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Opening extract from

Lee Raven Boy Thief

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CHAPTER 1

The Story According to Lee Raven, the Boy Thief

Earlier this year I got myself embroiled in an adventure so extremely peculiar and weird that if any other bloke had come up and told me it had happened to him I would've not believed him in fact I probably would've decked him for his cheek. However here I am sitting in the place to which this adventure brought me, with the purpose, prize and hero of the adventure in the hands of my friend beside me, so it must be true, and if you don't believe it I don't care because it don't matter, but don't try and deck me because if you do you'll be sorry.

I'll start at the beginning because I know that's where you ought to start a story. The beginning was, really, all that palaver in Greek Street, Soho, London, Great Britain, the UK, 20 April 2046, after the petrol ran out and the lowlands were drowned but before the Martians invaded (they still ain't yet, for your information, but you never know).

I, Lee Raven, useless git, pointless specimen, little oik, bliddy hoodie, thievin' ratbag (I'm merely quoting my fans

– well, my dad), thought what with it being Friday night, and a sunny warm evening all orange with the dusk, there'd be a load of guys the worse for booze out on the streets in Soho and I'd go and pick their pockets for them, get me a bit of tosh and they'd never even know, probably go home thinking they'd spent it all on booze. If they was good blokes they'd have given it to charity for poor lost homeless boys like me anyway, so I was just helping myself direct. Plus I was saving them the ill-healthful effects of drinking that much extra that they would've drunk if they'd've had the money I'd nicked. I was in fact performing a public service of redistributing wealth and preventing public drunkenness.

So late in the evening I was waiting for them to start falling out of the pubs and clubs when I noticed a dyed blonde bird in a fur coat and a very swanky handbag which made me think she'd likely have a quite nice fat purse inside it, waiting outside that club with the duck on it. I watched her for a moment. She was on her own, and when she turned I saw she had one of those faces covered in make-up to look young but underneath it was a face like boiled meat. Probably she was waiting for someone to come out of the club. *Move fast, Lee-o*, I thought, so I swung by her and gave her the old brush and dip and 'Sorry, Mrs!' as I passed. Only she only grabs my arm while I'm inside her bag, and holds it up in the air so's I'm on my toes, and she's yelling blue murder

and anyone would've thought I'd been trying to slit her throat not lift her caio – so then all these people are looking at us and some security come lurching out of the club and young Lee thinks, *All right, mate, enough of this*, so I kick her in the shins, extremely hard if I may say so, and she goes 'Eyurgh' and lets go of me to grab her leg, and I make off as quick as I can down the nearest revolting dark alleyway, which turned out to be the one where my aunt Jobisca lives since she had to leave Norfolk. Well, I wasn't going to stick around down there, so I roared off towards Piccadilly, looking for noise and crowds to hide in, only there was all the theatre and nightclub security along Shaftesbury Avenue, and I didn't fancy fighting my way past them, so I took a way towards Regent Street, and just kept on, feet thumping, heart thumping, keep going, and I crossed Regent Street all right and kept going and before long I was out of my territory, so I kept *on* going just in case and after a while there was a big garden square so I pitched myself over the railings (One-handed! Legs flying!) and flung myself down under a big old bush and lay there, and my heart was beating so hard I could feel it juddering the hard earth beneath me.

Otherwise it was quiet except for a bird singing away.

No one had followed me. I thought I'd keep my head down anyway. No more running around tonight, that's for sure.

It was a good enough place to sleep. I tucked myself inside under the branches and the drooping leaves, and I pulled my jacket round me. The earth was hard and dry and crumbling against my cheek. London wormcasts. I'd wake up covered in little grey squiggles.

And I'd got her purse too, safe in the deep pocket my mum had sewed in the back of my jacket lining for just such a purpose.

So the next day, I was just entirely minding my own business. I'd woken quite late considering I was outdoors, and thanks to Mrs Wallet – she had a bunch of cash, but I hadn't been through it properly yet – I'd bought my coffee and a chocolate croissong and a cheese and ham toastie and a big raspberry sherbet. I took them all back under my bush in the square, and it was a bit sunny and some leaves and blossoms like soapsuds were out on the trees and the buildings were all tall and white and handsome, so I sat there feeling completely happy, as it happens, munching and feeling the sun on my nose. If the sun's out, I'm happy. It's that simple.

For about ten minutes.

Then a bloke came and sat on a bench along the way. I thought about dipping him but decided not – I'd enough for the moment, and it was too quiet and light, and I didn't feel like any more running away yet, not after last night. So I just ignored him.

He had a coffee and a sandwich, and looked like an

officeguy on his break. He was having a shufti at the paper – checking the results by the look of it.

I'd finished my food, so being a good citizen up I got and strolled over to the bin, which was behind him, to dump my wrappings.

And as I passed, I took a look at his paper. And got a bit of a shock. There on the front page was a picture – big picture – of me. You wouldn't necessarily see it was me as my face was half hidden but I recognized myself – I've got this pretty weirdly pale hair – and I recognized the bird in the fur all right and there was my hand and it was pretty blatant what was going on. There was a big old headline and a load of writing to the side.

The officeguy noticed me standing there like a lemon because he looked up and smiled at me and looked down at the story, and said, 'Yeah! Romana Asteriosy got mugged last night! Amazing, isn't it? The amount of security she'd have and she got mugged by a kid! Pity that kid . . .'

Well that was enough. I tried to sort of grin and nod to cover up my dropped jaw, and moved on, and dumped my wrapping, and kept on moving.

Romana Asteriosy! Well that explains the amount of security that jumped out on me.

Romana Asteriosy is only one of the richest of the Rich Russians in London. I don't think she's actually Russian though. She owns half the shops and half the football teams and crike knows what. Extremely rich and dodgy as all

crike. You can't blame me for not recognizing her though – she's never photographed, except sometimes in shades. She's too mysterious for photographs. 'A shadowy figure', they call her on the TV.

But I never mugged her! I dipped her. It's different. I didn't threaten her. I didn't hit her. I don't carry – I don't like it. I just nicked her bliddy purse.

I felt the weight of it in my jacket.

I had to get rid of it, certes.

I looked round for a private place. Bogs in the cafe would do.

I went back there, ordered another sherbet and went into the toilet. Locked in the stall, I took out the purse and checked through the tosh properly.

It was the fold-out wallet kind. Full of caio, as I said. Three hundred dirhams! More than I'd seen – in my life, actually. The richness of some people – my mum could've fed us all for a month on that. Well, I was keeping it. I took it out and stuffed it in my inside pocket.

Cards: five, cash and debit and credit and all that. I wasn't interested in cards. Too much technology and no way you can use them and stay safe. I know some people sell them on and stuff but it's too complicated for me. I ain't mixing with that kind of people – once you've done business with them they think they own you and the next thing you know you're sharing a room with a dozen kids brought in a box from god knows where, none of them

talk English, they're crying all night and you're all getting beat up. No thank you. I only want clean anonymous stuff I can use – cash caio.

Photos: an old one of a guy in glasses – twentieth-century-looking. Probably her husband or her dad or something. Well, for sure I didn't need anybody else's family.

ID card, driving licence, some other stuff. None of it was anything to me. She was welcome to it. I'd jump a tube train out to Clapham or somewhere and leave it somewhere, and it could do what it wanted.

That's what I was doing. I came out of the cafe and walked down the square towards the tube station at Green Park. And walking up towards me was a bunch of security. I don't know whose, or where they were from, but they had that look of importance like they were Doing Something, and in a split second my mind went off on one and I knew for a fact that they were Asteriosy's security, and what they were doing was looking for me, and here I was with the wallet in my pocket, just walking up to them like a dork . . .

The houses in that section are very grand, tall and old with the blue plaques on their fronts about all the grand blokes who used to live there.

I ducked up the nearest set of steps leading up to a front door.

I didn't even know who lived here or what. There was a big brass sign, and glass windows in the door. *Very*

grand. Inside I could see a wide hall, and bookshelves.

Behind me, the security glanced up at me, semi-interested, from the other side of the street. One of them slowed down. He stopped to tie his shoe. The others stood around, with nothing better to do than stare at me.

There was a smaller brass plate by the doorbell. I stared at it. It might well say on it 'Deliveries to the basement door please'. I put a look on my face as if that had been what I just read, and then strolled down the stairs, innocent as you like, and down the much smaller and less glam set of stairs into the area where the basement door was. Out of their view so I wouldn't have to a) stand there like a lemon or b) ring! Clever, eh?

The only problem was, they were also out of my view so I had no idea whether they had finished tying their shoes yet and gone on about their business, or whether they were looking at their photo and discussing how the pale-headed kid in it looked exactly like the pale-headed kid they'd just seen going down the stairs looking dodgy.

So I had to stay down there for a bit.

So I did.

Then it started raining.

It was all right because there was a kind of arch under the stairs up to the front door, so I went in under there, where the coal hole was in Victorian times.

I'd been there a while, leaning against the whitewash

and congratulating myself on a lucky escape, when a face stuck itself up against the wire glass in the basement door, and a great rattling began, and the door shot open.

It was an old geezer – tall, stooping, in a dark suit and a big thick moustache. He was already talking: '. . . because if you'd rung someone should've come, I'd have thought, rather than leave you out in the rain, poor blighter, come in, come in. I was upstairs and didn't hear, lucky I came down actually. I was looking at the letters of David Docherty . . . I don't suppose you know him – very highly thought of in the late twentieth but hardly known now, still terribly funny though I don't know what I'm going to do with them . . .'

I took one look at him and saw something to be turned to my advantage.

'David Docherty who wrote *The Cannibal Death*, sir?' I chirped up in my best polite voice.

He'd been ushering me but now he stopped and turned to me. 'Yes!' he cried. 'Have you read him?'

Yeah. Well. That's the question that floors me. Have you read . . .?

I didn't answer him.

I didn't say the truth, which was, *No, I bliddy haven't because I can't bliddy read.*

I can catch a rat by the tail just by sneaking up on it, I can pick pockets like the Dodger and filch off market stalls and run like a cat, I can swear in several languages and

add things up in my head and I remember everything that I ever hear or see, but I can't read.

That's why the teacher told Dad I was DYS LEX IC and needed help. That's why I wouldn't go to school. My dad thought it meant I was STU PID PRAT and should be thwacked till I saw sense.

That's why I left home.

I didn't run away, mind. I'm not some little coward. I escaped.

Anyway, so I said, 'Yeah. Brilliant. Really scary, ain't it, that bit when . . .'

I knew all about it because my brothers used to watch the old film. They wouldn't let me watch because they said I was too little but then they'd scare me with stories about how this guy was going to eat me up and all of that. Ciaran was the worst. He'd go on and on: 'He'll slice out your liver and fry it with onions, he'll get chips from the chippy and a big bottle of beer, he'll deep-fry your fingers and put mustard on you and ketchup . . .' and Finn would grab me from behind, going, 'YUM-YUMYUM', and Billy and Squidge would laugh at us and tell us to shut up and in the end Dad would come in and yell.

The old geezer was saying, 'I never read *The Cannibal Death*. Do you know, I found it simply too frightening. Had to put it down. I don't find that kind of thing amusing any more, at my age . . . So – do come on in.'

Come on in? All right. Don't mind if I do.

'Yeah – ta,' I said. Bye-bye, blokeys outside. Lee's been admitted, and by that fact is proved an innocent Lee, going about innocent business. Bye.

The building smelt funny. Dusty and leathery and old. Not quite damp. Chilly and warm at the same time. The floor was big old stone slabs, like we were in a garden or on the pavement still, and there were all these bookcases everywhere, and books just piled all over the place: really old-looking ones mostly. I don't like books. They've got everything in them, and I can't get at it.

On one set of shelves they were all a kind of ghostly white, like pearl. He caught me looking at them and said, 'Ah, our vellum collection.' I nodded wisely as if I knew all about it, and stored the word away for when I could find out.

'You'll like this,' he said suddenly, and grabbed me and pulled me towards what looked like a big, thin, tightly rolled leather carpet.

'Eighteenth-century deerskin,' he said. 'Shipwrecked!'

'Yer what?' I replied.

'This is a roll of deerskin from the eighteenth century,' he said. 'It was on a ship going from Spain to New York, and the ship was wrecked.'

'Why ain't it all rotted away?' I asked.

'The right question!' he said, gleaming. 'It was so tightly rolled, and so tightly packed in, that the water never got

to it. It was salvaged in the early 2000s and found to be in perfect condition. Sniff it.'

I sniffed it. Leather, age – and salt.

'Isn't it beautiful?' he said.

He had a funny face – great big curving nostrils and eyes like under-cooked poached eggs and a moustache like someone had parked a broom up his nose – but I was quite liking him. Not that it was going to be able to last long – I knew that.

He took me into, of all things, a kitchen, tucked away among more rooms full of books. It had no windows, an old pale green table and lino on the floor. There was a hot pot of tea on the table and a packet of HobNobs.

'You're all wet,' he said. 'Would you like a cup of tea?'

This did surprise me. Then he looked at me again.

'You're *not* the lad from the auctioneers, are you?' he said.

'No,' I said.

He seemed mildly disappointed.

'And why were you here then, in my basement?' he asked.

'Just keeping out of the rain,' I said, looking all blue-eyed and innocent. It's a look I have had to perfect.

'Do your parents know where you are?'

Uh-oh. Here it comes – the lecture, the load of sympathy, the handing over of the miscreant to the authorities.

'Yeah of course I'd best be on my way then thanks

anyway,' I said hurriedly, and jumped up, and legged it. I was quicker than him and off out of there – or at least I would have been, and I would've made it too, only no one but a criking homing pigeon could've found his way out of that maze of a building. I thought I'd just gone back the way we came, but one shelf of books looks a lot like another and I think I turned left at the vellum not right, and the next thing I had to go up a skinny little staircase because Mr Whoever-he-was was right behind me, rustling about like a ferret up a hole, because he'd taken some shortcut. Anyway, so I was up these stairs and down a corridor and then pushing through a big, solid, heavy door – and suddenly we're in another country. Thick green carpets. Reverential hush. High ceilings and a big old chandelier dangling. Windows down to the floor. Bliddy great marble fireplace over there. Swankerama, old-school style. It looked like a historical telly programme.

I slowed down and tried to look like I belonged, in case there was anyone to see me. Sauntered towards a big pair of double doors, leading I hoped perhaps to the front door back on to the square.

Suddenly Mr Thing leapt out of a door in front of me. 'Hold on,' he said. 'You can't get out that way. Come with me.'

He was making me nervous. I overreacted, I know that now. But he was blocking my way and not letting me out and it was making me . . . nervous.

So I pushed past him.

And he pushed me back.

Well I could've clocked him, but he was old and I don't like clocking old people. Doesn't seem fair. I was about to do it anyway, but he'd got the advantage of my hesitating. With a quick movement, he shoved me through the door out of which he had just popped.

'Now just stay there while I decide what to do with you,' he said, as he slammed it shut on me.

It was the sheer surprise of it that let him get away with it. I was taken off guard, otherwise he'd never have achieved such a thing.

'Oi!' I yelled. 'Oi! You can't do that! Oi! Let me out! Let me out, you old sod!'

Nothing doing. Well, he was going to go to the Authorities, at a guess, wasn't he? Otherwise he would've just let me go. He was going to get somebody in who'd do me for assault and theft and take me home and my mum would cry and my dad would thwack me and I'd be in prison or, worse, back at school and everyone would be criking me out about being Stu Pid Prat just because I can't read and then I'd run away again. Big deal.

So I looked around. I was back in skinny-corridor-land by the looks of it. It was a decent-size room, shelves to the ceiling on all the walls, piles of old books everywhere, one lamp hanging on a bit of wire, a rackety ladder thing on wheels, no doubt for climbing up and down the shelves.

No windows. Another door, set in among the shelves: locked. In the corner was a little sink, and in the middle a chair in front of a big desk, with a computer on it – the only modern-looking thing in the place. I sat in the chair and whirled it round for a bit, but there's a limit to how long you can find that amusing. I took out Mrs Asteriosy's wallet and had a look through it again. I sighed a couple of times and looked round. On the shelf was a safe. I picked it just for fun, for something to do. Honest – I had no intention of nicking nothing. I was just stuck in a boring bliddy room with crike all to do, so I was amusing myself like anyone would.

Inside, there was a metal briefcase – tigrenium, if I wasn't mistaken. I recognized the metal because my dad always made me look out for it. It's very light and very strong. You could bash away for hours and not make a dent, and you can't cut it. They use it for safes and stuff. Only valuable items get stored in tigrenium. So you notice it.

Well, because it was tigrenium, and in a safe, I opened it. Course I did. Inside was lined with soft red furry velvety stuff, and lying on the stuff like a movie star in her bath was – the *Beano Annual*.

Well, I like the *Beano*. The only time we ever had anything like books at home was when Mum decided one time when we were little that she should read us bedtime stories, so she got this copy of the *Beano* and read Dennis the Menace to us. She read that same copy over and over, and

we all laughed at the stupid dad running round with his stupid slipper and Dennis getting one over on him the whole time.

I picked it up. On the cover was the Bash Street Kids, with a big picture of Plug, who my brothers always said looked like me. Or I looked like him. Plug Ugly. I like Plug.

There was a sort of honey and oranges smell in the office.

I opened it. The first strip was Dennis the Menace. There he was in his black and red stripy jumper, and there was Gnasher jumping up, and Dad . . . I smiled, and followed the pictures.

My heart kind of bounced.

How extremely peculiar.

It was the same story. The same strip my mum used to read, over and over . . .

I followed it with a strange sad kind of warmth growing up inside me. It was so lovely to see it. It made me feel like a little kid again, with Mum with her arm round me, and all of us being quiet and not fighting each other for once . . .

Dad burned our old *Beano*. He came in one time while we were looking at it for the ninety-ninth time with Mum and he thought we were laughing at him – well, we were – so he tore it in half and chucked it in the fire.

And here it was again. The exact same story. I started

laughing – a little hiccuppy laugh that might bring a tear with it if you were girly. Which I ain't. But I was really happy to see that Dennis the Menace story again.

And then I heard a whispering at the keyhole.

I whipped round, in one movement shoving the book under my jacket and twitching the lid of the box shut.

'Boy!' it said. It was the old geezer.

'What,' I said crossly. I swung the safe door shut with my elbow.

The key rattled. The book slipped as of its own accord into my thieves' pocket. The door opened. The old guy slid in and shut it behind him again.

'What's your name?'

'Joe English,' I said. It ain't. My name is Lee Raven. Joe English is what I use.

'And you're what – twelve? Fourteen?'

'That kind of thing,' I said.

'Well, Joe, my name is Edward Maggs, and this is my family business, and I can't help noticing that you are dreadfully grubby and quite possibly a street child – are you?'

'I live my own life,' I said, with some dignity, though I say so myself.

'Are you in trouble?'

I was a bit surprised by this. How could he tell?

'Those men who were approaching who caused you to enter my basement – were they after you?' He almost

hissed this bit, though there was no one to overhear us.

'Certainly not,' I said.

'I thought so. They don't belong around here. I assume you have some skill in nefarious activity,' he said.

I just looked at him.

'The kind a person of tender years might have to acquire to survive on these mean streets . . .'

His square didn't look very mean to me, I can tell you. Not compared with some of the bailiwicks around which I've lurked.

'Could be,' I said.

He stared at me. I knew the expression on his face. I get it all the time. He was a decent old sod and didn't know whether to pity me or call security. Was I a poor boy struggling to get by as best he could in a wicked world, or was I a wicked boy who ought by rights to be locked up toot sweet?

And suddenly, as if he'd made up his mind, he announced, 'Off you go, young fellow, off you go, and don't come round my basement again. Don't know what you're up to, don't need to, not my business.'

He'd opened the door, and lugged me out into the hall, and was opening the front door. 'Off you go,' he said again, and chucked me down the stairs.

The blokeys, and just as well, had gone. I was all alone, stumbling out of the garden and collapsing on the pavement, picking myself up, brushing my knees and controlling

a very strong urge to rush back up there and shout, 'Oi! What's all that about! First you lock me in, then you chuck me out . . . What's your problem?'

But he was right. We were not each other's business. My business was to get rid of this flamin' wallet –

Oh.

Patting myself down, the flaming wallet was not where it had previously been and should still be, i.e. in my thieves' pocket.

The flaming wallet was not on the pavement, not in the gutter. Nor on the stairs.

I scrabbled myself across the road and back under my preferred bush. I took off my jacket, checked all pockets and down the seat of my pants, and in my shoes, where I sometimes hide things, though it was pretty obvious it wasn't there as it was too darn big.

Nothing – except that *Beano* book, which I hadn't even meant to nick.

I knew all along where the wallet was. It was where I had left it – on Mr Maggs's desk.

So I swore for a bit, and I tightened up my mouth so it probably looked like a bumhole which is how it goes when I am really criked off, and I breathed hard and thought.

I had the caio at least. That was good.

But the old guy would find the wallet and realize it was Asteriosy's and realize I had left it and call the Authorities and they'd get a cracking description of me and my life

would not be worth living, plus he'd see the *Beano Annual* was missing, with like my signature practically written all over the crime, and even though it was only a *Beano Annual* it had been in a tigrenium case, in a safe, so someone thought it was worth something, and the public police and Asteriosy's security would be all over me.

My first thought, which lasted a while, was I had to get back in there to Maggsland and nick back that wallet before he found it.

I groaned.

I hate housebreaking now. Too complicated.

I used to do it when I was little but I never thought about it then. It was just what we did. Normal. It was always the littlest kid's job in our family – going through the window and opening up for Dad to come through the door. I was the youngest in our family so it stayed my job for longest. I'd been proud at first when Finn got moved on for being too big. Dad talked it up like it was a real honour. There's only three things Ravens are any good at, toshing, flushing and nicking, and Dad made us proud.

But it was scary when you were only a tyke, and it's all dark in front of you and you don't know what's there, dogs maybe or alarms, or people – and Dad behind shoving yer and saying . . . what he said . . . and you go head first on the floor if you're not lucky.

But I was good at it. It's like falling off a bicycle – you don't forget how.

So I'd just go round and nick the wallet back.

I still had the peculiarly precious *Beano Annual* as well. Stupid bliddy instinct I got for pocketing stuff. Now what was I going to do with it?

CHAPTER 2

The Story According to Mr Maggs, the Bookseller

I have to say that the presence of the boy in the basement confused me. I assumed he had come from Christie's to pick up the copy of Johnson's *General History of the Pyrates* for Mrs Netherby. True, he wasn't the usual boy, but they could have employed a new one. True, he didn't, once I had a proper look at him, resemble a Christie's boy: he was so pale, with his pale sticky-up hair and the bags under his eyes. He looked as if in his entire life he'd consumed nothing but chips and cheap lemonade. I was discombobulated by his presence, to tell the truth, particularly as it followed on so swiftly from my other two unusual visitors.

But I run ahead. My name is Edward Maggs, of Maggs Brothers Antiquarian Booksellers of Berkeley Square. I am absolutely accustomed to handling rare and valuable items. We have vaults for humidifying and dehumidifying, to rehydrate a brittle book or dry out a damp one. We have contraptions with dry-glove fingers which will turn the pages of ancient documents so that the paper is not damaged