



# Meant TO BE Me



Wendy Hudson

# Chapter 1

THE BRIDGE WAS SO CLOSE.

Eilidh huffed a breath and swore aloud. “Fuck.” The word came out in a prolonged wheeze. “C’mon, Grey. Nearly there. You’re. Nearly. Bloody. There.” It was a straight stretch now, less than fifty metres. She screwed her face up and focused on every step that pounded the pavement.

“Yes!” She touched the middle lamppost, threw her arms in the air, and then bent double and concentrated on taking long, slow breaths rather than the ragged ones causing stars in her vision. Finally, able to stand upright again, she leaned her thighs against the cold brick of the bridge wall and braced her arms on top of it, taking a moment to admire the view.

The River Ness wove its slow path below her. At this time of year, meandering blocks of ice jostled one another on their journey, destined to melt before they reached the great Loch Ness. Streetlights lining its banks still projected their yellow orbs; the sun hadn’t yet appeared to snuff them out. The castle on the hill glowed white under blinding floodlight, creating a ghostly effect that was surreal yet friendly, unimposing despite its fortress status.

Her gaze flitted from one landmark to the next, but always returned to the shadow of Ben Wyvis almost thirty miles in the distance. She scanned its shadowy outline as her breathing slowed and her heartrate returned to normal.

An impatient voice snapped her out of the reverie, and she turned to see a harried-looking woman headed her way, muttering obscenities into her phone. It was held in place with her shoulder, while one hand balanced a tray of four coffees and the other rooted in a huge handbag slung over the opposite shoulder.

Eilidh knew she should have called out; she saw it coming. One bag strap slipped from the stranger's shoulder, followed in slow motion by the other. As she came level with Eilidh, the weight of the bag yanked the crook of her arm and the tray toppled. In her vain attempt to save the cups of coffee, the phone dropped with a clatter alongside one unlucky cup.

"Oh shit." Eilidh reached to catch the underside of the bag in order to relieve the weight. "Are you okay?"

The woman flinched at first, then looked embarrassed. She glanced from the precarious tray to her phone on the ground and then the bag Eilidh was holding. "Aye, aye. I'm fine. Thank you. Would you mind?" She held the tray in Eilidh's direction, and Eilidh dutifully took it.

The woman bent to retrieve her phone, and Eilidh winced when she saw the cracked blank screen. "Not a great start to the day, eh?"

The woman shook her head. "At least it was only the boss's coffee I dropped." She retrieved the now-empty cup from its brown puddle on the pavement and jammed it back in to the tray. "She never returns the favour anyway."

Eilidh chuckled. "I'd call that karma, then."

Knackered phone in bag, bag back on shoulder, with spots of coffee wiped from her sleeve, the woman was set. She reached for the tray. "Thanks again..." She drew the last word out, waiting for a name.

"Eilidh. And it was no problem..."

"Darcy." The woman returned her name and held Eilidh's gaze for a moment. She gestured around them with her free hand. "It's rare I see anyone about the town this time of the morning. Especially on a Saturday. What on earth forces you out of bed to run before the sun comes up? In minus temperatures, no less?"

Eilidh patted a gloved hand to her tummy. "Christmas belly. It's my resolution to finally get rid of it."

"Finally? It's only the eighth of January."

"Ah, but this band of chub has been hanging around since at least Christmas 2011."

Darcy laughed. "Oh, I know how that goes. Good intentions in January, then suddenly you're scoffing chocolate eggs the entire Easter weekend."

"Exactly," Eilidh agreed. "Then it's summer barbecues and beer gardens, followed by an autumn of eating half a loaf with every bowl of broth."

### Meant To Be Me

“And then we’re back to Christmas.” Darcy nodded her resignation. “I feel your struggle. It’s a vicious circle.”

“Indeed. Hence the six a.m. self-inflicted-pain regime. What’s your excuse for being up at this ungodly hour on a weekend?”

“Conference call to Hong Kong. They’re seven hours ahead and, apparently, it’s urgent. So...” Darcy took a cup from the tray and offered it Eilidh’s way. “I can only offer black, no sugar, I’m afraid. I’ll never survive if I don’t get my fix, and my work pal will be raging if she doesn’t get hers either. The other guy. Meh. He’ll live.”

Eilidh waved her away. “Not for me, thanks, and also not necessary. Honest. I need to get moving again and get home before I start seizing up in this cold anyway.”

“Okay, well, thanks again for your help.” Darcy glanced at her watch. “Crap, I better get a move on too. It was really nice to meet you.” She held Eilidh’s gaze for a moment longer and seemed about to say something more before changing her mind. Her head dropped. “Your shoelace is undone.”

Eilidh looked down. Oh, hell, this meant she had to squat. “Cheers for that. I hope the call goes okay.”

Darcy smiled and turned to go. Eilidh watched her a moment, making sure she didn’t turn back and catch the grimace that would accompany her squat to tie her lace.

As was her luck, midway down to the ground, Darcy turned and headed back her way. Eilidh pasted a smile on her face despite the burning in her thighs. “Hey again.”

“Hey. Erm...” Darcy shifted nervously, and Eilidh wished she’d spit it out. Her hamstrings were screaming. “I know this is random. It’s six-thirty in the morning, and we’ve only just met but...well, maybe I could buy you a coffee you might actually enjoy? To say thanks for being so kind.”

Dammit. Eilidh was pretty sure she was stuck down there now. She held up a finger. “Give me one sec.” Her gloved fingers fumbled impatiently before the lace was finally tied. Then she held up an arm. “You could return the kindness right now and help me up if you like?”

Darcy chuckled and reached a hand down for support. “I guess the seizing has already started.”

Eilidh struggled to her feet with a groan. “Yup. I’m going to pay big time for this later.” She leaned back against the bridge wall. “Thanks.”

Wendy Hudson

“You’re welcome.” Darcy tugged at the thick green woollen scarf wrapped around her neck. “Does this mean we’re even and you don’t fancy that coffee?”

It finally clicked in Eilidh’s mind that Darcy wasn’t asking to say thank you. She was asking her out. Holy crap. It had been a long time. “Sure I do.” Her mouth engaged before her brain, and Darcy’s smile stopped Eilidh from backtracking. “You got a pen in that shoulder suitcase you call a bag?”

After much rummaging, Darcy produced a pen and a crumpled receipt, and Eilidh dutifully recited her number onto it. Her real number. She was doing this. She was inviting Darcy, another woman, to get in touch. To take her for coffee.

Darcy held up her broken phone as if to remind Eilidh. “As this has failed me, I’m going to be one of those people and give you a business card.” She seemed a little tentative when offering it over. “And now you know where I work.”

“*Infinite Energy Renewables. Darcy Harris. Senior Engineer.* Wow. That sounds cool.”

Darcy shrugged self-consciously. “Not really. It’s mostly dealing with tedious amounts of data.” She glanced at her watch again. “Okay, now I definitely have to go. It really was lovely to meet you, Eilidh. I’ll text you once my phone is fixed. Yeah?”

“Sure.” Eilidh raised a hand as Darcy headed toward the high street. “I’ll look forward to it.”

## Chapter 2

DARCY MANAGED TO MAKE IT the rest of the way to the office with the three remaining coffees intact.

“It’s six forty-five on a Saturday morning and you’re smiling.” Anja popped her head above their desk divider. “There’s something wrong with you.”

“Moi?” Darcy held a hand to her chest. “I’m perfectly fine.”

“Which is why there’s something wrong with you.” Anja skirted around her desk and nabbed a coffee from the tray. She popped the top and sniffed. “Ah. Chai latte. Have I told you today that I love you?”

“You talking to me or the coffee?”

Anja took a sip and sighed with pleasure. “Both.”

Darcy relieved the tray of her own drink before turning and leaving the last one on Joe’s desk. It was guaranteed he’d arrive with a minute to spare before their seven o’clock conference call.

“So why are you so perfectly fine this morning?” Anja perched on her desk and raised an inquisitive eyebrow.

Darcy craned her neck toward their boss’s office. The door was shut, and being Saturday, no one else was around. “I think I may have got myself a date.”

“A date? Really?” Anja seemed surprised, which irked Darcy a little. “I thought you were done with that given the last disaster.”

She waved her hand dismissively. “Who hasn’t said that after a break-up? Or a no-show, as the case was last time. And the time before that.”

“And the one before that,” Anja added with a wry smile.

“Whatever.” Darcy wasn’t deterred. “We all know it really means: done with it until the next one comes along. Or jogs along like this morning.”

“You were jogging?” Now Anja’s eyebrows had shot to her hairline. “Seriously, what’s wrong with you?”

“Cheeky bitch. She was jogging, I was on my way to work. She helped me out when I dropped the boss’s coffee, and my bloody phone, so to say thanks I asked if I could buy her a cup sometime.”

“Smooth.”

“It wasn’t really. But she said yes, so that’s all that matters.”

“Who said yes to what?” Joe breezed out of the lift ruffling snow from his hair. “Snow’s on again.”

“None of your business.” Darcy glared at Anja with her ‘keep your mouth shut’ eyes. “And no shit.” She pointed at the floor-to-ceiling windows that made up the entire front of their building. It made her almost dizzy to look out. The snow was falling thick and fast.

“Aw, don’t be like that. You two never let me in on the gossip. You’re so sexist.”

Darcy nearly choked on her first sip of coffee. “Sexist? Are you kidding? More like because you’re the boss’s pet. You can’t be trusted.”

“Pfft, that’s bollocks and you know it. She’d let you away with bloody murder, Darcy.”

On cue, the boss’s door swung open and she gestured towards them. “Joe. I need you a minute first. You two”—she pointed between Anja and Darcy—“go get the video link set up.”

“Run along, pet,” Anja muttered under her breath in Joe’s direction.

He gave her the finger but obediently went on his way. When the door closed behind him, they both burst in to laughter. “Do you think they’re shagging?” It was Anja who asked what they were both thinking.

“Nah.” Darcy picked up some files and started heading in the direction of the conference room. “But I think he wishes they were.”

“I don’t know. I always thought he had a little soft spot for you, Darcy.”

“So you keep saying, but there’s no way. I’m definitely not his type. Besides, he’s certainly not mine, so what does it matter?”

“True.” Anja hit some buttons on a remote and prepared them for the call to Hong Kong. “Tell me about this mystery date, then?”

## Meant To Be Me

Darcy shrugged. “Nothing much else to tell. We had a bit of a laugh at my clumsiness, and despite all the sweating and red face, there was something about her that got my attention. She had a kind face, and I thought what the hell. You know I’m a sucker for the sporty kind.”

Anja rolled her eyes. “Maybe that’s where you’re going wrong? All that obsessing over miles run and calories burned—where’s the time to be someone who’s actually fun?”

“Whatever. I dropped my bloody phone, though, so I had to be all cheesy and give her a business card. Then I said I’d text her and went on my way. The end.”

“You gave her your card?” Anja stopped midway to reaching for one of the files. “She knows where you work then?”

Darcy braced herself for the telling off. “Erm...yeah.”

“For fuck’s sake, Darcy. You do remember what the police said, right? About being careful around strangers? About not handing over any personal info to someone you don’t know?”

“I know, I know.” She put on her whiny ‘please don’t be mad’ voice. “It was a moment of weakness, and by the time I thought of that I was already handing it over. I would have looked a right weirdo suddenly grabbing it back.”

“Did you not think looking like a weirdo might be better than the alternative?”

“Woah. Harsh. What happened to not thinking about worst-case stalker scenarios?”

Anja sighed. “Well, that was before you started handing out your business card to strangers you randomly meet in the city at the crack of dawn. I worry. That’s all.”

“I know.” Darcy moved to drape her arms around Anja’s shoulders. She resisted for a moment, then allowed the hug. “But if you think about it, stalker person already knows where I work. I have a dozen bouquets of flowers, chocolates, champagne, and gig tickets to prove it.”

Anja stepped away and busied herself sorting through the reports she’d need for the call. “True. Still, I’m not sure going on a date with someone you just met in the street is a good idea.”

Darcy grinned. “Why? You jealous?”



Wendy Hudson

It was a running joke, as if she'd ever have a chance with someone like Anja Olsen. Beautiful, smart, fiercely loyal, and wonderfully funny Anja. With her long blonde hair that always sat perfectly over her shoulders, and her cute-as-anything Norwegian accent. Inflected with enough of a Scottish twang here and there to make it even more perfect.

Anja—who was also married, and according to her, to the perfect guy. Weren't they all? She'd had a bit of a thing for Anja in the beginning and had even thought it was reciprocated. They had worked in separate teams, but Anja had always seemed to go out of her way to speak: in the lift, the kitchen, passing in a corridor. But a workplace romance had burnt Darcy in the past, so she had quickly talked herself out of the idea and hadn't allowed herself to be anything but polite. She loved and needed her job too much to jeopardise it.

Then Anja had become her team's Lead Engineer, and Darcy had spotted the framed photo of a smiling husband on her desk. Before long, a strong friendship had replaced any potential fantasy that had simmered within Darcy, but she didn't mind. Anja had become one of her closest friends, which were as rare to her as girlfriends.

"You wish." Anja winked. "And you're taking me to that gig, by the way."

"Do you still think that's a good idea? Shouldn't I hand them over to the police to go with the other stuff?"

"Nonsense. Who knows how many people will have handled them before they got posted to you? I doubt the person they're after even touched them. They're useless as evidence."

"But what about how they were paid for? If they were bought online, there might be an account to trace. A card payment?"

Anja shook her head wearily. "As if. I think we know better by now. That gig was sold out months ago. My guess is they bought some extortionately priced tour tickets off a private seller."

Darcy's shoulders sagged. She remained hopeful her mystery torturer would slip up at some point, but the signs so far showed it was unlikely. The police kept talking about escalation and complacency. That one of those would occur and that would be their opening. Darcy knew which scenario she preferred.

"Wow, you really want to go to that gig, don't you?"

## Meant To Be Me

Anja smirked. “And you don’t?”

“Well...” Darcy couldn’t deny she had been dying to see the band for ages. “Maybe a little. Although why you would think I’m taking you...”

Before Darcy could attempt to wind Anja up and pretend she had someone else she’d rather take, Boss Woman Bridget sailed through the conference room door, with Joe close on her heels. “When you’re quite finished, ladies. Can we get on with this?”

“Aye.” Both women nodded.

“Then let’s get it done.” She sat down and hit the call button. “I’ve far more interesting people I’d rather be spending my Saturday with.”

\* \* \*

Darcy strolled the high street without a care in the world. That’s why it was so easy to watch her. It had become second nature to slip from doorway to doorway, use the crowds and traffic as cover, never allowing Darcy’s image to get too far away.

Part of the thrill of the follow was that Darcy had no idea who watched her and when. Who hunted and haunted every part of her life. She was oblivious to the fact that she was unwittingly sharing every secret and sacred moment.

This close to the anniversary was always the hardest as the thoughts of the past ran riot and the question of what might have been mercilessly nagged. Meanwhile, Darcy continued on with her life completely unaware.

The familiar lump lodged in their throat and grew day by day. It showed no sign of diminishing, along with the anger and the memories.

Darcy approached the bridge, the same one she’d met that girl on early in the morning. Was she smiling? Remembering the moment? Every ounce of happiness that Darcy experienced gnawed and irritated. Why did she get to be so happy? Why had she deserved it more? Why was it fair that other people should suffer while she was so blissfully ignorant? Decent parents were a precious gift to be cherished. Why should some people have that and others get nothing?

In the beginning, it had all been so innocent.

The voice had been merely a faint murmur.

**Wendy Hudson**

But it had been a long road to this point and things had changed. Years of research and sacrifice to track Darcy down. Then more years of calculating and plotting, as the objective had become clear.

As the voice had grown louder.

Torture her with uncertainty until she couldn't stand it anymore. Darcy had never witnessed someone she loved torn down, had never had her spirit broken by others. Her sunny outlook had never been challenged. She needed to experience and understand what the real world felt like. What a childhood of scorn and pain could cause.

For a long time, that had always been the plan, but lately some things had changed. It was becoming harder each time to witness the disappointment on her face. To execute each scheme knowing its ultimate effect. An unexpected and unwanted struggle had begun to materialise.

The voice stirred inside. A reminder of why it couldn't be stopped, despite the inkling of new doubt.

*He thought they were better than us. He loved them more. He chose her over you.*

*She needs to know the truth. Someone must pay for what was done to us.*

*For what we became.*

*And she is all that remains.*

## Chapter 3

IT WASN'T ONLY THE CHRISTMAS belly that had Eilidh running the morning she'd met Darcy. She'd awoken too early with a weight on her chest. In her nightmare she was suffocating, as something nameless, faceless, and bodiless pressed down on her and sucked the air from her lungs. It was no better after she'd gasped a few panicked breaths. The room had been stuffy, the central heating up too high, and the walls had pressed in from every side.

After pulling on her joggers, a cosy hat, and gloves, she'd crept downstairs in an attempt not to wake her girlfriend, Claire, who was sleeping in the spare room. But it turned out she hadn't even made it to the spare room. Eilidh had found her asleep on the sofa, the TV on low, an empty bottle of wine on the table. She'd thought about stirring her, putting on some, coffee and finally having "the talk", but a glance at the clock changed her mind. Six in the morning probably wasn't the time to be breaking up with someone.

The early morning frost had bitten at first, until her legs stretched and the blood began to pump and only her nose felt the chill. She'd wanted distance, so she'd cut back around their street, taking the long way through the park, until eventually the road to town had opened up before her. Normally she'd avoid Inverness and head in the opposite direction out along the back lanes towards Loch Ness, but so early on a weekend morning, there'd be few souls about.

The bridge was to have been her halfway mark, but instead it had become her final destination. For her run, at least. After watching Darcy walk away, she knew her muscles would protest if she tried to get going

again, and another injury would do her no good if she wanted to get back to work any time soon. So, she found a café and grabbed a cup of coffee and a newspaper before walking along the river bank towards Ness Island.

The paper wasn't for reading. She found a bench and used it as a buffer between her arse and the snow. Around her, the city began to come to life, and she watched for a while, focusing on nothing in particular but sipping her coffee and the heavy flakes as they hit the water. Eventually, though, Claire found her way back into Eilidh's thoughts, and she sighed.

This was not going to be pretty.

They both knew it was over, had known for a long time. Eilidh couldn't even remember the last time they'd shared a meal or a laugh, never mind shared a bed. She'd known that night for certain, the night of the incident; they'd finally voiced the words they both were thinking. Finally had that difficult conversation. But then the world had come crashing down, and now guilt kept Claire from leaving. Eilidh knew it was going to be up to her.

She thought of Darcy. What had she been thinking giving Darcy her number? Agreeing to coffee? She might have already started to move on from Claire in her mind, but until it was official, this wasn't the way to do things. If Darcy texted, she would explain and hope she understood. She seemed so lovely; Eilidh hated to let her down.

She had to admit the excitement that had flushed through her when Darcy asked her for coffee was something she hadn't felt in a long time. But Claire still came first, no matter their state of affairs. After nine years together, they both deserved to move on, and Eilidh knew only she could release Claire from the guilt. It had been almost six months since the incident. It was time to set them both free.

TO CONTINUE READING,  
PLEASE PURCHASE

# MEANT TO BE ME

BY WENDY HUDSON

This excerpt is offered by Ylva Publishing.  
Its primary function is the orientation of interested readers.  
Ylva Publishing | [www.ylva-publishing.com](http://www.ylva-publishing.com)