite breeze blowing, making the skin on her arms come up in goosebumps. Odd. She peered in as the curtains parted with the breeze and she thought she could see jagged edges of glass. A broken windowpane?

She stepped inside, her hand finding the light switch.

Nothing. No light. Strange.

She took her small torch out of her handbag and shone it around.

It was a study, that much she could tell. There was a bookcase along one wall, and dour pictures of landscapes hung on another. A grandfather clock ticked sonorously in the corner. There was a small grate with the remains of a fire. Two wing-backed chairs sat regally either side of the fireplace, and at the end of the room was a desk.

There was something in the air, as if it had been disturbed. A strange smell too, that overlaid the aroma of cigarette smoke and leather, one she recognised, but wouldn't acknowledge what it might be. Not here. Not in Chelsea.

She made her way to where the breeze was coming from and yes, she had been right, the sash window had two broken panes, and it was partially open, but there was

very little glass on the floor. Someone must have reached inside to push the latch before heaving up the window. She turned to the desk. There was a burgundy leather inlay with a sheet of well-used blotting paper, and a tortoiseshell and silver inkwell with matching stamp box. A letter opener lying by the inkwell looked as though it had been brought from India with its twisted ivory handle and sharp edge. She imagined Ralph Bowen opening important letters and signing documents at this desk. Perhaps there were stiff cards, stiff as a starched collar, with his name bossily imprinted upon them for him to make ready replies to invitations and enquiries.

Putting her handbag on the floor, she tried the top drawer. Locked. As were the other two. Damn. Should she use her picks?

Something made her stop and stand stock still. There it was again. The feeling that all was not well. A ripple in the atmosphere. And all at once a familiar smell. No, she had to be imagining things. She shook her head, directing the beam of her torch towards the side of the desk, to check, to be sure.

And there was a stockinged ankle, a sensible black shoe half on, half off a foot, and the smell was that of congealing blood.

Beattie went behind the desk and knelt down with some hope that she could help, that perhaps the woman had merely fallen and bumped her head.

The woman's throat had been cut with savagery and efficiency. Blood pooled blackly around her neck and under her shoulders. Beattie breathed through her nose, trying to rid herself of the ferrous smell coating the inside of her

mouth and throat. It had been a long time since she'd seen so much blood and she'd forgotten the iron stink of it, the viscosity of it. This had been a violent death.

The legs of the dead woman were splayed at an awkward angle, and her thick tweed skirt had ridden up over her knees. Beattie itched to pull it back down, but she knew she mustn't. Strands of inky black hair had come loose from the woman's bun and her dead eyes stared at Beattie. What had she seen in her final moments?

Such a lonely death.

She could do one thing for the woman. Gently, she closed those pleading eyes, gave her some peace.

Beattie sighed. It was time to get the family involved, whatever the consequences for her, but before she could act she heard a step, felt a movement of air, smelt a sharp, sour smell and an arm was wrapped around her neck and increasing pressure was applied to her throat. She struggled, trying to wrench herself free, to find his eyes with her fingers, but he was holding her too tightly, pinning her body against his.

Air. She couldn't get air. She couldn't breathe.