Lovereading.co.uk
Helping you choose your next book

You loved your last book...but what are you going to read next?

Using our unique guidance tools, Love**reading** will help you find new books to keep you inspired and entertained.

Opening Extract from...

The Beautiful Dead

Written by Belinda Bauer

Published by Bantam Press

All text is copyright © of the author

This Opening Extract is exclusive to Love**reading**.
Please print off and read at your leisure.

The Beautiful Dead

Belinda Bauer



BANTAM PRESS

LONDON • NEW YORK • TORONTO • SYDNEY • AUCKLAND

TRANSWORLD PUBLISHERS
61–63 Uxbridge Road, London W5 5SA
www.penguin.co.uk

Transworld is part of the Penguin Random House group of companies
whose addresses can be found at global.penguinrandomhouse.com



First published in Great Britain in 2016 by Bantam Press
an imprint of Transworld Publishers

Copyright © Belinda Bauer 2016

Belinda Bauer has asserted her right under the Copyright,
Designs and Patents Act 1988 to be identified as the author of this work.

This book is a work of fiction and any resemblance to actual persons,
living or dead, is purely coincidental.

Every effort has been made to obtain the necessary permissions with
reference to copyright material, both illustrative and quoted. We apologize
for any omissions in this respect and will be pleased to make the
appropriate acknowledgements in any future edition.

A CIP catalogue record for this book
is available from the British Library.

ISBNs 9780593075517 (hb)
9780593075524 (tpb)

Typeset in 11.75/15pt Minion by Jouve (UK), Milton Keynes
Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, Bungay, Suffolk

Penguin Random House is committed to a sustainable
future for our business, our readers and our planet. This book
is made from Forest Stewardship Council® certified paper.



1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

Thanks to the Cardiff Poker Tour for all
the laughs and free money . . .

Look at the beauty that only death can bring.

See Medusa's raft, where the waxen corpses recline careless on the splintered timbers, fists unclenched and eyes closed on the horrors of the world. At peace at last, their faces are serene, while those of the luckless survivors twist in shipwrecked shock.

See Death claim his Maiden, his flesh still rotting on his bones. See her turn her head away in modest horror – while one sly arm embraces him . . .

See the two martyrs in the arena as the snarling tiger reaches them. They, too, are beautiful. Calm – even as the first claw punctures the flesh. Their hands are linked in the certain knowledge that the agony of existence will pass and that they will be together on the other side . . .

A great artist knows how to lead us uncomplaining out of this life and into the next. The Old Masters did it with china-white and elegant hands, with lashes closed on pale cheeks – with stoic mourners and tragic heroes.

Who wouldn't want to be remembered thus? Who wouldn't relish everlasting life in a world that's kinder than this one? Who wouldn't want to be so beautiful?

Be honest, dear reader.

Who wouldn't rather be dead?

PART ONE

1

1 December

Layla Martin's shoes were killing her.

She had bought them on Thursday even though they rubbed her little toes.

A hundred and thirty pounds. A third of her weekly wage.

She'd worn them on Thursday night and again on Friday night while making cheese on toast for tea. And she had worn them to work on a Saturday even though she knew she'd be the only person on the eighth floor – quite possibly in the whole building. She'd wanted to break them in for Monday, when she was planning to walk past the glass-walled office of the new accounts manager at least twenty times, because he had a sports car and a great bum, and the ridiculously high heels made her calves look fabulous.

But now it was those very same heels that she was running in.

Running for her life, she had to assume.

And, as the machine-gun clatter of her brand-new heels rang through the empty stairwell, any consciousness Layla Martin could spare from the terror of being chased by a madman was consumed by the desperate wish that she'd come to work in her usual weekend garb of jeans, jumper and Reeboks.

Because right here, right now, her shoes might mean the difference between life and death . . .

*

The man had appeared across the wide open-plan office. She had looked up from the ToppFlyte file and seen him standing at the lift. It had given her a little jolt of surprise and fear. Silly, really – in broad daylight in the middle of London. But she was alone on the eighth floor, and that made all the difference.

Still, he was an ordinary-looking man. Not weird. A delivery guy, most likely – or lost.

'Hi,' she'd said. 'Can I help you?'

'I am a friend,' he'd said. 'I am not fierce.'

She'd frowned. 'Say again?'

By way of an answer, the ordinary man had put his gloved hand inside his coat and drawn out a knife.

Layla Martin had never been in danger before, but she'd hesitated for only a second before leaping to her feet, grabbing her bag and running.

Because he'd been blocking her way to the lift, she'd headed for the stairs . . .

Layla didn't scream. The thought of the sound bouncing endlessly up and down the stairwell only frightened her more – and she was trying not to panic, trying to *think*. She ran as fast as she dared in those *bloody shoes*, clutching the black-plastic-covered handrail in case she lost her footing, watching the stairs blur underfoot with eyes that bulged in concentration, desperate not to fall, her long blonde hair swinging into her mouth, her bag bumping her ribs.

There would be someone on the fourth floor. She had once come halfway up in the lift with a woman who'd bitched about working at weekends.

Layla stopped above the fourth-floor landing, panting, gasping. She forced herself to be quiet so she could listen.

She heard nothing. No one.

Maybe he wasn't coming after her. Maybe he'd never planned to. Maybe he hadn't even had a knife.

He had though . . .

She started downstairs again – slowly this time – her knees like jelly and her toes on fire.

She pulled open the fire-escape door marked with a giant 4 and took a tentative step on to the carpet.

'Hello!'

The lift door slid open. The man was inside. Calm and still, and with the knife – it *was* a knife! – held casually by his side.

He smiled.

Layla gave a shriek of shock, fear and disbelief. She swung her bag at his head, hitting him a glancing blow, showering him with assorted bag-junk, seeing him flinch and duck. Then she turned back into the stairwell and ran downstairs again.

At the next landing she kicked off her heels and left them there.

This was better.

Layla was not that fit, but she was young and slim and – without the killer heels – she was nimble. She started to get into a rhythm. She barely touched the stairs now, leaping from five or six treads up on to each landing, grabbing the rail as it turned, using it to slingshot around the blind concrete corners. Somewhere behind her she heard a door slam shut. But it was a long way back.

He wasn't catching her. *He wasn't catching her.* She was going to make it!

The sobs that had choked her became hysterical glee in her throat. Her stockinged feet skidded and slid but she *used* that. She worked it, baby! She had it all under control.

Run jump grab skid turn . . . Run jump grab skid turn . . .

It was a helter-skelter without the mats, but with added terror. But that was *good*, because it was all going to be OK in the end.

With manic laughter bubbling inside her, Layla burst through the door marked G and into the vast, bright lobby with its shiny polished floor. She turned towards the exit so fast that she skidded

over on to her right side with a bang, but was on her feet again before the fall even registered.

The door was right there.

Escape was in sight. More than in sight . . .

Escape was panoramic.

Coldharbour was a new building and the lobby was a sleek and shiny glass-walled, marble-floored expanse that still smelled of stone dust, and not yet of people. The front wall was entirely glass – smoked grey and impenetrable from outside; but from inside Layla could see that, just thirty yards away, Oxford Street was teeming with Christmas shoppers beating a path through dirty snow.

She ran to the door, fumbling under her armpit and into her bag, her fingers spreading panic among the random objects, clutching and sifting with unaccustomed urgency.

The keys. The *keys*!

At weekends they had to let themselves in and keep the doors locked. Something about cutting security costs. The cheap bastards. She'd like to see what they thought about cutting costs after *this* little episode . . .

A door clicked behind her and she turned and saw the man standing at the entrance to the stairwell.

Not coming for her, not running; just standing, watching her escape.

She cackled at him like a witch.

'*FUCK* you!' she shrilled. 'Fuck *YOU*!'

She turned back to the door. Mentally she was already outside. Already safe.

Where were the *keys*?

Then she heard them – that wonderful chink of familiar metal – and for a glorious split second Layla was *on* Oxford Street in all its slushy glory. She was stepping out on to the crowded pavement alongside that bottle-blonde woman and her Goth daughter. She

was brushing past that young man with the cheap bouquet, who had his back to the glass wall and who was looking up and down the road, waiting for someone special. She could already feel the wet city snowflakes melting on her hot cheeks . . .

And then she realized that her keys were jangling *behind* her.

With one clutching hand still in her bag, Layla looked around slowly.

The man had her keys.

Maybe they'd hit him in the head when she'd swung her bag; maybe she'd never put them *in* her bag and he'd picked them up off her desk.

It didn't matter how he had them.

He had them.

And she didn't.

He gave a half-smile and tossed the keys a few inches into the air again. They settled in his palm with a sound like money. From here Layla could see the key ring that her flatmate, Dougie, had bought her at the petrol station they used on the Old Kent Road. Lisa Simpson nestled snugly between the black-leather fingers of the man with the knife.

He had driven her down here.

Layla realized that now. Now that it was too late.

He could have killed her on the eighth floor; he could have killed her on the fourth. He could probably have caught her in the stairwell and killed her there. But instead he'd herded her to this very place – like a dumb sheep on that TV show with farmers and collies.

She could see it in his forgettable face: he had her right where he wanted her. Right here in this bright open space with people passing by.

'Be of good cheer,' he said. 'I am not fierce.' And although he did not speak loudly, his voice swelled to fill the marble lobby so that it came at her gently from all sides.

The man put her keys in his pocket and started to walk towards her, almost casually, the hand with the knife in it swinging gently by his side and his murmur caressing her like a breeze.

'I do not come to punish.'

She turned and beat the door with her fists. The building was new; nothing rattled, nothing budged, and the heartless glass swallowed the sound smoothly and burped nothing back.

Layla took the deepest breath since her very first, twenty-four years earlier, and screamed.

Nothing came out but a strangled squeak that scurried about the echoing lobby like a silly white mouse. She tried again, but her throat was so tight that air could barely get through in either direction.

Suddenly drowning in fear, Layla pressed her back against the cold glass – an infinite half-inch from where people were safe – and waited for the man to reach her.

He did.

'Softly shall you sleep in my arms,' he murmured kindly.

Right up until the very last second, Layla Martin didn't believe that she would – or could – be murdered. She knew that *something* would save her.

It didn't.



The knife had gone in; the blood had come out, warming the killer's hands with the joy of creation.

At first the girl had flip-flopped like a fish on the floor. But once she'd understood, she'd calmed down, and died as she should.

Beautifully.

Searching his face with her grateful eyes until they'd faded to ash.

And as she had emptied, so he had filled up.

For the first time in a long time, his heart had started to beat, and he had cried with relief.

Thank you, he'd sobbed against her clotted ear. *Thank you.*

And knew he would do this again.

Wanted to. *Needed* to.

Looked forward to it.

2

Eve Singer threw up her breakfast into the shiny white toilet. Toast and Marmite.

She knelt on the glittery black floor and rested her cheek against the bowl – her straight dark hair bunched in her fist at the nape of her neck – waiting to see if she was going to throw up last night's Chinese takeaway too. While her stomach thought about it, Eve stared dully at the words under the rim: Armitage Shanks.

Quality.

She had thrown up into many toilet bowls since starting work at iWitness News and thought of Armitage Shanks as an old friend – a comforter who supported her head with a cool porcelain palm while she retched and groaned. There was Mrs Twyfords and Dr Imperial too, and any number of lesser manufacturers whose names she'd registered vaguely over the years, but she always felt most at home vomiting into a Shanks bowl.

Being a TV crime reporter was thrilling, but the sight of blood made Eve sick. And after three years of gory murder scenes she'd had plenty of opportunities to perfect her emetic technique.

Today's was a belter.

She hadn't been able to see a thing from Oxford Street because of the one-way glass, so after doing her piece to camera she had sneaked in through a side door manned by a newbie copper, who had been no match for her combination of threats and wheedling – a technique her cameraman, Joe Ward, called 'threedling'.

The cop had let her in, and Eve almost wished he hadn't.

The body had been removed, but the blood alone had been enough.

Before her stomach had twisted over on itself, Eve had registered the sheer shocking *quantity* of it. Splatters up the glass walls, and a wide, calm, maroon lake, as if someone had gripped the young woman in giant hands and squeezed her like toothpaste until she was empty. And from one edge, a trail of red footprints, where the killer had climbed out of the lake on to dry marble land and walked out of the front door.

Eve dry-heaved into the bowl again at the memory and then laid her forehead on the rim, gasping and trying to think about starlight and ponies. That wasn't easy when she worked on what everybody but Human Resources called 'the meat beat'. An endless round of bodies, black bags and bloodstains.

She was twenty-nine years old, but on days like this she felt forty. Already she had an ulcer that flared at moments of tension. Probably an ulcer. She hoped it was an ulcer, because she didn't have the time to let a doctor find out for sure.

'You OK?'

A man's voice outside the door.

Eve lifted her head only long enough and high enough to give her the strength to sound pissed off.

'Do I *sound* OK?'

She laid her face down again and felt the cold sweat drying on the back of her neck.

Bloody Guy Smith.

She hated people knowing she was squeamish. You had to be tough in this business. If you weren't tough you were picked off and brought down like a wounded wildebeest.

Especially if you were a wounded female wildebeest.

Eve spat and grimaced into the porcelain bowl. Her stomach had apparently decided to call it quits, so she got slowly to her feet and flushed, then opened the cubicle door.

Guy Smith from News 24/7 was checking his eyebrows in a mirror ringed by showbizzy light bulbs.

Eve rinsed her mouth and washed her face, then pulled a paper towel from the dispenser.

'Sick, eh?' said Guy.

Eve gave her reflection a cursory glance, then said sharply, 'Dodgy curry last night, that's all.'

He grinned slyly and jerked his thumb at the door. 'No. I mean, whoever did this. Sick.'

Eve eyed him suspiciously. She didn't trust Guy Smith any further than she could throw him. He was as vain as a teenage girl and lied like one too. Plus he routinely spoke to her breasts, as if tits were the windows to the soul. She balled up the used towel and tossed it into the bin.

'What are you doing in here, Guy?'

He shrugged. 'Free world, last time I looked.'

'This is the Ladies, you know.'

Guy licked his thumb and pushed an errant brow back into place. 'Are you always this tetchy?'

'Yes.'

She brushed down the knees of her good black slacks and walked out, hoping to leave him behind.

But Guy followed her through the rear of the vast lobby, peopled by police and forensic teams. It was late now, and the Oxford Street Christmas lights glittered beyond the windowed walls.

Two policemen stood deep in conversation, reflected in the dark-red puddle where the victim had bled out. One of them was Detective Superintendent Huw Rees. He had no love for reporters, so they stayed close to the wall and left in practised silence.

Once outside, Guy walked on, but Eve stopped to smile at the young officer who'd let her in. 'Thanks,' she said. 'I owe you a drink.' She dug about in her bag. 'I'm Eve,' she said, although he probably knew that already. 'Here's my card.'

It was a good card. She had designed it herself. Black, with white type and a single blood spatter in one corner.

EVE SINGER
iWITNESS NEWS
CRIME CORRESPONDENT

'Thanks,' he said.

'My mobile number's on the back,' Eve pointed out. 'So keep it just in case you ever come across anything interesting.'

'OK,' he said enthusiastically. 'I will.'

She knew he would. They always did. They always called her and she always took them for a drink to let them know they were all on the same side in the war on crime – and that was usually enough to make her the first civilian they called when something bloody happened. She couldn't have done her job without this network of insiders she cultivated. Police and paramedics and firemen and coroners' officers and court ushers. She thought of them as her safety net for all those times when she needed a free pass, a blind eye, a nod and a wink. Those times when she needed an *edge*. Last Christmas she'd bought an ambulance driver named Mandy Flynn a bottle of pink champagne, and today Mandy had told her the dead girl's name. By tonight, iWitness News would have a photo of Layla Martin, while News 24/7 would still be calling her 'a twenty-four-year-old woman', and Eve's job would be safe.

For another few days, at least.

Mentally, Eve flipped through the next few hours. What needed to be done, who needed to be called. Mrs Solomon was always first on the list. Eve wouldn't be home before midnight and that meant paying the sitter double time.

Couldn't be helped. Murder was murder.

Guy Smith fell into step beside her. 'Do we know who she is yet?' he asked, then corrected himself. '*Was*.'

Eve only shrugged. For her to succeed, Guy Smith must fail. It wasn't her nature, but it was the way her world worked, and they all understood.

It was five thirty and already dark, and the Christmas lights that spanned Oxford Street made everything look like a film set. A carefully lit thriller, with crowds of curious shoppers and office-party drinkers craning for a glimpse of something they didn't really want to see.

'Want to share a cab?' said Guy, waving his arm. 'My bloody monkey's buggered off.'

He meant that his cameraman had left without him. Joe had left too, but that was fine. Eve always did her report *before* throwing up.

'I'm not going your way,' she said. It was true. She wanted to go back to the office to recut another Layla Martin package so it looked fresh for the breakfast bulletins.

'Well, maybe I'm going yours,' he said with a suggestive wink.

Eve wasn't flattered. Guy Smith's flirting was indiscriminate. She wasn't even his type. She'd seen him with his type at last year's NTS awards – a giggling teenager who had left the after-party falling-down drunk and carrying her shoes.

A black cab stopped and Guy held open the door invitingly.

'Night,' she said, and walked away under the lights of the Christmas-card street.