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Opening Extract from...

London Calling

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Prologue

Society has the teenagers it deserves.

11.15 p.m., Thursday, 31 January 1952
Upper Belgrave Street, Belgravia, London

The kitchen smelled of roasting pans and spilled wine. The servants were in bed, and the family's plump ginger cat lay dozing in front of the black range. Rose Bellamy Gore tiptoed across the flagstones. With her parents' bedroom above the hall and a distinctly squeaky door-handle, using the front entrance was far too risky. Rose slid the bolt across and eased open the door. Thank heavens it wasn't raining or worse – the smog made the whole city seem oppressive. She pulled her fox fur around her shoulders and with perfect deportment crept up the stone stairs, before cutting smoothly through the long shadows cast by the railings. The street was deserted. The white stucco porticos at every front entrance framed a line of rectangular black caves. Perfect for the wolves that live here, Rose thought. The neighbours were ghastly – every one.

The gas lamps glowed hazily in the smog. Rose's breath clouded in her wake. Harry was waiting further along the street in his racing-green Aston Martin, an eighteenth birthday present from his parents. Her gloved hand moved to her throat to check the pearls – her birthday present only a month after Harry's big day last autumn. The cousins were close. Their parents had hosted a lavish joint eighteenth

party, which both Rose and Harry agreed had been insufferably dull – champagne and canapés and some dreary band Harry's mother had heard was fashionable.

'Chop chop!' Harry grinned, holding the door open and beckoning her into the tan leather interior. 'We're going to be late.'

Rose smiled. She slipped elegantly into the front seat exactly as she had been tutored, sitting first then pulling in her long legs before tucking the skirts of her yellow dress out of the way.

'I'm going to die of boredom if we don't have some fun soon,' she said.

Harry started the car as Rose lit two cigarettes from her brushed-gold case, engraved with the first notes of her favourite number from last year – 'Too Young' by Nat King Cole. Her father had peered at it the other day but the old man couldn't read music. He'd never even heard of the hit parade and probably thought the notes were written by Benjamin Britten or, worse, Mozart. Rose had already tired of Nat King Cole; these days she much preferred Chet Baker. She handed Harry one of the cigarettes. He took a deep draw savouring the combined taste of lipstick and tobacco. Rose always smelled good – of L'Air du Temps, Earl Grey tea and hair lacquer.

'I'm dying for a cocktail,' she announced, tossing her hair. 'Something bitter with gin.'

Harry was about to pull away from the kerb and into the night when a female figure emerged from the thin smog – one with a familiar clumsy gait.

'Damn!' Rose snapped. 'Do you think she's seen us?'

The girl was wearing an ankle-length blue cape. Her mousy hair was pinned up with a diamanté clasp. She gave a little wave as she homed in on the Aston. They had no choice but to speak to her.

Harry wound down his window. 'Vinny!'

Lavinia Blyth leaned in. Grinning broadly, her lips were chaotically painted with orange lipstick. 'Gosh,' she said, 'I was hoping I might catch you. I saw Rose's bedroom light and thought you must be going to some club or other. You two are always out on the town! The parentals would be livid if they caught us out this late and off somewhere, well, mysterious, wouldn't they? What fun!'

There was a moment's hesitation that would have indicated reluctance in the car's occupants to anyone more sensitive than Lavinia Blyth. Harry rolled his eyes and glanced at Rose. There was nothing to be done – they'd have to bring her along. Quite apart from the rudeness of leaving her, now she'd seen them Lavinia could blow the whistle. Next time they'd be more careful. He jumped out of the car and held open the door.

'In you get.'

Rose did not offer Lavinia a cigarette as they bundled together.

'Top hole!' Lavinia cooed, oblivious. 'Are we off to Greek Street? Dougal McKenzie told me they dance all night in Soho! It sounds thrilling! I can't wait!'

She licked her lips, smearing the orange lipstick.

Harry eased into the driver's seat and flicked his cigarette out of the window. The orange embers sparked on the pavement. They might as well have a good time with Vinny, now she was here. She'd probably be shocked, but there was nothing for it. Soho at night was a labyrinth of unsuitable delights. He expected Vinny might quite like to be shocked and, for his part, the idea of enlightening one of the famously strait-laced Blyth girls about what really went on in London's nightclubs gave him a thrill. Harry loved pushing the boundaries. He dedicated a good deal of his time to it.

'Right, ladies,' he said, 'there's somewhere I've been meaning to try. Hold on tight!'

And with that, the Aston pulled into the chilly January night. The youngsters were so self-involved they didn't notice the black Ford Zephyr with two passengers following them at a distance.

Chapter 1

A scout is never taken by surprise.

8.25 a.m., Friday, 1 February 1952
Brighton

Mirabelle Bevan turned up East Street from the front, the wind forcing her round the corner so she almost lost her footing. Her hand went up to check if her hat was still pinned in place, which she achieved miraculously without losing the morning newspaper tucked under her arm. From behind the long Georgian windows of her flat on The Lawns, the winter sunshine had appeared deceptively warm that morning, though now she came to consider it the waves had looked choppy as they broke on the pebble beach. Mirabelle had had a turbulent night. She struggled to recall the detail of the disturbing dreams that had forced her awake, shivering and achingly alone, at two o'clock and then again at four. She didn't like to think too much about the war, or Jack, or even the events of last year when she and Vesta had gone on the trail of a missing Hungarian girl. So, instead of going back to sleep, she had huddled under a quilt by the window, distractedly wondering why there were no seagulls. Perhaps they sheltered under the pier. Checking her watch, Mirabelle noted she could scarcely feel the tips of her fingers through her green calfskin gloves. She had walked in to work in record time. There was no point in dilly-dallying. It was time for a cup of tea.

It was set to be a busy day at McGuigan & McGuigan Debt Recovery. Five weeks after Christmas and the wages of Yuletide borrowing were about to be visited on Brighton's debtors. There had been a queue of new clients snaking out of the beige office and along the dingy hallway for at least some of the day on Wednesday and Thursday. Each client clutched unpaid invoices from the festive period. The agency's reputation was growing. Mirabelle sat at one desk, her sidekick and office clerk, Vesta, at the other as they methodically took down everyone's details. For two days there had been so much paperwork they hadn't had time to chase a single payment.

'At this rate,' Mirabelle commented dryly when they left work the evening before, 'we're going to need extra staff.'

The thought of having someone to boss around clearly appealed to Vesta. 'Fresh meat!' she declared happily. 'Well, I'd like a handsome black man. Not just a debt collector – someone who could take me out dancing.' She winked. 'Wouldn't it be nice to have a fella round the office? We could extend our portfolio, Mirabelle.'

Ever since the two women had taken over the agency a year ago Vesta had been trying to expand the business. She wanted McGuigan & McGuigan to take on commissions that were not strictly debt collection and more in the line of private investigation. Steadily Mirabelle had knocked back the ideas, one by one, and refused two cases, which although ostensibly about debt clearly concerned one family member looking for information on another or a husband trying to find out what his wife was up to during the day.

'It's not our business,' she insisted.

'But we'd be good at it.' Vesta was adamant.

Mirabelle, however, did not want to get involved. Cases fired by emotion rather than money were dangerous. For three months last year she hadn't been sure if she would

end up in prison because she'd fired a shot that had killed a young man – a young man who was trying to escape and who would have killed her given the chance, but still. In the end she had been exonerated but it remained one of the horrors Mirabelle still dreamed about. Not last night, but sometimes. She was determined to lead a quiet life now. If the firm took on another member of staff she'd need to make sure that Vesta was still fully employed on the company ledgers or the girl would inevitably find something more interesting to do; something that would land them, no doubt, testifying in the divorce courts. Mirabelle smiled indulgently; Vesta was a honey and she was great with people, but she had to be kept in check.

Mirabelle crossed the street opposite Brills Lane and entered the office building. Her heels clicked smartly up the stairs to the first floor, but there she stopped in her tracks. A drenched young black man crouched in the office doorway. A small puddle of rainwater had collected on the faded linoleum around him. As Mirabelle came into view he jumped to his feet. Mirabelle noticed he was wearing extraordinary black-and-white shoes with red laces. He was holding a battered saxophone case.

'Miss Bevan?' he asked, his accent a cross between the broad vowels of London and the even more expansive vowels of Jamaica.

Mirabelle nodded briskly. This chap wasn't the kind of customer who usually turned up at McGuigan & McGuigan – he looked far too interesting. She was intrigued.

'And you are?'

'Lindon. I'm looking for Vesta.'

'I'm afraid we're not quite ready to take on a new member of staff. I don't know what Vesta has told you, Mr . . .' Mirabelle's voice trailed off.

'Claremont.'

Heaven alone knew what Vesta had organised overnight. Mr Claremont, like Vesta, was only in his early twenties. If they did take on someone new, it would be far better to find an experienced man, perhaps one with a military background, someone tough who was used to getting the job done. Lindon Claremont smiled. He had nice eyes, and Mirabelle wondered how large a part Lindon's appearance had played in Vesta's recruitment criteria. I bet he can dance, she thought. Sometimes the girl could be impossible! This chap would never do – his whole demeanour was far too accommodating and though his clothes were smart he was dressed like a spiv. Collecting debts was an intractable business. As Big Ben McGuigan used to say, no one wants to hand over the money. You have to be firm.

'Do you mind if I wait for her?' Lindon asked. 'I mean, if I'm in the right place? This is where she works, isn't it?'

'Yes. Vesta won't be in till nine. I'm afraid we're very busy, there's a lot of work to do today. There really isn't anything for you, Mr Claremont.'

'I wasn't sure when you opened. Been waiting a while,' Lindon continued. 'I got wet, see. It was stormy around half five.'

'You've been sitting here for three hours, soaked to the skin?'

Lindon shrugged.

Mirabelle pulled the office key from her clutch purse, and the young man moved obediently out of her way.

'Well,' she said, 'we can't have you catching your death. There's a towel in the cupboard and I'll boil the kettle. I want to be clear though. There isn't a job.'

Lindon grinned gratefully. 'Vesta said you were a kind woman, Miss Bevan. I'd love a brew.'

Lindon sat by the electric fire warming up and sipping tea. As he dried, Mirabelle peered periodically over the pile of

papers – debts she was putting into geographical order so she could visit to collect payments later in the day.

'Morning,' Vesta called as she came through the doorway amidst a jumble of bags and brandishing an umbrella so battered Mirabelle doubted it would be of any use. 'Double deckers are off in the high winds. The service is still running, though – it's just slow. Sorry I'm late.' She turned, clutching two greasy-looking paper bags, which it was immediately apparent from the smell contained pies she had picked up from The Pie Shop on St James Street on her way in. 'Beanos,' she said delightedly and then, noticing Lindon, let out a high-pitched scream.

'Lindon, boy!' She launched herself into his arms. 'Sweet Lord Almighty!'

Lindon rose to his feet and wrapped himself around her.

Mirabelle glanced towards the door. It was fortunate, she noted, that there were no clients in the office. All this hugging was not entirely professional.

Lindon and Vesta, however, showed little restraint and were clearly delighted to see each other. They launched into a conversation so fast, and containing so much slang, that Mirabelle couldn't understand a word they were saying. The sounds were almost musical.

After a minute or two of catching up Vesta turned Lindon around as if he were a child. 'Mirabelle, this is Lindon Claremont.'

'Yes, we've met. Vesta, I know we talked about hiring someone but really we need to chat about it . . .'

Vesta looked nonplussed. 'This one? This one? Pardon me, Lindon, but this one would be hopeless – completely hopeless! He'd end up lending people his own money! Oh Mirabelle!' She began to laugh.

'But . . .' Mirabelle started. 'Well, in that case, what is Mr Claremont doing here?'

'No idea,' Vesta grinned. 'I ain't seen you, Lindon, since last summer.'

Lindon nodded. 'Must be about that.'

'Would you like a pie? They're hot,' Vesta offered. 'They make these wonderful pies down here – beanos. They're a taste of the seaside. I haven't seen them in London but they'd go a bomb. Delicious!'

'I'm starving,' he admitted.

Vesta handed him a beano before scrambling around on the floor and picking up her possessions. 'I'll make more tea and then you can tell me what you've been up to. We got a lot of catching up to do.'

Mirabelle glanced at the sea of paperwork strewn over Vesta's desk. 'I'll need to go out and get started on the collections. Can I leave all this with you?'

'Sure.' Vesta gestured, as if the mountain of paperwork could simply be dispersed by a wave of the hand.

Mirabelle reached for her coat and hat. She had done up the buttons and was considering whether, given the wind, it was worth even taking an umbrella, when for the second time that day Lindon Claremont made her stop in her tracks. His voice changed to a low register, and he had the demeanour of a naughty child, one who clearly couldn't wait any longer before blurting what was on his mind. He leaned over Vesta's desk.

'Thing is,' he hissed, the pie uneaten in his hand, 'I had to come. The police are probably looking for me. It's not my fault – I didn't hurt anyone. They was too fancy – I said that to the others. The police have found out I talked to the girl, I think, and now they'll assume what they always assume.' He drew a long finger across his neck in a macabre motion. 'I didn't do nothing. I didn't hurt her. I swear it.'

Vesta froze. 'Shit,' she said. 'What are you talking about? Who didn't you hurt, Lindon?'

Lindon's eyes sank to the drab linoleum floor. He shrugged his shoulders. The boy's expression suddenly became difficult to read. 'They didn't give no names. I just spoke to them. Young white kids. The girl, she was laughing, you know, chatting. Glossy they was, well turned out. Liked music. Liked dancing. She gave me this.' He held out a gold cigarette case with musical script engraved on its face and laid it on Vesta's desk. His hand was trembling slightly.

She picked it up. 'That is fancy merchandise,' she said.

'"Too Young",' Lindon replied wistfully.

'Oh no,' Vesta groaned. 'I should have known! Too young for what?'

'Nothing like that, girl. "Too Young" by Nat King Cole. The music on it. See.' He gave an engaging smile and began to sing the tune, pointing to the notes. 'She said she was sick of it and didn't want it no more. She thinks she's cutting-edge, whatever. Hep.'

'And then what?'

'She went off. I went back inside for a drink. Next thing I know, Barney tells me the police have been around the clubs asking about her. The girl's in trouble. She's hurt. Last place she'd been was with me, and now the pigs are working their way round, trying to figure out where she's been and who's responsible. I didn't do nothing, I swear, Vesta. They left. I never laid a finger. But you know what it's like. I panicked.'

'You said she was hurt?' Mirabelle stepped in. 'What do you mean hurt?'

'I dunno. Barney didn't say. But I got some white chick's cigarette case, and they're trying to figure out what happened to her. I didn't touch no one, but things don't go so well for a brother, not that kind of thing. Vesta will know what to do, I said. I walked to Victoria straight and got on the milk train. I mean, you solve mysteries, right? You're cosy with the law?

You caught all them Nazis last year. You'll be able to tell them it wasn't me.'

Mirabelle ignored the inaccuracies – the less said about last year, soonest mended.

'It was really Mirabelle who worked everything out,' Vesta started, 'with the Nazis.'

Mirabelle waved her off and focused her attention on Lindon. 'Was it this girl?' she asked smoothly as she turned over the paper. The headline read MISSING HEIRESS and there was a photograph taken the previous year of a girl in a white ball gown and pearl earrings. The police were appealing for information.

'That's her!' Lindon's finger hovered over the picture. 'Rose Bellamy Gore,' he read, clearly sounding out the words for the first time. 'Some name!'

'But it says she's missing,' Mirabelle pointed out. She scanned the paper. 'They don't know what happened to her. She's not necessarily hurt, Lindon, they just don't know where she is.'

'That's not what they was saying last night,' Lindon insisted. 'Barney said someone hurt her. I thought she was dead!' He bit into the pie and chewed slowly, looking slightly sheepish. Perhaps he'd jumped the gun by making a dash for help.

'Well, she might be hurt, of course,' Mirabelle mused, removing her coat and sitting down at the desk. 'And that's the assumption, I suppose. Tell me your story one more time, Lindon. Tell me everything all over again.'

Twenty minutes later, Lindon Claremont was beginning to wonder if showing up at McGuigan & McGuigan wasn't more trouble than turning himself in to the police. He had gone over the story several times, but Vesta's boss wasn't giving up. He'd told her about the damp bedsit in a rundown Georgian

tenement off London Spa where he'd lodged for the last four months and the clubs where he played his saxophone. He'd explained how sometimes the gigs paid and sometimes they didn't. If the company was right, he drawled, he played free, just for the experience. He'd told her about everything he'd done the day before, how long he'd known Barney the doorman (ever since he started booking proper gigs in Soho – eighteen months) and exactly what had happened when Rose and two of her friends arrived at Mac's Rehearsal Rooms where he'd been jamming. Then he'd explained jamming and revisited the conversation he'd had with Rose about her favourite musicians – Tony Crombie, Ronnie Ball, Leon Calvert – some of whom Lindon had played alongside. It was difficult to break into the scene, he said, but his persistence had started to pay off.

'The girl – Rose – had seen me on the horn, but she didn't say where. Then she ranted on about Ronnie Scott, how he was only in it for the money, and then she said, "And money's just too dreary, darling. Too dreary for words." She called me darling but she didn't mean anything by it. Cut glass she was.'

Vesta perched on her desk, listening intently as Mirabelle asked question after question. Occasionally she nodded but she let her boss get on with it.

'So Rose knew about music?' Mirabelle confirmed.

'Oh yeah. She knew what was what.'

'But she didn't play an instrument herself?'

'Nah. She was audience but she'd been around every swing joint in town, even the trade ones – bare lightbulb and a bad bottle of whisky if you're lucky. She'd spent time. Asked me about Charlie Parker. Johnny Dankworth. We had a laugh, really. The other two was dancing but she wanted to talk.'

'And she was drunk?'

'Yeah. She'd had some. That time of night all of London

is drunk as a fiddler's, innit? She liked my shoes,' Lindon said proudly.

Mirabelle considered a moment. Rose was missing, and, at the least, Lindon was a key witness. The boy was no saint, but the police would certainly need to speak to him. Until he'd turned in a statement, there was no other way to establish his innocence, unless the girl turned up in the meantime.

'Vesta,' she said, 'we need to speak to Detective Superintendent McGregor.'

Lindon sat up straight. 'You're turning me in?'

Vesta put out her hand to calm him. 'Don't be silly, Lindon. It's not like that. Mirabelle's right. If they're looking for you, you'll have to speak to them in the end. And you'll be better off if you volunteer the information than if they catch you halfway across the country on the run.'

Lindon bent forward in the chair and moaned, 'Mama's gonna kill me if I get nicked again.'

'Any trouble from your mother and I'll speak to her,' Vesta snapped.

'Again?' Mirabelle enquired.

'Last year.' Lindon kept his eyes fixed on the floor. 'Drunk and disorderly. Happens to all the jazz boys now and then. It's like they got a room reserved for us at Savile Row nick – the jokers even call it the dressing room. Seems there's always one of us in there. I've been more careful since. It's easy to get carried away. I was stupid but I was unlucky, too. They don't catch a brother every time.'

'I see,' Mirabelle nodded. 'Well, it's time to see what we can do at Brighton police station, I'm afraid.'

She gestured towards the coat rack. Whether she liked it or not she was involved now. Lindon's eyes met Vesta's. Should he comply? She nodded. 'You got to sort it out properly, boy,' she said. 'Official.'