

Chapter One

Beautiful Beginnings and Some Badass Bookkeeping

Many years ago, somewhere in the garden of England, a sweet little ten-year-old boy called David Swallow was spending a glorious summer's day in a terribly English way in the company of the little girl he had just fallen in love with. To him, she looked like a little angel with tumbling blonde locks and bright blue eyes; the prettiest thing he had ever seen. And so he called her Angel and it stuck because it fitted her so well.

David was a true nature boy and delighted in showing his six-year-old companion the exquisite sights to be found in the woodlands in summer. And she, from her city background in smoky old London, watched him adoringly and followed his every move. First, they paddled in a little brook and caught sticklebacks in jam jars; just to look at, mind – David insisted they be returned to the stream. Then they stalked butterflies and David taught her the names of every one they saw. He pointed out mushrooms and berries, telling her which ones they could eat and which they couldn't. He shushed her, and they saw a little faun scampering off to find its mother. Over there a rabbit, here a squirrel, up there – songbirds and buzzards. The little girl took it all in with wonder and never forgot a moment of that special day.

Finally, exhausted and knowing that they had to be home very soon (lest their parents, who were having tea together, be cross), David made his pledge. He picked some daisies and made a garland to go around Angel's neck, and wove a crown of buttercups for her head. He swore that he loved her and would

marry her as soon as he was old enough, and they would live together in the woods forever. He kissed her shyly on the cheek, and she told him she loved him too.

They heard calling. Only then it wasn't a voice calling; it was a shrill ringing sound and the little girl was torn from her idyll; pulled from the grass, out of the woods, round the corner, over the hill, dragged through many years and finally back up Memory Lane to the ringing of a telephone.

'Good afternoon,' she shook her head awake. 'Damned right we will.'



In another place, but not so far away, Beryl sat at her home-office desk filing her nails and waiting for a call. She had recently parted company with an agency due to a complaint about her behaviour but, obviously, she couldn't tell the new agency that. She had found this agency from a strangely placed advert in the paper. They had readily accepted her story about her poor mother's recent demise which had freed her up for work again after a long spell of being a carer. In fact, they had set up a short assignment for her almost immediately and, naturally, she excelled. After that, she had been called in to the head office for a full and thorough assessment with the head of the agency herself; a formidable lady called Ms Elle Scarlett. Strangely, the assessment had been done with Ms Scarlett sitting behind a screen. Beryl guessed that it was a two-way screen but she couldn't be sure.

The psychometric tests she had been given surprised her. She was clever enough to know that there was an agenda behind the questions, but not quite proficient enough to spot all the pitfalls. Nonetheless, she had seemingly passed with flying colours and had been promised a very exciting and rewarding

contract. Now, looking at the telephone, as if by magic, it rang. She listened carefully and nodded enthusiastically.

‘Monday. Nine o’clock? Ask for Mr Porcine. Right you are. And you’ll email me...’ After the undercoat to her nails had been applied and dried, she looked at her emails. ‘A pork packing company,’ she recited. ‘This is going to be very meaty indeed.’ She began to read through the details with relish, now and then making notes in her tiny red leather-bound notebook. Being exceptionally efficient, she also searched the internet and studied everything she found on one Ernest Porcine, before squashing his digitised face under the lid of her laptop and smiling contentedly to herself.

It was Friday evening and Beryl began to prepare, leaving nothing to chance. She swept open her double-doored wardrobe, exposing a perfectly colour-coordinated assemblage of blouses, jumpers, cardigans, skirts and dresses, coupled with a collection of shoes which would have made Imelda Marcos partly swoon, partly vomit. Item after item was scrutinised and checked. A blouse discarded; a skirt moved a couple of places along; a dress extracted for hand washing; a pair of shoes pulled out for polishing. This will do for now, she decided confidently. There’s always time for shopping whether it’s necessary or not.

The remainder of Beryl’s weekend was spent working out; not her body – that was already rounded to perfection. She needed to practise her facial expressions, her postures and her appearance. All were filmed with her appropriately-placed camera then examined and retaken until at last, she believed she could even fool herself. The final touches were a new hair colour, bleached teeth and some major depilation, all pulled together with a light spray tan.



Monday morning Beryl was up and dressed ready for action. Turning to look at herself in the mirror, she smiled and wiggled her bosom against her crisp white blouse with the slightly dodgy middle button. Then she put on her thickest framed glasses and left her bedroom, pausing to flick the light switch before stepping flinchingly into her sensible lace-ups. At 8:55 precisely she was outside the office of Porkers Packing Plc. She rang the bell and cooed into the answering buzz. 'Cheryl Smythe, bookkeeper, here for Mr Porcine.' As the door bleeped, she pushed at it, taking care to whip off her glasses and smile winningly at the camera as she went in. She walked smartly up to the young receptionist's desk and spoke charmingly to her. 'Good morning. Pleased to meet you.' The receptionist looked up, disinterested.

'Cheryl Smythe?' Beryl nodded. 'Take a seat and I'll ring him.'

'But before you do,' Beryl began earnestly, 'Could you tell me something about Mr Porcine please? I've found that often it's best to talk to other staff members just to get an idea of what the boss is like.' The receptionist gave her a strange look.

'I'm sorry, my dear.' Beryl looked away, ashamed. 'I didn't mean to talk out of turn. Heavens! What will you think of me?'

'It's all right,' the girl whispered to her. 'Call me Caroline.'

Beryl turned back, just seeming to blink the faintest tear from her eye. Caroline was smiling sheepishly. 'I'm sure you'll be all right Cheryl,' Caroline whispered. 'He's a bit of a ladies' man if you know what I mean. If there's a chance later on I'll...'

Before Caroline had finished the sentence, the big door at the end of the corridor flung open and an impatient-looking rotund man with red cheeks and a comb-over strode up the corridor towards them both. He took one almost-scowling look

at Beryl and without any introduction, he snarled, 'I hope you're better than that last woman they sent. Right sourpuss she was.'

Beryl gave him her best simpering smile. 'I do my best, sir.'
'This way then.'

Beryl followed him back to his office, flashing a quick, nervous glance back at Caroline. She crossed her fingers, waved them in the air for Beryl to see and smiled sweetly at her.

Ernest sank into his big pink leather-cushioned chair, nodding at Beryl to sit opposite. He stared at her for a moment, giving Beryl time to wonder if, should he disrobe, she would be able to tell where the chair ended and he began.

'Now see here,' he began with authority. 'That last woman, she, well, let's just say she had a vivid imagination. She had ideas that I had designs upon her. Now let me tell you...' He searched on his desk for the paperwork. 'Let me tell you, Miss Smythe, I am a happily married man and I'm well fed at home thank you very much. I don't need to stray.' And in that moment, he was being totally sincere; Beryl seemingly had nothing to offer him.

'Gracious me, of course!' she exclaimed. 'I wouldn't dream...' she soothed. 'Let's get on to the matter in hand then. Now, about these books...' Beryl reached for her handbag and took out her ordinary black notebook and pen, but unfortunately, she dropped the pen. As she bent down, she accidentally popped that mischievous button and as she blushingly did it up again, she just caught Ernest's eyes staring at her cleavage and smiled to herself. Now she knew she could save the cow eyes and hair flick for later.

As it turned out, Ernest was away on business for the rest of the week but he gave Beryl access to his intranet work diary so that she could contact him if needed. He'd also shown her round

her office which was linked to his by a communicating door. It was small but well equipped and most importantly, completely private. Beryl was delighted; much better to have her own space, although she did pride herself on being able to manage with whatever resources she was given. Better still, she no longer had to wear the glasses or the sensible shoes while Ernest was away and she was itching to look around the place. Her very first reconnoitre was to survey the external premises in their entirety. She had absolutely no doubts about her abilities to do the job, but she did need to ingratiate herself with as many staff members as possible for her plan to work.



Tuesday morning, she made a point of taking a short but productive walk around the plant in her lunch hour. As she went out of the front door, she heard a wail above her.

‘Oi, you down there. I need a P!’

‘Gracious,’ Beryl replied to the man in overalls up the ladder. It was pretty obvious what he meant when she realised he was trying to replace a couple of the letters above the factory entrance, but having an extraordinary ability to blush at will, she was very soon a delicate shade of puce. The man scuttled down the ladder, taking his cap off as he reached the bottom, and almost bowed.

‘Err, so sorry, miss. I thought that little scamp John was down here. I was talking letters you know.’

Beryl smiled sweetly. ‘I know now,’ she whispered. ‘It was just a bit of a surprise.’

‘No offence?’ The man asked.

‘Absolutely not,’ replied Beryl. ‘May I introduce myself?’ She paused for his nod.

‘My name is Cheryl. I’m the new bookkeeper. Temporary, for now anyway.’

Half an hour later, Beryl knew almost everything there was to know about Kevin the head of maintenance, including his bank account details. But more importantly, she had also learned a little more about Ernest Porcine.

Beryl worked late that evening and saw Bert the security guard as he came by on his rounds. ‘I remember you from the camera,’ he exclaimed. All it took was a coy smile from Beryl and in a jiffy, she knew all about Bert’s troubles at home with his wife. ‘My missus likes to eat early,’ Bert began. ‘But this blimmin’ shift means I don’t get home till nine. If only I could nip home, have my tea and come back... well that would be perfect.’ Beryl listened sympathetically.

‘I’m sure something could be worked out,’ she mused. ‘Maybe when I get to know Mr Porcine a little better...’ Bert was rattled.

‘Don’t you go to that man on my account. Don’t say I said, but he’s a wrong’un and no mistake.’ Beryl nodded wisely.

‘Well maybe I can help anyway,’ she said, smiling sweetly.



While Ernest was away exercising his wallet to keep him in female company, Beryl was pleased with her progress. She had dealt efficiently with all the business demands and most especially meeting the key staff members. Tom Higginbottom was next on her list and the most important. He was the supervisor of the processing plant. Beryl spied him sitting on a bench outside the factory that lunchtime and introduced herself.

‘I’m Cheryl, the new bookkeeper.’

‘Clever lady,’ Tom replied. ‘Never one much for figures

meself. I'm more handy with me hands.'

'And that is something I've never been,' Beryl mused, holding out her hands expressively. 'I'd love to be able to do more with my hands than just type and add up. I've always wanted to be able to mould things with my hands.' Tom's eyes widened at her gestures.

'I'm sure you could do anything you put your mind to.'

Before long they were chatting like old friends – or at least, Beryl was listening intently to him; especially the bits about the cutting machinery. Tom, who had continued without interruption, was very impressed and somewhat taken with Cheryl.

'It's not all women that are interested in my job. Normally it's a turn off, I'm told.'

'I find it fascinating,' Beryl gushed honestly. 'How a whole carcass can be turned into all the cuts with such precision. And then you use all the other bits to automatically make sausages. So perfect, everything is used almost without any intervention at all.'

'Aye. We do have the latest technology. I'll give Mr Porcine that; he does know how to spend his money to make money. In his father's day, there'd have been lines of men and women chopping away...'

'Very impressive,' Beryl replied. 'I do like big plants and machinery.' She smiled sweetly at him. 'And a jumbo sausage.' At that, various organs were activated, especially Tom's pounding heart. Respite came courtesy of Beryl's ringing mobile; one of her preprogrammed precision calls to herself. 'I'm so sorry Tom, I must take this,' Beryl smiled and got up to move away. Tom nodded with relief and crossed his legs firmly, trying to stop his face from

going beetroot; it was a long time since any woman had affected him quite like this Cheryl one. She didn't look particularly sexy, he noted, but by God, she could get his juices going. Beryl, the very picture of innocence, merely walked to the end of the path with a slow, knowing sway of her ample buttocks, then went back into her office and sat at her desk.

She looked around furtively as if someone was watching her, and she wasn't wrong.



Somewhere else, a thin hard-faced woman was watching a screen. 'How's she coming along, Elle?' said a voice behind her. 'Any good?'

'She's doing quite nicely,' Elle replied. 'I think she might be an asset. Maybe even one of the best.'



Beryl had been invited to the pub for girls-only drinks that evening. It was Caroline's birthday and Beryl went along happy to join in but held her own tongue while waiting for the Snakebites to loosen the others'. She was not disappointed. After pleasantries had been exchanged, all the conversation revolved around Ernest Porcine and his foibles.

'Gracious! I'm sure he can't be that bad. He was perfectly polite to me,' Beryl exclaimed.

'I bet he ogled your boobs,' someone said.

'Don't ever bend over, or he'll accidentally brush past you with his fun-sized Mars bar,' another added. Caroline herself was more circumspect.

'This is why I've only invited us girls,' she stated. 'He's tried it on with all of us, one way or another, and that poor Mavis...' Before long, Beryl had found out all about poor Mavis; how

Ernest had sacked her when she refused to play with his porker and how he'd stitched her up, accusing her of stealing from the company.

'Why on earth do you still work for him?' Beryl asked, genuinely perplexed.

'There's not many employers around here,' another girl piped up. 'It's all right for them that's got qualifications, like yourself, but for us locals, there's not much of a choice.'

'That's awful,' said Beryl sincerely. She went home that night and typed up her notes. She always tried to ignore superfluous office gossip and maintain a professional distance, but this man was clearly a pig in every sense of the word. She reviewed her plan and decided to raise it to level three.

Friday afternoon brought Beryl her first real crisis. One of the biggest suppliers, and he really was big, hadn't been paid on time and he was very angry. Caroline rang Beryl to warn her that Farmer Styes was on the warpath.

'I've told him Mr Porcine's not here but he wouldn't...' Beryl heard Caroline's pleas at the other end of the phone. 'No Farmer Styes, you can't go in there...' Sure enough, just as the conversation tailed off, Beryl heard a loud thudding noise followed by her door bursting open so hard it popped a hinge. She held back her shock very well as she turned round and looked the intruder over. This was a monster of a man; ruddy-faced, bald on top with ginormous orange sideburns and dressed in a checked suit big enough to play giant chess on. He made Ernest look like a chipolata in comparison.

'My goodness!' Beryl clutched her chest like a maiden about to be ravished.

'Eh?'

‘Can I help you, sir? I am Cheryl Smythe, the new bookkeeper.’ Felled by her voice, the farmer stopped in his tracks and took in the loveliness of Beryl, sans spectacles and with heaving ample bosom. King Kong morphed into a lovesick puppy in an instant.

‘Oh, my dear,’ he slimed, ‘I do beg your pardon. I was looking for that bas— was looking for Mr Porcine. Is he in?’

‘Please sit down,’ said Beryl, pointing to the visitor’s chair and hoping he would fit in it. ‘Mr Porcine is away on business. He won’t be back until Monday. Can I be of any assistance?’ Farmer Styes was so taken aback he was quite unable to speak. ‘Shall I check your account with us?’ Beryl asked helpfully. There was still silence as the poor man went from pink to purple. When he began puffing, Beryl walked a very slow jiggly sort of walk to the water fountain just outside her office and came back with a glass of ice-cold water. If she had thrown it all over him, Farmer Styes wouldn’t have minded one bit. Instead, he took the cup from her and knocked it back in one.

‘Never you mind, miss,’ he spluttered when some of his senses had returned. ‘It can wait till Monday.’

‘Are you sure?’

‘Will you still be here?’ he simpered.

‘I will,’ she nodded. Farmer Styes got up and without another word left the office a good deal slower than he had arrived. Beryl, when she was sure he had gone, gave a tiny sigh of relief. But only a very small one. Big suppliers – and he was one of the biggest – were invaluable.

Beryl was still working at knocking off time when Bert the security guard came round. ‘I’m so sorry,’ she explained when she saw him. ‘Farmer Styes came in and made me a little behind.’

I wouldn't call it little, Bert thought to himself, *nice and rounded!* 'He can be a bit tricky. I hope he didn't upset you?'

'No,' Beryl smiled. 'I'm fine, but I wanted to make sure I locked up properly. I know the factory is open tomorrow, but the office is closed isn't it?'

'Don't you worry Miss Cheryl, I'll sort it,' Bert assured her.

'I was just thinking,' Beryl pondered. 'Perhaps you should show me what to do. Then, if you like, you can nip off for your tea. I don't mind working late.' Before Bert could say 'security' he was giving Beryl a guided tour of the whole site including, thanks to her photographic memory, all the code numbers to the safe and access points to the factory. Then, dashing off home, he left Beryl to savour the experience.

Bert was very apologetic when he returned an hour later. 'I'm sorry Miss Cheryl. I should have let you get home. I'm sure you've got lots to do. Husband? Kids?' He began to inquire, but Beryl put him right.

'My personal life never ever,' she looked at him almost sternly, 'gets in the way of my professional life. So never you mind about that.'

'Right you are,' replied Bert, a little dumbfounded. He had never met anyone quite like her before. Beryl said a charming 'goodnight' and dropped the spare set of keys he had so adoringly handed her, carefully into her handbag. Then she headed off to The White Horse where she had a very important appointment of her own with someone from the agency for her first week's debriefing.



That someone had taken great delight in reading the results of Beryl's psychometric tests. 'Devious, conniving, untruthful and

loyal only when absolutely necessary,' was the conclusion, and this was looking very promising.

At seven o'clock precisely, Beryl walked into the pub and looked around. She had no idea what Ms Scarlett even looked like; all the face to face stuff had been done with an underling. Going further in she saw a strange-looking, impossibly thin figure dressed in black. Her face was stern and she had the sort of eyes that could burn right through you. She nodded at Beryl, who tentatively walked over to join her at the table.

'Good evening, Cheryl Smythe,' the woman said. 'Or should I say, Beryl Braithwaite?' Beryl gulped and sat down.

Later that night, a shell-shocked and dazed Beryl arrived home to kick off her shoes and reach for the gin. She knew there was something odd about the agency, but never in her wildest dreams would she have thought... Now she had two choices. She could leave now, making her excuses to Mr Porcine and try another, rather more normal agency. However, she had been told very clearly that there would be serious 'implications' if she did. By that, Beryl assumed that she would not get a reference. Well, she'd been there umpteen times. New alias, new fake passport – not really a problem; except that she'd done it a little too often and was now treading a very thin line.

The other choice was to stick with the agency, but she had no idea what this meant either; it was all far too vague. She was expected to carry on as if nothing had happened. She would get her wages as usual, but then there would be a deal to be struck. This felt a little like protection money to Beryl. On the other hand, they did apparently offer a great deal of protection. What had upset her most was that they seemed to know not only everything she'd done at Porker's, and everybody she'd spoken

to, but they'd hinted at some of her earlier escapades as well. They had even mentioned Billy. So spooked was Beryl by this that she stripped off, pausing briefly to admire her generous proportions in the mirror, before checking every single piece of clothing for bugs. But no, there was nothing to be found; even under her special microscope. Slipping into something genuinely more comfortable, she found temporary solace eating a pizza in front of the TV before slowly nodding off on a gentle haze of alcohol, just waking in time to crawl into bed. Beryl never slept on sofas.



Elle Scarlett was also having an unsettling evening sitting in her flat. It wasn't Beryl she worried about; that situation looked very promising indeed. Instead, she was embarking on her Five-Year Plan revision, but this year it happened to correspond to her fortieth birthday. This wasn't any common old mid-life crisis; this was major stuff. She was the owner and manager of one of the most successful employment agencies in London – well, it was if you counted all the black-market money, but that wasn't the point. Her business goals were meant to be her life goals and, once again, she'd gone off track. It was time to move things forward and hit forty running.