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Written by James Craig

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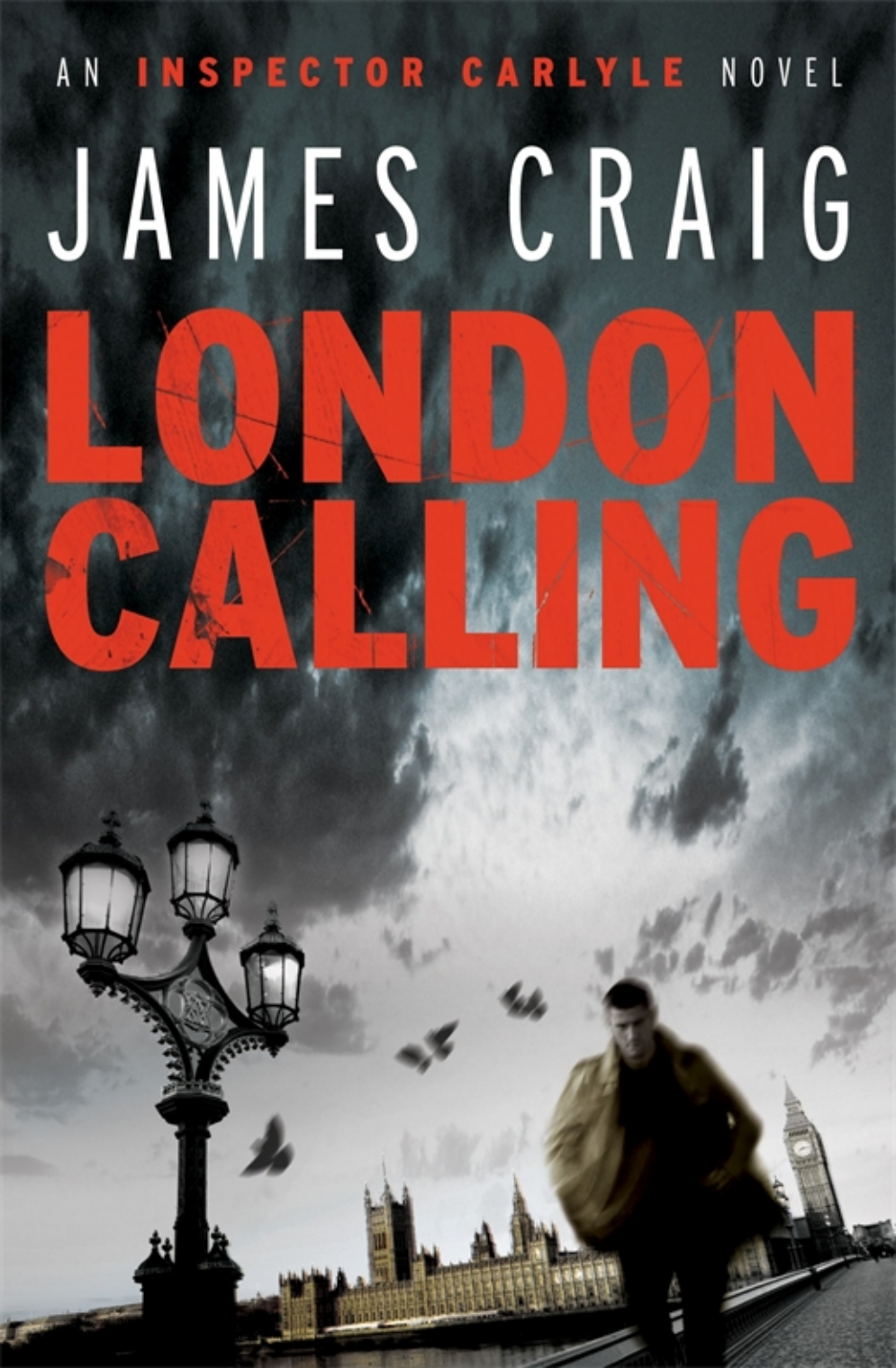
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AN INSPECTOR CARLYLE NOVEL

JAMES CRAIG

LONDON CALLING



James Craig has worked in London as a journalist and consultant for almost thirty years. He lives in Covent Garden with his family.

This is the first Inspector John Carlyle novel. For more information visit www.james-craig.co.uk.

LONDON CALLING

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‘Where there is no publicity there is no justice.’

Jeremy Bentham

ONE

Shuffling into the tiny kitchen of his one-bedroom flat in Tufnell Park, north London, George opened a cupboard above his head and pulled out an economy tin of baked beans. After opening it, he poured about half of the contents into a small pan resting on the stove. What was left in the tin went into a small fridge that was otherwise almost empty, containing only a pint of milk and a couple of bottles of Red Stripe beer that had been on special offer in the local minimart.

Taking a box of matches from the worktop, George lit the gas and began stirring. When he estimated that the beans were on their way to being hot, he fished his last two slices of white bread out of their wrapper, and carefully dropped them into an ancient toaster. Switching it on gingerly, he stepped back quickly, fully expecting the machine to blow up at any moment. Returning his attention to the stove, he also kept half an eye on the bread. George knew that multi-tasking had never been his strong point, and more often than not something got burnt. It was quite stressful, really. Giving the beans another stir, he had a quick taste. Though bubbling away nicely, they were still quite cold. He then decided to pop the toast; the bread was barely coloured, but that was, he always thought, better than waiting too long and incinerating it. *Err on the side of caution* was his motto. Or, at least, it had been for a long time now.

Happier that he could now focus exclusively on the pan, George relaxed. As he stirred the beans, he listened to the background hum of city life. George liked to listen.

Tonight, he could hear the television in the flat downstairs over the ever-present rumble of traffic from the road outside. After a few moments, his ears picked out the sound of footsteps coming up the stairs. He heard them stop outside his front door. After a couple more seconds, the buzzer sounded, harsh, flat and insistent.

At first, George didn't react. He couldn't imagine why anyone would want to ring his bell. When was the last time he'd received a caller? With no intention of answering the door, he carefully speared a bean and dropped it on to his tongue – still not quite hot enough.

The buzzer sounded again: another short, authoritative burst. George hesitated. Maybe he should see who it was. But would he have time to answer the door without the beans getting burnt? He remonstrated with himself for even debating about it. Why should he bother? It would only be some door-to-door salesman, a cold caller, wanting him to change his electricity supplier or something similar.

Dropping the toast on a nearly clean plate, he wondered if he should have any butter. The buzzer sounded again, longer this time, as if the person outside knew for sure that he was there.

'Go away!' George hissed, under his breath, as he gave the beans one last stir. Turning off the gas, he decided against the butter and poured the beans directly over the toast. Sticking the pan under the tap, he half filled it with water and dropped it in the sink.

He was hunting for a knife and fork when the buzzer went again, a series of short staccato bursts that said: *Come on, answer the bloody door. I'm not taking no for an answer*.

'All right, all right, I'm coming.' George turned away from his dinner and shuffled into the tiny hallway. As a matter of routine, he put his eye to the spyhole. There was no one there. *Typical*, he thought, *bloody kids. They'll be hiding up on the next floor, thinking this is hilarious*. With a sigh, he turned back to his plate. Before he'd even taken a step, the doorbell went again, much

louder this time, the buzzer right above the door drilling harshly into his skull.

'You little sods.' Turning on his heel, he swung the door open and stepped on to the landing, his chin making perfect contact with the fist that had been waiting for it all this time.

Waking up, George had a nasty taste in his mouth and a throbbing headache that made him want to cry. He was sitting in the living room, his hands and legs tied to the only upright chair. His upper chest had also been taped to the back of the chair, to ensure that he was totally immobile. There was another strip taped across his mouth. Realising that even utility companies would probably not go this far in order to convince customers to switch their accounts, he started to panic, gnawing at the tape with his teeth, and trying desperately to push himself out of the chair.

'Relax, relax.' The voice was quiet, soothing. 'Just try to keep breathing.' But the hand on his shoulder did nothing to help calm him down. It was wearing a rubber glove like the kind doctors wear, or those you see killers snapping on in movies, just before they butcher their victims.

Forcing himself to draw in a few deep breaths, George noticed the plate on the coffee table in front of him was empty now, save for a few breadcrumbs and a couple of stray beans. His stomach rumbled in protest, even though dinner was the least of his worries right now. Next to the plate was a large kitchen knife with an evil-looking serrated edge. George knew that the knife had not come from his kitchen. In a moment of bowel-freezing clarity, he realised that you wouldn't bring along a knife like that if you weren't intending to use it.

Shaking his head, George started to sob. Big, fat tears rolled down his cheeks, and over the tape covering his mouth. Surely this couldn't be the end? His time had gone so quickly. He had squandered it so badly. There hadn't even been enough that had happened in his life for anything exciting to flash in front of his

eyes. What he saw was more of a short loop that kept repeating, like the trailer for a film that you know is going to be really quite disappointing.

'Compose yourself,' said the voice.

George sniffed. He could hear the banging of pans in next-door's kitchen. A young Asian couple. There were voices, laughter. He didn't know their names, but he had nodded to them on the stairs once or twice. A couple of times, he'd overheard them having sex through the paper-thin walls. Once he'd even jerked himself off to the rhythm of the woman's cautious groans. That was the best sex he'd had in a long time. The memory of it caused a twinge of arousal in his groin, sparking a flicker of fight in his belly. Rocking backwards and forwards on his chair, he started screaming through the tape. All that came out, however, was a cautious moan, not unlike that of the careful lovemaking next-door, which he'd liked to listen to whenever he had the chance.

'Enough.' Again, there was the hand on his shoulder. 'Don't wear yourself out.'

Head bowed, George nodded.

For a moment, there was silence. Then the voice continued. 'You have a very modest abode here, don't you, George? All that education. All that money. All those opportunities. All that . . . privilege. How did you end up like this?'

George shrugged. He badly wanted to blow his nose. It was a question he himself had pondered many times.

The hand reached over and picked up the knife. George felt himself gag. The tip of the blade tickled the back of his neck. 'You know why I'm here?'

George nodded.

'You know what I'm going to do?'

Again, George tried to scream.

The blade appeared at his left cheek, reflecting the light from the sixty-watt light bulb overhead. 'It can happen either when you're dead, or while you're still alive, but I would suggest the

former.' His guest finally stepped in front of him and brought the point of the blade to the tip of George's nose. George felt himself go cross eyed as he tried to keep it in focus. The blade was moved a few inches back as if to give him a better look. 'You have a choice. I'm not a sadist. Not like you.'

George vigorously shook his head, eyes wide. Along with the rubber gloves, the visitor was wearing a thin, clear, plastic raincoat, the kind that tourists bought when caught out by the weather. It hung all the way down to the floor and looked ridiculous.

'Oh, you'd say that now. But then . . . when you had the chance.'

George felt something press into his flesh, then a burning sensation, then the agony of the knife chiselling into one of his ribs. He reached deep into his lungs and bellowed. The sound that emerged was like a constipated man trying to pass a cricket ball.

'The harder you make it for me, the worse it will be for you. I'm no expert in this kind of thing, but I should be able to make a decent effort at cutting your throat. Sit still now . . .'

George was trying for one last deep breath as he watched the knife disappear under his chin. Looking down, he was distracted by the sound of something splattering off his killer's raincoat. The knife flashed in front of him for a second time but by now his head was slumped on his chest, as if he was mesmerised by the blood that had filled his dinner plate to overflowing.

TWO

Inspector John Carlyle of the Metropolitan Police dropped the copy of *Vogue* back on to the coffee table in front of him and yawned. In the corner, his sergeant, Joe Szyszkowski, was snoring away quietly. Above Joe's head, on a large television screen, a news reporter was standing outside Buckingham Palace speculating that the prime minister was finally going to call the long-awaited General Election. All manner of important things were going on in the outside word and here he was, sitting in a private health clinic on Harley Street, waiting for some Italian crook to finish having a tummy tuck.

'How long is this going to take?' he asked no one in particular.

The sour-faced receptionist looked up from her computer and gave him an exasperated look. Having a bunch of policemen camping in the clinic's reception did nothing for the atmosphere of the place. Not to mention her ability to spend the morning talking to her mates on the phone while updating her Facebook page. 'The doctor said Mr Boninsegna should be coming round in the next few minutes,' she said slowly, as if talking to a particularly dim child who needed everything repeated several times. 'He will let you know as soon as his patient begins to regain consciousness.'

'You are very kind. Thank you.' Commissario Edmondo Valcareggi, of the Italian State Police, smiled at the girl like a wolf contemplating the lamb that was about to be lunch.

You dirty old bugger, Carlyle thought sourly, *you've got to be*

even older than I am. Having to babysit this old lech from Rome was a major pain in the arse. With his shock of white hair and sharp features, Valcareggi looked like something out of a Ralph Lauren advert. The expensively casual clothes he was wearing looked as if they must have cost many months of Carlyle's salary. How much did Italian police get paid, anyway? 'You're sure that the man in there is actually Ferruccio Pozzo?' he asked for the umpteeth time. The man recovering from his operation down the corridor was registered in the name of Furio Boninsegna.

Valcareggi smiled indulgently. 'There is no question of it. We are absolutely sure. He's had plastic surgery before, and is travelling on a fake passport of course . . .'

'Of course,' interjected Joe, who had woken up and was helping himself to a fresh cup of coffee from the pot by the reception desk. Taking a sip, he smiled at the receptionist, who made a show of blanking him. Shrugging, he sat back down next to Carlyle.

'. . . but we have a DNA match,' Valcareggi continued. 'It is definitely the right man, and he is very worth catching. Pozzo has links to the various crime clans in the 'Ndrangheta syndicate. He has been a fugitive for almost two years now, and this is his second round of liposuction. We almost caught up with him the first time, at a clinic in Nice, but he left it about an hour before we arrived.'

'It happens,' said Joe sympathetically.

'This time,' Valcareggi beamed, 'we've got him. No problem.'

'Anaesthetic always slows them down,' Carlyle quipped. 'I don't know why we don't use it more often.' Reaching down, he picked up another magazine and quickly flicked through the pages until he came to a large picture of two well-dressed men hovering on the cusp of middle age. The pair beamed at him as if they had just won an Olympic gold, taken the casino at Monte Carlo for ten million dollars *and* fucked Scarlett Johansson all ends up, all on the same day.

The strapline read: *Better than you, and they know it*.

Tossers, Carlyle thought. But he started reading anyway.

THE GOLDEN TWINS TAKE CENTRE STAGE

The Carlton brothers will be running the country soon; Eamonn Foinhaven profiles a new political aristocracy in the land.

One is known as 'the Sun King', the other 'the dark prince', nicknames they picked up on their fabled journey from the playing fields of Eton, the forge of leaders down the centuries, through Cambridge University to the House of Commons, and now on to the very gates of power, in front of No 10 Downing Street itself.

If the perception in Westminster is that Edgar Carlton is the prime minister in waiting – the odds on him taking the top job shortening every day, after every new fumble and misjudgement by the current incumbent – his younger sibling (by two minutes), Xavier, is hardly living in his shadow.

The political classes are now agreed that Edgar Carlton has all the necessary skills for great office: the charm, the drive, the appetite to lead from the front. Xavier, on the other hand, who is as likely to be found in the gossip pages as in parliamentary reports, has more doubters. Already handed the post of Shadow Foreign Secretary by his brother, it seems increasingly certain that he will get the chance to prove these doubters wrong. It is even whispered that the twins have agreed a secret pact, with Edgar promising to stand down as PM in favour of Xavier once a second term is secured.

The Carltons fit perfectly with the mood of the moment, the country's new taste for austere glamour. Their story is now well known: the sons of the celebrated union between Hamisi Michuki, the Kenyan model who stormed London society in the 1960s, and Sir Sidney Carlton, a rakish tycoon who rose to the heights of Paymaster General in successive governments in the early 1960s, before his political ambitions were derailed by an unfortunate incident with a pair of strippers from the Cowshed Club, a notorious haunt of gangsters and other pre-Swinging Sixties lowlifes.

Happily for the boys, the best genes of both parents have been passed on; they acquired their mother's stunning looks and their father's

political nous. Now, they are poised to sweep away both the gloom of the 'new austerity' and also the soul-destroying cult of the working-class rapscallion, or 'cheeky chav', both of which have plagued the country in recent years. In the class-ridden twenty-first century, the Carltons are the ultimate 'anti-chavs', standing against everything that is common, vulgar and ugly. Surfing a popular wave of optimism and glamour, they have, quite simply, left routine politics behind. 'They are so in touch with the zeitgeist, it's frightening,' declares Chelsea-based style guru Sally Plank. 'Their peers are footballers, pop stars and royalty, rather than other politicians. They realise that becoming a credible celebrity is ninety per cent of the job done; because if you're a celebrity, the public will forgive you for being a politician.'

Potentially the first brothers to hold senior government office together since just before the outbreak of the Second World War, they are fiercely loyal to each other. 'It's almost like a gay political marriage,' remarked one colleague who declined to be named. 'They have an almost telepathic understanding and are constantly watching each other's backs.'

Not that they have much to worry about in that regard at the moment, for whatever reservations ordinary members may have about the brothers' grip on the party is more than offset by the current opinion polls. After many years in the wilderness, power once again beckons. Lucky or not, Edgar and Xavier Carlton are in the right place at the right time. They look young, modern and in touch with the public.

'They will win, that much is certain,' says pollster Martin Max of pressyourbutton.co.uk, the UK's leading 360-degree sentiment-sampling service, 'the only question is by how much. The Carltons could end up with the biggest majority in modern history, eclipsing the 232-seat majority of the Spencer government in the early nineteenth century.'

Joe Szyszkowski tapped him on the arm. 'Look . . .'

Carlyle looked up at the television screen just in time to see a sleek Jaguar carrying the current prime minister sweep through the gates of Buckingham Palace.

'Here we go,' Joe said. 'Election time.'

'Big surprise,' Carlyle grumbled. 'The silly old sod left it as late as possible. Not that it's going to do him any good.'

'Who will you vote for?' Valcareggi asked bluntly.

'That's between me and the ballot box, Edmondo,' Carlyle said stiffly. He held up the magazine so that the *commissario* could see the article that he had been reading. 'But you can safely assume that I won't be supporting this bunch of over-privileged chancers.'

'The inspector is a real inverted snob,' Joe laughed, whereupon Valcareggi gave him a look that indicated he didn't understand the phrase. Before the sergeant could explain, a nervous-looking man in a white coat appeared. Reflexively, Joe reached for his handcuffs.

'Gentlemen,' the doctor said quietly, 'Mr . . . er, the patient is just waking up.'

'Excellent!' Carlyle pushed himself to his feet. 'Let's go and arrest the now not-so-fat fuck.'