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British Bulldog

A Mirabelle Bevan Mystery

Written by Sara Sheridan

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British Bulldog

A Mirabelle Bevan Mystery

Sara Sheridan

Polygon

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This story is dedicated to my Paris helpmates:
Lorne, Lucy and the incomparable Molly. Your
patience with my being a novelist is an amazement.
My, did we trail around the Marais.

The past is never where you think you left it.

KATHERINE ANNE PORTER

Prologue

*A thing is not necessarily true just
because a man dies for it.*

6.45 p.m., Monday, 8 February 1954
Brighton

Mirabelle snapped off the light at McGuigan & McGuigan Debt Recovery and locked the office door. Her breath clouded in the freezing air as she took the stairs down to the deserted street. It had been a cold winter and the weather had been front-page news in the national papers since before Christmas. Further north the winter skies were crystal clear and there was heavy snow, but it felt like a long time since the clouds had parted in Brighton. An unrelenting dampness had settled over the city. On East Street the sky was forbidding. It had been dark since five o'clock. Mirabelle often worked late, especially at this time of year when there was little to go home to and the office was busy with post-Yuletide commissions. She looked up and down the street, her fingers already numb inside her silk-lined leather gloves. If she chose the route along the front she'd get back more quickly to her flat on the Lawns, but the seashore could offer no protection from the biting northeasterly that cut through the city like a shard of ice. Sizing it up, she turned towards town. The streets were silent and eerie, the lamplight hazy over the damp pavements.

On Duke Street she realised she was being followed. A man carrying a briefcase fell into step behind her. She could hear

the segs on his heels clicking on the paving stones, his pace distractingly out of time with her own. She crossed the road, making for North Street, and hazarded a quick glance over her shoulder. The fellow was wearing a dark woollen coat with the collar turned up and a bowler hat. The outfit was respectable enough but she couldn't quite make out his face. Near the corner she loitered, peering into the black window of a ladies' outfitters and hoping he'd pass. He did not. In fact, disconcertingly, he headed straight towards her. Mirabelle stiffened. She wished she was carrying an umbrella – the ideal everyday weapon for seeing off an assailant. Instead she concealed the office keys in her clenched fist in case she had to strike and run. Endeavouring to stay calm, she reassured herself that if she had to she could probably wind him and get away. The man tipped his hat and smiled.

'Excuse me, but are you Miss Bevan? Miss Mirabelle Bevan?' he asked pleasantly.

His voice was educated, cultured even. Mirabelle relaxed a little, though she kept the hidden keys turned outwards. Looking up and down the street, she could see no one else in either direction. The shop fronts were dark, flecked with fine drizzle, caught in movement by the buttery streetlight. She took a moment to examine the man who had addressed her. He was of slight build and sported a moustache. His neck was muffled by a dark scarf and he seemed somehow rather keen. Mirabelle wished someone else was nearby. It wouldn't be the first time a man who owed money to one of her clients had tried to accost her in the street. Further down the road, the door of a pub opened. A watery wash of light leached onto the stone paving and a tall figure in a shabby jacket lumbered out. He turned the opposite way without even looking in Mirabelle's direction.

'I'm Miss Bevan,' she admitted.

'I didn't mean to alarm you,' the man smiled again. 'I intended

to call at your office but there's a good deal of snow up north and my train was delayed. I thought I might as well have a look anyway to get my bearings, and then I saw you leaving . . .'

Now she took a closer look at him, she realised he didn't look like a man who had reneged on a debt, failed to pay his rent, or run up an outstanding bill in a boarding house or any other Brighton establishment. These things could happen to anyone, but you got a nose for people. So what on earth did he want? Occasionally Mirabelle and her colleagues branched into more interesting cases, deserting debt collection for private investigation, but when a special case arose it generally didn't come their way by commission.

'We'll be open again at nine sharp,' she said. Business was business.

'Yes. I see. Only I'm not here about the collection of a debt. It's a more personal matter.'

'You've had a wasted journey, then. We don't take on that kind of thing, I'm afraid.'

The man nodded. 'That kind of thing' meant evidence for use in the divorce courts.

'No, quite. But I don't mean personal to me, I mean personal to you, Miss Bevan. My name is John Lovatt. I'm a solicitor.' He held out his gloved hand.

Mirabelle pocketed her keys and shook it, her hazel eyes unwavering as Mr Lovatt continued. 'The thing is . . . oh, I didn't want to tell you this way, here in the street, but, well, here we are. You've been mentioned in a will. You've been left a rather unusual bequest. Is there somewhere we might go to talk? And have a drink, or dinner perhaps? It's been rather a long day.'

Chapter 1

*A little resolution is all that is wanted to
bring matters to a happy conclusion.*

The dining room at the Grand was the obvious choice. Mirabelle hadn't liked to direct Mr Lovatt to the little café where she sometimes ate with Vesta, her office clerk and business partner. The place seemed too scruffy for the solicitor, though the food was tasty. 'Good honest chuck,' Bill Turpin, the office's roving debt collector and third member of the team, called it.

As Mr Lovatt rounded the corner onto Kings Road, Mirabelle realised that she hadn't been to the Grand since the previous year, when there had been a series of grisly murders in one of the penthouses. Mirabelle had come close to being one of the bodies, though no one knew that – at least, no one who would tell.

As the doorman stood to attention, they swept inside. Mirabelle caught sight of herself in a gilded mirror as Mr Lovatt negotiated his way round the exotic potted palms that had recently been installed in the hotel's hallway. She couldn't help noting that next to him she looked as if she was one half of a married couple. Now they were in the light she could see that his coat was well-cut navy cashmere and his shoes were handmade – old but nicely maintained. Mr Lovatt was a gentleman.

'I'm not really dressed for dinner,' she said, looking down at her tailored green tweed suit and fur-lined ankle boots.

‘Now, now,’ Mr Lovatt scolded good-naturedly as they handed their coats to the bellboy. ‘You look fine.’

The waiter showed them to a table and Mr Lovatt ordered for them both.

‘Chicken pie,’ he said decisively, scarcely reading the menu, ‘and I’ll have a gin and tonic. Is that all right for you, Miss Bevan?’

Mirabelle nodded. Gin was only her second choice, but the chicken pie sounded appetising. It was good warming food to keep a body going through the chill – better than she would have had at home, where all that awaited her was a tin of soup and a fish paste sandwich. The tailing off of rationing had had little effect on Mirabelle’s diet.

As the waiter left there was an awkward silence. Mr Lovatt fiddled with the gold signet ring on his right hand. It was engraved with a shield – perhaps a family crest, Mirabelle thought. She fixed her gaze on the salt cellar, not liking to ask who on earth had died. Mirabelle had been orphaned at a young age. Her mother and father had both been only children and their parents were long gone. She had no family. Mr Lovatt took out a silver cigarette case and offered it across the table. She raised a hand to decline. Lovatt shrugged, then tapped a Dunhill on the box’s engraved lid and lit up. It appeared the situation felt awkward to him too.

‘Where did you travel from?’ she asked at last. That at least might furnish a clue.

‘Durham.’

That explained the delayed train. A good three hours north of London, County Durham and its neighbours had seen the worst of the snow. However, the information didn’t enlighten Mirabelle about anything else.

‘My client became acquainted with you some time ago, as I understand it.’

Mr Lovatt paused as if waiting for confirmation.

‘You’re going to have to tell me his name,’ she said. ‘I don’t have the least idea who it might be.’

The waiter arrived with two cut crystal glasses. The ice clinked. Mr Lovatt let it settle.

‘Bradley. Matthew Bradley,’ he said. ‘He died just before the weekend – Friday night, in fact. I came as soon as I could.’

The name didn’t sink in for several seconds. Mirabelle stared blankly at the solicitor. Then it came to her.

‘Do you mean Major Bradley? Bulldog Bradley?’

Lovatt nodded. ‘You seem surprised.’

‘I am,’ Mirabelle admitted. ‘He was so young.’ Bradley had been her age, or perhaps slightly older.

Her mind flitted back to wartime London. It was nearly ten years since the peace, but her memories still felt fresh. She had met the major twice when he was debriefed late in 1942. Bradley was an escapee. He’d been captured in enemy territory two years earlier – in the weeks after Dunkirk. The Germans confined him to a prisoner of war camp from where he became a serial escapee, and, once he got back to Britain, something of a celebrity. In one particularly energetic run he’d broken out three times in as many months before he finally found a route home.

When Mirabelle ran into him all those years ago he’d been visiting someone in the office down the hall, and later that week she had happened to see him again in a club. The men and women who worked in the government offices – the Whitehall set – stuck together when they went out, though of course no one discussed what they were working on. That night the party had been in Soho. There was a magic show and music, and the major danced with one of the secretaries. She was a plump young thing with auburn hair and watery blue eyes – not the type of girl in whom a man like Bradley might have been expected take an interest, but still. Mirabelle remembered how the major’s gaze had seemed too blank as his fingers

lay squat on the curve of the girl's hip. Escapers were the cream of the crop. Fewer than one in a hundred of those captured, Jack had said. Mirabelle's boss had a fondness for calculating percentages.

'You're a bona fide hero,' the pale-eyed girl had cooed.

Dressed in mulberry silk, Mirabelle had caught the words in a lull as the band paused before launching into a swing number. She saw Bradley stiffen, his shoulders moving upwards, his face mostly in shadow.

'Not at all,' he had replied. 'Escaping is ninety per cent luck. All it takes is a sleepy guard or a door left unlocked. All the good men get sent to the front – the ones manning the camps don't have what it takes. Ten to one they're useless. If you wait your chance you're bound to get out.'

Perhaps all men liked explaining the odds, Mirabelle mused. If nothing else Bradley was at least modest. She knew perfectly well that it took a good deal more than just an inattentive guard to get out of a Nazi prisoner of war camp. The girl simpered as the music got going again but Mirabelle thought the major's eyes darkened even more after the conversation. His blank expression had scared her.

'I haven't seen Major Bradley in ten years – more than that,' she said to Lovatt. 'It was when I lived in London. I only met him briefly. I don't think I even knew his Christian name until now. Matthew, did you say?'

'Well, he seems to have remembered you, Miss Bevan. He even knew you were in Brighton.' The solicitor reached into his briefcase and took out a buff cardboard file. Reading from the sheaf of papers inside it, he went on, "'To Miss Mirabelle Bevan of McGuigan & McGuigan Debt Recovery, Brills Lane, Brighton, I bequeath the remainder of my estate on the condition that she accepts the terms contained in the enclosed envelope.'"

He extracted a sealed envelope from the file and pushed it

across the table. The skin on Mirabelle's forearms prickled. This felt somehow dangerous. Had the major had her followed? Who knew she was here? Although recently, of course, there had been one or two high-profile cases after which her name had been mentioned in *The Times*.

'But I hardly knew the chap,' she protested.

Mr Lovatt picked up his gin and eyed the woman opposite him. He decided she was not at all unattractive – well dressed and nicely self-contained. It was interesting, he thought. Usually the first question asked by someone who had been left an unexpected bequest was how much. Miss Bevan seemed too shocked to grasp the reality of her windfall. She was about to become if not a very rich woman, then at least extremely well shod.

'Do you know what it says?' she asked, eyeing the envelope. Lovatt shook his head.

Mirabelle slipped the butter knife through the seal. Inside the letter ran to three pages. The paper flashed between her fingers, showing off her well-manicured nails, painted scarlet by Vesta only the day before. The words crowded together as she unfolded it. Somehow it felt as if this piece of paper was a passport into another world. She didn't want to read it. Why on earth am I in such a panic, she thought. Usually I'd be curious.

The waiter returned holding two steaming portions of chicken pie with cabbage on the side and small boiled potatoes that rolled against the rims of the plates. Gratefully, Mirabelle paused. Controlling her racing thoughts, she returned the letter to its envelope and slipped it into her handbag.

'I'll read it later. In private,' she said. 'It seems disrespectful to tackle it over dinner.'

Lovatt picked up his fork. 'Very wise. I can call on you tomorrow at your office to discuss the matter further, if you like. That should give you time to consider.'

The relief showed in her face.

The pie smelled delicious. At the next table there was a burst of laughter as someone told a joke. Lovatt stared at Mirabelle as she speared a piece of cabbage. He wondered if she was ever going to ask him about the money – Bradley had died one of the wealthiest men in Northumberland.

Apparently she wasn't.

'Have you visited Brighton before?' she asked as she looked up. This, Lovatt decided, was most refreshing. Miss Bevan was genuinely unusual.

'Not at all,' he said. 'I am looking forward to seeing the pier tomorrow. It is renowned, is it not? Brighton Pier?'

'I always recommend the Aquarium to visitors.' Mirabelle smiled.

It was only later, as she slipped the key into the door of her flat, that she recalled the only other piece of information she knew about Major Matthew Bradley. There was a rumour he had specialised in Escape and Evasion at M19. The department had perfected the art of supplying escaped prisoners of war on the Continent with what they needed to escape confinement, outrun their pursuers and, for that matter, avoid capture in the first place.

More than two million compasses and an impressive number of maps had been distributed throughout Europe over the course of the war. Bradley was an obvious recruit – he had, after all, been something of an expert by the time he got home. Unusually for a fellow with a desk job, it was at M19 he'd acquired his nickname. He'd believed there was always a way out and that a chap only had to find it. 'Get out quickly and keep going,' she'd heard him quoted. That certainly had the ring of the solid young man who'd decried the camp guards rather than admit his own bravery. Why on earth had Bulldog remembered her? Worse, why had he come to find her like this – from beyond the grave? The whole thing had an ominous, gothic feel.

Mirabelle shuddered. It was as cold inside the high-ceilinged flat as it was outside. She decided to go straight to bed. Grabbing a bottle of whisky as she passed the drinks cabinet, she poured a slug into her bedside glass. Then she dived under the covers and waited for the bed to warm up before removing her coat, hat and gloves and dropping them to the carpet. The cornicing cast shadows down the wall. Taking a deep breath, Mirabelle drew the envelope from her handbag. With the whisky in one hand and Major Bradley's clear cursive script in the other, she curled sideways into the milky light of the bedside lamp and began to read.

Chapter 2

Life is understood backwards but lived forwards.

The next morning the office of McGuigan & McGuigan Debt Recovery was hardly the shipshape place of business that Mirabelle might have liked to present to Mr Lovatt. A distinct smell of wet dog emanated from Panther, the office spaniel. There had been a squally shower as Bill Turpin walked the little dog to work. Now Bill was towelling Panther dry, those on four legs always being of more concern to the stolid ex-copper than those with two.

‘Sideways rain,’ he was saying. ‘I don’t mind wind and I don’t mind rain. But not together, eh, boy?’

The dog’s glossy black coat steamed in front of the single bar fire. Sideways rain or not, they’d be leaving soon on their rounds. Tuesday morning meant a call or two out at Preston Park, and even on a day like this Bill always took Panther for a run off the lead afterwards. Meanwhile, Mirabelle’s partner, Vesta, sat at her desk surrounded by samples of chiffon in varying shades of purple.

‘I just can’t decide between the mauve and the violet,’ she sighed as she bit into a biscuit.

Bill pretended not to hear. Since Vesta had got engaged to her American boyfriend Charlie, the arrangements for their wedding had been discussed again and again. Everything, that is, except the date.

Vesta held a long strip of fabric against her face. ‘Bill?’

Bill made a noise something akin to a man in pain. ‘Very nice,’ he managed.

Mirabelle smiled as she hung up her coat. McGuigan & McGuigan frequently felt more like home these days than her flat. Bill was squinting and Mirabelle decided to rescue him. Men, after all, could rarely tell the difference between one hue and another. Jack had been colour blind. Once when she had spent hours getting ready to go out she had paraded in front of him. 'I like you in green,' he had said. 'You look like a very beautiful imp.' She had made the immediate decision not to tell him that her dress was a fetching shade of peach. Jack had been the love of her life. It seemed now, four years after his death, that there had never been bad times, though she knew that wasn't true. Yet all she could call to mind were moments like the one she could see so clearly now – Jack staring at her in the peach evening gown as she made the decision not to correct him, or even to tease him, but to let him believe whatever he wanted as long as he thought she was beautiful. The memory turned in her stomach as she removed her gloves.

'The mauve, dear,' she advised. 'If you really feel you can't run to white or cream.'

Vesta crossed her arms. Her mother was distraught that she wasn't going to wear white, but Vesta was toughing out the family arguments over her wedding, from the colour of her outfit to the fact that she wanted a small party for her big day – a celebration that didn't revolve around tables piled with food and a hundred of her parents' friends arriving to help the Churchills eat it, which was the Jamaican way.

'It's not as if white suits our circumstances,' she tutted. 'And cream is such a cop-out.'

Charlie and Vesta had been sharing accommodation for over a year now. This had been another bugbear for Vesta's parents, although it had also proved an effective bargaining chip. The fact that their daughter was at least about to legitimise her union meant Mrs Churchill was less likely to criticise her low-key attitude to the ceremony. That did not mean that

she hadn't argued vigorously if uselessly in favour of a white dress and a traditional Caribbean party after a service in a church – preferably the one the family attended only a street or two away from their south London home.

Vesta twisted a chiffon scrap around one of her fingers. 'White,' she continued. 'If there's one shade a woman of colour can't wear it's got to be the one everyone expects, hasn't it? I don't want to look ridiculous, and white will only make my skin look even darker. I want to get married our way – Charlie's and mine. Not like a hick from Hicktown, Jamaica. Just the two of us, that's all.'

Mirabelle didn't like to comment, but she couldn't help thinking that if Vesta was hoping to disguise her skin tone she'd need to wear a veil whatever colour she chose.

'Now, now,' she said.

'I'd best get on.' Bill rose to his feet. When Vesta got exercised about her wedding it could go on for some time and he was already out of his depth. He picked up the list of calls that had been left on his desk. The post-Christmas rush of holiday debt had been heavy this year but they'd made a good start and now at least it was on its way to being cleared. There were a few stubborn offenders with whom terms had yet to be agreed, but Bill was methodical in tracking them down. Mirabelle felt proud of what the little team had achieved. The business was making an increasing profit every month – it was an easy mark of success by which to judge her efforts. The ledger balanced. The office was well run.

Vesta pulled herself together. 'Tea?' she offered, casting the fabric samples aside.

Mirabelle nodded. 'Thanks.'

She sat down, unconsciously drumming her fingers on the brown leather desktop as Bill left with Panther at his heel. Vesta placed a steaming cup in front of her and eyed Mirabelle's manicure for chips.

‘What happened?’ she asked.

Mirabelle looked up. ‘What do you mean?’

Vesta rolled her eyes. ‘Honestly! It’s always the same when something special comes up. You become very quiet – more distracted than usual. And you drum. Next you’ll look at the paper, but you won’t really be reading it.’

Mirabelle removed her hand from the desktop and cast a rueful glance at the morning’s newspaper sitting on the edge of her desk where Bill always left it. She couldn’t pick it up now.

‘I received a letter,’ she said.

The envelope was nestled in her bag but she didn’t want Vesta to read it. Her partner always jumped to conclusions and somehow Bulldog Bradley’s missive felt, if not sacred, then certainly personal. ‘I’m sending you this,’ it said, ‘because Jack Duggan once told me you had the conscience of an angel and the sleuthing skills of the devil himself. I hope he was right.’ For Mirabelle, the very mention of Jack’s name made the letter a private matter – a window into a world that she kept not only closed but also shuttered.

Vesta sat with her head to one side, pulling her thick blue cardigan around her frame. ‘Well?’ she said.

‘Something’s come up about a missing person. A man. A soldier.’

Vesta grinned. She longed to take the more interesting cases that were periodically offered to McGuigan & McGuigan but Mirabelle generally vetoed them. She leaned casually over her desk to retrieve her tea and biscuit, and settled down for the story.

‘Like a man who has run off and abandoned his missus?’ she asked.

Mirabelle pursed her lips. This was exactly what she expected from Vesta, and the truth was that sometimes that way of thinking paid off. It was the reason that the girl was so good with paperwork – you could hand her a file of drab, seemingly

dull information and she'd construct a story from it worthy of a novel. Her instinct for making connections had nailed a case or two in the past. Mirabelle's steely logic and Vesta's vivid imagination were a winning combination. Still, Mirabelle didn't relish the idea of Vesta's mind getting to work on anything that mentioned Jack Duggan.

'Not at all like a man leaving his wife,' she said. 'More like a soldier missing in action.'

'Was he married, this guy?' Vesta said knowingly.

Mirabelle shrugged her shoulders. 'I don't know. But one thing's certain, a chap wouldn't hole up in occupied France just to get away from his wife, Vesta.'

'Occupied France? How long has he been gone?'

Mirabelle told herself that at least this was a sensible enquiry. She paused. Vesta realised she was counting.

'Gosh. It must be almost twelve years,' she said. 'Of course, the most likely thing is that he's dead.'

'A case like that is going to take a while. We'd better put ourselves on an hourly rate.'

Before Mirabelle had a chance to elucidate there was a sharp rap on the office door and Mr Lovatt entered.

'Good morning, Miss Bevan.' He tipped his hat cheerily.

Mirabelle stood up, catching the merest whiff of aftershave. Truefitt & Hill if she wasn't mistaken. There was a familiarity about Mr Lovatt that was comforting.

'Come in,' she said, ushering the solicitor towards a chair. 'Mr Lovatt, this is my business partner, Vesta Churchill. She's our office clerk.'

Lovatt cast a thin smile in Vesta's direction but did not offer his hand. 'How do you do,' he muttered.

Vesta beamed: her standard response to embarrassed Englishmen who were not sure how to behave towards her because of her colour. Her dark eyes flashed.

'Might I make you a cup of tea, Mr Lovatt?' she offered, an

unaccustomed twang of Jamaica in her south London accent, inserted simply to underline the point.

Mr Lovatt declined. 'I had an excellent breakfast at the lodging house. Thank you. I came to see you, Miss Bevan, to ascertain . . .' He seemed not to know how to put it.

'Vesta knows about Mr Bradley's bequest,' Mirabelle cut in, mentally ticking herself off for enjoying the solicitor's discomfort. 'She knows about the letter, anyway. You can speak freely.'

'I see.' Mr Lovatt cleared his throat. 'Well, the bequest is contingent on your accepting Mr Bradley's terms, as you know. I wondered if you had had time to consider the contents of his letter?'

'There's a bequest?' Vesta cut in. 'How much is it worth?'

A smile played across Mr Lovatt's lips, as if he had suddenly been dealt the cards he needed to play a royal flush.

'The estate remains in a condition of probate,' he replied. 'Mr Bradley stipulated that you should receive the remainder, Miss Bevan, after his wife's portion, a donation to one or two charitable concerns and of course any outstanding debts that need to be covered, including death duties. At my estimate the sum coming to you will approach ten thousand guineas.'

'Sweet Lord Almighty,' breathed Vesta. It was a fortune.

'Major Bradley was married?' Mirabelle latched onto the information. 'I had no idea. Surely it isn't right that I should be left this money. I mean, Mrs Bradley must be provided for properly.'

Mr Lovatt was not sufficiently indiscreet to admit this had also been Mrs Bradley's position when she heard the terms of her husband's will. She had immediately assumed that Miss Mirabelle Bevan had been Mr Bradley's mistress, if not recently, then at some time in the past. While her husband left her entirely financially secure, Mrs Bradley had enjoined Mr Lovatt to allow her to read her husband's letter to the woman she had immediately termed 'this hussy of Matthew's'. Mr Lovatt had resisted, though the truth was he had wondered whether it

would be a woman of considerably more easy virtue than Miss Bevan that he would meet upon his arrival in Brighton.

‘Mrs Bradley is most comfortably off, I assure you.’

‘But what must she think?’ The words escaped Mirabelle’s lips almost involuntarily.

Neither Mr Lovatt nor Mirabelle or indeed Vesta gave voice to the obvious answer. Mirabelle ran back over the evening before – Mr Lovatt pursuing her in the street, eyeing her over the dinner table, and lingering ever so slightly too long as he bade her goodnight in the hallway of the Grand.

‘Really, Miss Bevan,’ the solicitor insisted. ‘I assure you, financially there is plenty to go round. Mrs Bradley and her daughter are well provided for.’

‘There is a child as well? My goodness! I shall have to write the poor woman a letter. This must have been dreadfully difficult for her.’

‘Quite.’ Mr Lovatt restrained himself from saying anything more. Mrs Bradley’s feelings, after all, were not his business. Miss Bevan’s reaction to the letter she had received was. ‘And as to the condition Mr Bradley imposed upon your inheritance – the letter, I mean? I feel bound to enquire . . .’

‘It’s quite some mystery,’ Mirabelle said. ‘I can’t imagine why he has come to me, or indeed why he waited so long.’

Mr Lovatt reached for his cigarette case. Both women declined as he waved it in front of them before slowly lighting up.

‘Might you be prepared to share some of the details?’ he asked.

‘I was just telling Vesta,’ Mirabelle said. ‘Major Bradley would like me to track down an associate from his wartime days. He supplies little more than a name and a broad outline of the last time he saw the fellow, which is now of course several years ago. They escaped together from a German prisoner of war camp and appear to have become separated in France on their way back to Blighty. What I don’t understand

is why the major didn't try to find his friend after the war. I mean, there were agencies for that sort of thing.' She paused as she recalled the confusion that pervaded Europe long after the guns had stopped. 'The major was perfectly well connected and besides that, it's now clear he was a man of some means. If he lost touch with this person why didn't he find him again himself – in his lifetime? The man was a British officer. If he came back to England, it wouldn't have been too difficult. And if the poor chap didn't make it, one way or another it would have been easier to find out at the time than it is now. I don't understand why Bradley didn't just get on with it.'

Mr Lovatt took a deep draw and blew a robust jet of smoke across the desk. 'I might be able to illuminate matters,' he admitted. 'The letter you received and the accompanying bequest were only inserted into the terms of Mr Bradley's will when he knew he was dying.'

'Major Bradley's death was expected? I don't understand. He was still a young man. Why, he can scarcely have been forty years of age.'

'Forty-two.' Mr Lovatt inhaled. 'Cancer of the lungs. Tragic, really. Bradley had always been such a fit fellow. He was a stalwart of the local hunt. He quite threw himself into that kind of thing. In such cases the news of one's own mortality is deeply affecting and it strikes me this bequest might be a matter of conscience. Knowing he had hardly any time left the poor fellow suddenly felt the matter was pressing but realised he wouldn't be able to deal with it himself. That sort of thing takes on a whole new meaning when one is about to face one's maker.'

Mirabelle nodded. 'I suppose that might explain it,' she said doubtfully. The kind of man Bradley had been or at least what she knew of him, mitigated against any delay. Bulldog Bradley had been a bolt of lightning – a man who acted decisively in the most difficult of situations. The matter was intriguing but

it also felt dark. If there was something Bulldog Bradley didn't want to face, Mirabelle couldn't imagine what it might be. She tried to focus on the element of riddle or at least puzzle contained in the letter and ignore the sense of doom that was sweeping over her like dark clouds rolling over open water. Whatever had been going on in Bulldog Bradley's mind, there was only one way to find out.

'All right, Mr Lovatt. I can make some enquiries and see what I turn up.'

'And you'll keep me informed?'

Mirabelle's gaze didn't waver. The letter hadn't stipulated what she should do with the information once she'd uncovered it. But then, on balance, what other course of action was there but to pass anything she found to Mr Lovatt?

'Are you Major Bradley's executor?'

'Yes, I am.' Lovatt smiled and handed her his card.

'All right.'

'Excellent.' The solicitor reached for his hat. 'I'll leave it with you, shall I?'