

# Bright Lights & Promises

Pauline McLynn

Published by Headline Review

Extract

All text is copyright of the author

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

---

Copyright © 2007 Pauline McLynn

The right of Pauline McLynn to be identified as the Author of the Work has been asserted by her in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

First published in 2007 by HEADLINE REVIEW  
An imprint of HEADLINE PUBLISHING GROUP

First published in paperback in 2008 by HEADLINE REVIEW  
An imprint of HEADLINE PUBLISHING GROUP

1

Apart from any use permitted under UK copyright law, this publication may only be reproduced, stored, or transmitted, in any form, or by any means, with prior permission in writing of the publishers or, in the case of reprographic production, in accordance with the terms of licences issued by the Copyright Licensing Agency.

All characters in this publication are fictitious  
and any resemblance to real persons, living or dead,  
is purely coincidental.

Cataloguing in Publication Data is  
available from the British Library

ISBN 978 0 7553 2638 9

Typeset in New Caledonia by Palimpsest Book Production Limited,  
Grangemouth, Stirlingshire

Printed and bound in Great Britain by  
Clays Ltd, St Ives plc

Headline's policy is to use papers that are natural, renewable and recyclable products and made from wood grown in sustainable forests. The logging and manufacturing processes are expected to conform to the environmental regulations of the country of origin.

**HEADLINE PUBLISHING GROUP**

An Hachette Livre UK Company  
338 Euston Road  
London NW1 3BH

[www.headline.co.uk](http://www.headline.co.uk)  
[www.hodderheadline.com](http://www.hodderheadline.com)

# ONE

‘Are you telling me that my son being robbed at knifepoint is something I should just get used to?’ Susie Vine asked, her voice shaded with disbelief and sarcasm.

The weekend had started early with the theft of Milo’s mobile. This was the second time in a month and set to become a regular occurrence, if the dour police officer was anything to go by. Statistics about the robbery of school kids bounced off the shabby station walls, mingling with spent breath and an air of vague hopelessness. Susie honed her mind away from the fact that she should be at the opening night of a new West End play later, supporting a client, doing business.

‘Sadly, this is modern life,’ the constable went on. ‘And there’s no real hope of getting the phone back.’

She wanted to scream: the fucking phone is irrelevant. My twelve-year-old son was held up by a thug from a neighbouring school wielding a carpet knife. What are you going to do about it, you moron? She stemmed her annoyance, realising it was largely the manifestation of guilt about missing the show and an unfair resentment at Milo for impinging on her work.

## Pauline McLynn

‘Mrs Vine,’ the officer continued.

‘Miss,’ she corrected.

Did she detect a hint of a smile across the cop’s lips? Or was she hunting for something that didn’t exist, nuances of the expected slight. After all these years it was pathetic if she was. Besides, this guy didn’t look old enough to have that sort of baggage built in; the remnants of a past judgemental age. Even more of a relief was that she didn’t seem old enough to be his mother, a modern pitfall avoided. Even some of the staff in her building were beginning to look like children in her eyes and she did not want to go down that dark road just yet. Thirty-six was too young to be feeling so old.

Milo sat hunched over the table sweating in his school blazer, trying hard to come over all hard and nonchalant. She stretched a hand across his back and for once he didn’t shrug it off. She could feel his tremors through the fabric and thought her heart would shatter.

‘Officer, I am deeply concerned that this sort of thing can happen on a crowded street in the middle of a big city. Is there some programme in place to tackle the problem?’ Her voice was on its highest horse, an impressive sound, she liked to think.

‘We are doing our best, I assure you,’ the police constable said frostily, picking up on Susie’s tone. ‘The schools themselves have to take some responsibility. Perhaps if your son or one of his friends was prepared to identify a culprit, we might be able to do a little more. He did say it was a pupil of Saint Vitas that attacked him.’ He looked expectantly at Milo.

## Bright Lights and Promises

‘Vitas HATE Morning Star,’ Milo muttered, actually in some awe at the ancient tradition he had invoked. Beyond that he offered nothing.

‘We’ll have to think about it,’ Susie said. ‘The last thing we want is Milo being victimised for grassing someone up.’ She nearly laughed at her words, too many television cop shows. She turned to her son. ‘Where were the others while all this was happening?’

‘They ran off.’ He caught her expression. ‘Mum, don’t blame them for that. I’d’ve done the same.’

She let that go for now. ‘We’ll discuss it later.’ She squeezed his shoulder, trying to take any sense of warning out of the statement. She didn’t want Milo retreating on her. He was adept at disappearing before her eyes while appearing to stay in the room. ‘As for identifying the creep who did this, we’ll consider that too,’ she told the policeman.

She gave their home details and her work address and numbers.

‘Arland and Shaw?’ the cop asked. ‘What’s that?’

‘We’re an agency.’

‘Oh?’

Here we go, she thought. She assumed Milo was raising his eyes to heaven.

‘It’s a theatrical agency. We represent actors.’

Now they had his attention. ‘Anyone famous?’

Susie rattled off a few names, soap opera stars, a hard chaw in a police procedural and the latest movie ingénue.

‘Anita Fay,’ the policeman repeated. ‘She’s great.’

Wait for it, Susie told herself, and try not to smile.

‘I don’t suppose I could have her autograph?’

Pauline McLynn

‘Of course,’ Susie replied. ‘I’ll get her to send you a signed photo.’

‘Oh, not for me,’ he insisted. ‘My nephew is a big fan. His name is Gabriel, same as myself, funnily enough.’

‘What a coincidence. I’ll pop that in the post to you, Gabriel, and in any case we’ll be talking about this incident further I’m sure.’ That’s rhetoric there, she wanted to point out. I don’t mean there’s any other option but further action, whatever that may be. But as she spent most of her day banging her head against other brick walls real and imaginary she decided to leave it for the time being. She was not entirely in charge here. Let the idea stew, stagnate and hopefully begin to grow like a fungus that had to be dealt with.

Susie and son left the stuffy building, stepping out into the still air of a balmy September evening. Milo had slung his enormous schoolbag onto his back and Susie’s arm now only reached halfway across, encountering canvas before books before him. They needed to match their mood to the sunny weather.

‘Young man, I think our only choice at this point is to indulge in pizza as therapy.’

‘That makes sense to me, Mum.’

‘I may have to have extra ham and an egg on mine.’

‘Hard day then?’

‘Much like your own, Milo.’

She wanted to reach out and kiss the mangled grin he gave her, but as he was now approaching teenagerdom that would have been tantamount to a war crime. Instead she steered him to the high street and pizza and another odd start to a weekend. She was already practising the excuses

## Bright Lights and Promises

she would issue later and the accompanying platitudes to make them palatable to her client.

Valerie Vine wrestled with the Chubb lock, painfully aware of the echoing sounds of her efforts throughout the stair-well. At sixty-six years of age she could expect to get away with this outside an apartment that was not her own, looking as she did both matronly and well off. When I turn to my devilish life of crime that will stand to me, she convinced herself as beads of exasperation broke out on her forehead. She could not fathom how any thief was expected to get through this door when she had such trouble using a key for it. Which was probably the point, she conceded, but that didn't help her. If she were the swearing type (she was not) she would have coloured the air blue there and then.

Footsteps clanged through the building and she heard an approach. She redoubled her efforts and jangled at the lock in one last frantic effort to get through without embarrassment.

'I can help you with that,' a light voice said. 'You are Susie's mother, aren't you?' The girl was a tiny wisp swaddled in bright red wool and a continental accent. 'I'm Isabelle,' she explained. 'Next floor up. I babysit Milo sometimes.'

'Of course. We met at the summer garden party.'

The girl expertly jiggled the keys and pushed open the heavy door. 'I'll help you with your bags,' she said, though Valerie doubted she could hoist much, being so elfin.

'Would you be a dear and drag in that number? Dodgy wheel so it can be a nuisance sometimes.' She congratulated herself silently on her tact, and was taken aback to see this

## Pauline McLynn

minuscule Isabelle drag in the wheelie as well as the overly large Gladstone she had appropriated from her husband. If Susie was here, she thought, I'd get a lecture on underestimating the modern woman and living in the past.

The apartment stood calmly waiting for them, the darkness hinting at a home of cottage pies and scented candles. Isabelle clicked on lights familiarly while Valerie headed for the kitchen.

'Tea or something just a little stronger?' she asked. 'It is Friday, after all.'

The waitress scanned the restaurant while wringing her hair tightly into an elastic band. There was a healthy teatime crowd, most of whom would disperse in time for the ravenous had-too-many-Pinot-Grigios-after-work crowd and on into the Friday-night regulars. She tied on her white apron and crossed her fingers in hope of a tip-tastic night; funds were low and she had her usual raft of impossible bills to pay. She fought the urge to daydream about a ridiculously well-paid job bathed in glamour and fame. All in its own good time, she hoped. The door opened and a blast of heat hit the air-conditioned cool in the pizzeria. A well-dressed woman came through, briefcase first, trailed by a uniformed boy near doubled over under the weight of his schoolbag. Something about the woman ticked a box in the young waitress's brain but fled the moment she tried to pin it down. She grabbed two laminated menus and approached them.

'Table for two,' the woman said. 'Non-smoking.'

And that's when she realised that this was Susie Vine, agent with Arland and Shaw. She stifled a basic instinct to



## Bright Lights and Promises

tell the woman that she was about to graduate from RADA and would love her to come to see one of the showcases planned over the next few months. She felt like a giant cliché: the drama student moonlighting as a waitress to pay her fees. Sometimes the truth was too hackneyed for words and this was one of those times, she decided. Instead she ran through the specials and took a drinks order for a large glass of the house Chianti and a Coke.

She made sure to walk away with poise and a straight back and resolved to sharpen up her voice and diction for the duration of the agent's stay. She would play the part of the waitress with style, élan. Often the maid's parts were pivotal in the plots of what some of her classmates called 'snot-rag drama', the comedy of manners with fops and archetypes posing about a stage uttering brilliant epigrams and being quite vacuous. She would make her mark before this über agent, perhaps be snapped up that very night?

She remembered that one of her teachers, Mr Roe, told her not to daydream so much. Hard graft, that's what he said it was all about. Well, she could do that too, had proved so far that she could. It wasn't easy holding down an evening job and attending classes nine to five. In this last year they would perform whole plays too and host showcases, so that was to be even more work piled on. It was exciting and exhausting and she wouldn't swap it for the world. She redoubled her efforts to be the perfect Waitress One. She checked that her nametag was straight and prominent and went to fill the order.

All of this was lost on Susie Vine who could think of little but her first long slug of wine and an enforced early night

## Pauline McLynn

in with her son rather than schmoozing a first-night crowd. She could watch the soap she had recorded featuring a new young actress she'd just taken on. After a dissection of the phone incident, of course, and possibly stern words about Milo's coterie of friends. She wondered how the play was going. Perhaps she should have asked for a pint of vodka.

John Forbes shucked out of his costume. It looked quite ridiculous lying on the seat without him inside. It was a Roundhead's uniform for the period piece he was filming. He replaced it with his own uniform of white T-shirt and jeans. His mobile phone chimed out to tell of messages left and trouble to be dealt with. He sat heavily into the cushions of the small Winnebago that was his home while he was on set. A knock on the door was followed by the fresh face of an assistant director delivering the call sheet for the following day. He hated these six-day weeks.

'Not great for you, I'm afraid,' the girl said. 'It's a six-thirty pick-up in the morning. Sorry.'

'Showbiz,' he sighed. 'If only the public could see my fabulous lifestyle, eh?' He smiled wearily at the AD. 'Thanks, Phoebe. If I have to hear bad news it's always best for you to break it to me. It somehow lessens the blow.'

The girl beamed and continued her journey around their little circle of caravans to break more details, good and bad, to the other actors on the shoot.

John stretched and grimaced. He had spent the early part of the day on horseback, then filmed some heavy love scenes in the afternoon. All were long and technical, somewhat boring too and he was now feeling the strain. Pretending to

## Bright Lights and Promises

make love, to prescription, was one of his least favourite bits of this job. He was not getting any younger and he lately found he had to watch what angles were planned for intimate scenes. It wasn't so much vanity as trying not to scare the public with a less than perfect physique. He was in good shape, very good shape, but age had crept in where it was supposed to naturally and he no longer had the body of the twenty-year-old he once had been. This wasn't a problem for Richard Fine, the other male lead, who had no qualms about buying a younger self, using Botox or the knife. 'Whatever keeps the jobs coming in, John.'

The great irony of the shoot was that, because of the weather they would experience between now and the end, they were filming backwards. All of the summer scenes were set a decade on in the story. When they got to the end they were at the beginning. So, after a long and gruelling shoot he was supposed to look ten years fresher.

Right now all he could contemplate was a long iced Scotch, a massage, a bath and an early night. No wild partying for him, he mused. No cocaine-fuelled romps with nymphettes. Fact was he had never really got into that scene, though he was always popular with the ladies and certainly would not die wondering what all the fuss was about. But marriage, two kids and an expensive divorce had curtailed any of show business's wilder excesses and at forty he almost felt he'd become staid. Christ, he was tired if he was letting himself indulge in a paean for a life he'd never wanted. He braced himself. Eight more weeks of the Cavaliers and Roundheads to go, then a rest, followed by the horror that was Christmas.

He hauled himself out of the seat and into the company

## Pauline McLynn

car that would take him home. He wanted to lose himself in the soft leather and snooze but seven messages awaited. He hoped none of them required immediate action because he was beat. The first voice he heard was Roma's. Problem. End of the massage, the bath and possibly the Scotch. His heart sank as he reached for a pen to jot down the list of those he must call. He needed help. At one stage of his life he might have facetiously said he needed a wife, but he now knew that was precisely what he did not need. Some class of Sherpa or indeed an actual slave might fit the bill better. Anything but another emotional drain.

Susie waited until they were halfway through their pizzas before bringing up the problem of Milo's mates.

'So they ran off and left you?'

Milo shrugged. 'Yeah. I guess.' He barely opened his mouth as he spoke, delivering the garbled lazy diction of all of his age group, the words almost unintelligible from mere sounds: 'yareyegez'. Then he stuffed his mouth to avoid any further conversation.

'That's not the first time, is it? I'm really worried that these are not good friends for you to have, Milo.'

He gave her a 'Muuuum', to indicate that she was too old and fuddy to understand the vast complexities of being twelve-going-on-thirteen now, and a bloke, and that he couldn't bear to discuss any of this with her. Milo preferred silence during their meals, which wasn't usually a problem as his mum was often preoccupied with work. There was too much focus on him this evening. He willed her phone to ring.

## Bright Lights and Promises

'You'll have to tell your father about it,' she said. 'I'll be phoning him tonight to bring him up to speed and I'm sure he'll want to talk to you over the weekend.'

Milo studied the table and nodded, trying to ignore her words. He didn't want to go through it again. He had been frightened witless when the thug from Vitas had waved the knife at him. He was still surprised he hadn't shat himself.

Susie looked at her son's dusty face, streaked with city grime. She knew that he would let himself forget what she had just said and that would simply make it go away. It was an enviable facility but not ideal for building a moral code. Milo lived for the moment and the sooner he forgot the ones he didn't like, the better for him. They continued to eat in silence, clearly preferred by Milo.

Susie wondered again about sending him to Morning Star. In truth, there hadn't really been any choice in the matter. It was the best of a bad bunch of second-level schools that had offered her son a place. He wasn't a stupid boy but he had absolutely no interest in academia and really only wanted to slack off and have fun: at his best executing pratfalls to make people laugh, and there were precious few tests in that for GCSEs. Morning Star had seemed a decent enough place. The school marched the legs off its boys, wore them further down with sports and taught them to mess about on boats. They had a neat uniform with a cute beret and middle to low standing on exam results. Milo had known Adam from primary school in Clapham, although they had never been very close, but Rafe and Gregory were new acquaintances made at Morning Star. And even though the term was only newly under way, already they had trouble. He had friends

## Pauline McLynn

from sailing but those classes were mainly at weekends and only sometimes on week nights. The rest of the time he was with the Morning Star entourage.

He was so easily led, she realised. For instance, he thought nothing of bidding for ridiculous items on eBay, prodded on by the others and desperately trying to amuse and impress them. This had come to light when Susie's credit-card bill showed up the transactions and he was now barred from going on the Internet at home unless he had adult supervision. It wasn't always possible to regulate what he did elsewhere. She had begun to feel a bit helpless about the whole thing. She had disciplined him fairly over the years. He hadn't had any childhood traumas he needed to work out of his system through some sort of rebellion. He was simply a weak boy with no ambition other than to be popular. She was going to have to try a new approach but had no idea what that might be. She watched him pack in his meal, thinking some table manners wouldn't go amiss. Her boy had matured so incrementally she had hardly noticed his approach to adulthood, yet here he was on the cusp of hormonal mayhem. She drained her wine and reluctantly decided against another, signalling instead for the bill.

'Come on; let's get you home. Your dad is calling for you early tomorrow.'

She paid and left a decent tip and failed yet again to notice the pretty waitress as she smiled her biggest smile and thanked her in her best Received Pronunciation. She had played her part too well and didn't attract any undue attention as a result.

\* \* \*

## Bright Lights and Promises

Valerie Vine closed the door after the tiny Isabelle left and found herself all too alone in her daughter's apartment. Suddenly the weight of the past week got to her and she began to cry. The cry rose to a wail. And as suddenly as it began it stopped again. She wiped her eyes. Foolish, foolish woman, she admonished. Pull yourself together, you ridiculous old bat. Worse things happen at sea. But her heart was broken and she really felt nothing could mend that.

Susie watched what she ate for most of the week so that she could splurge at weekends. It wasn't that difficult a system to maintain as she usually spent at least three nights at a show or a premiere or a press night and they happened hot on foot of work, so the dash was from office to venue with no break in between. It was expedient to grab an apple or a banana in lieu of a meal and as long as she had plenty of chewing gum to mintify her hunger-breath she was fine. As an agent she worked a nine-to-five day, five days a week and was available either in the office or on her Blackberry for America to call when it woke up, first New York then Los Angeles. Her list comprised mostly young talent, a handful of whom were creating heat, peaking the interest of the movie and television moguls of the New World. Oh, and she was also available twenty-four/seven on her mobile in case of client burn-out or producer paranoia or casting-director angst. All told it was a way of life as much as a career. And most of the time she loved it. Enough of the time she loved it.

She struggled up the stairs of their block, groaning to Milo about how stodgy she felt. He ignored her, that being weirdo women's country.

## Pauline McLynn

The first sign that they had been burgled was that the Chubb lock was undone. Oh God, no, she thought, not this on top of Milo's phone, there's only so much cop action I can take. 'You stay here,' she instructed her son, sounding a lot braver than she felt. She pushed open the door and said, 'Hello?' which struck her as ridiculous the moment it left her mouth.

'Is that you, darling?'

Susie swore, silently. 'Mum?' Had she forgotten a planned visit? She didn't think so.

Valerie appeared around a corner. 'I let myself in, sweeties. Well, I had some help from that nice French girl who lives upstairs.'

Susie couldn't help but notice that Milo's face blanched, while his ears went pink, at the mention of their neighbour.

Her mother went on oblivious. 'Now isn't this jolly': a fact not a query. She hugged Milo and kissed his head. 'You are a grown man,' she exclaimed. 'And you are far too thin,' she told her daughter. 'I've opened a bottle of red.'

Susie felt a stab of agitation. This had been a bitch of a day and so far she could see no let-up. 'Milo, you need to get out of that uniform and I'm afraid you'll have to have a bath too, even if there is a risk that you'll dissolve.' He had loved a nightly bath until he hit age ten when suddenly it was taboo. She had been banished long before that in case she saw him naked. He was too big to carry to the bath and throw in, so long negotiations took place with him resorting to creative time-wasting and more and more stupid excuses as to why he couldn't wash himself. No clean towels. Towels too high in the cupboard for him to reach. Stool too heavy



## Bright Lights and Promises

to drag to the airing cupboard to reach the clean towel shelf. And on, and on, and on. Tonight he shuffled off with a trademark unintelligible murmur. She'd give him a few minutes then check he was doing as he was told. The battle was ongoing and each side vigilant in its stance. I'm a five-star general, Susie reminded herself. I am the Mum. I have to win this skirmish or the war will be lost.

She followed her own mother into the living area, looking right and left for her scruffy old terrier. They had to sneak him in, as rules did not allow the keeping of pets in Berkshire Mansions. No sign of the mutt. As her mum placed a hefty tumbler of wine into her hand, Susie asked, 'Where's Toby?' and her mother fell sobbing into an armchair.

Eventually she parted with, 'I had to have him put down this morning. Cancer. Inoperable. Oh Susie, what am I to do?'

Susie felt like the original heel. She had arrived like thunder, openly bringing all of her day's frustrations with her, and had failed to notice her mother's distress.

'Mum, I am so sorry.' The older woman was curled against the arm of the chair and awkward to hug. Plus she had filled Susie's glass so full there was danger of spillage if they tried to negotiate an embrace. Susie knocked back a measure as she digested the information then said aghast, 'What will we tell Milo? He's known Toby all his life. He's never known a world without him.'

'I HATE her!' Flora was screaming down the phone now.

John Forbes took a deep breath. 'May I ask why?'

'She's a complete bitch and she doesn't want me to have any fun because you left her.'

## Pauline McLynn

In a nutshell.

‘Flora, be reasonable. You cannot go to an all-night rave in Oxford. You are fifteen years old. You are simply too young. And this has nothing to do with Mummy not wanting you to have fun. She loves you. So do I. But there are limits to our indulgence. We cannot allow this trip.’

The fact that Flora could sing really well now stood to her as she ululated her misery. Loudly. Then, ‘Everything is shit since you left, Dad. Please come home. Please.’

Things were shit before I left, he wanted to say. But he never would. And anyway he knew she was playing him. When he had lived with the family she was never done telling him what a crap dad he was and how unhappy he made EVERYONE. And that wasn’t just her opinion in case he wanted to know: EVERYONE thought the same thing. And he was a pig to make Mummy cry. And all the girls at school pitied her because she was so unhappy. And it was tragic how bad EVERYTHING was.

Time to get tough. He hardened his voice. ‘Look, Flora, it really is time you grew up a bit. Both your mum and I have been very, very patient with you. In fact I’d go so far as to say we’ve spoiled you, and far too much. It stops right here. Do you hear me? You will be grounded without your allowance if you keep up this pathetic routine of hysterics. Do I make myself clear? And you won’t go on the school trip to Rome either. So I suggest you toe the line, young lady, or face the consequences.’

She was so silent he thought she’d hung up. Then he heard a gulp and the sound of the telephone hitting the table with a clang.