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# **Under Attack**

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## CHAPTER ONE

Everitt White had spent most of his life afloat. Born on a narrowboat in Staffordshire, he'd devoted his early years to helping his father in the unremitting work of hauling cargo up and down canals in the Midlands and beyond. To broaden his horizons, he'd joined the merchant navy and learnt to cope with rough seas and gale force winds. When he felt that he'd seen enough of the world, he applied for a job in the Thames River Police and found his true *métier*. It was hard, gruelling labour but White was ideally suited for it. He made light of long days heaving on his oars and mastering the capricious tides. He didn't blench when he had to retrieve the bloated corpse of a human being or of an animal from the water. Nor did he recoil from the distinctive reek of the Thames. It was his whole world now and he relished it.

The police galley was a clinker-built open boat less than thirty feet in length. It had three thwarts for oarsmen and a seat in the stern from

which Inspector White could steer with rudder strings. He commanded a crew of three men, two of whom had only a single oar while the third, on the centre thwart, pulled on a pair of sculls. It was the position that White himself had held for many years so he knew how much skill and effort it took. He'd learnt how to read the river and, having seen colleagues swept helplessly into it over the years, he always respected its power. Though it seemed relatively placid that morning, White remained alert.

In the normal course of events, he rarely looked up. He was too busy scanning the surface of the Thames with a well-trained eye. For once, however, his attention was diverted and he stared up at the sky. Emitting an odd clanking noise from their whirring propellers, a fleet of fourteen big biplanes was cruising above him. His men also lifted their gaze upward. All of them thought at first that they were witnessing a display of British air power, visual proof that the city was well defended. It was a common mistake. They could hear people on both banks yelling in admiration or breaking into applause. Tragically, celebrations were soon cut short. When the bombs began to fall, everyone realised that they'd been cruelly deceived. London was under direct attack. Gotha bombers had reached the nation's capital in broad daylight and they showed no mercy.

Their bombs caused deafening explosions and spread disaster. White was horrified at the sheer audacity of the attack. Cold, systematic and unchallenged, the planes were wreaking havoc. The main targets seemed to be the docks and the area around Liverpool Street Station. Poplar, in particular, was taking real punishment. Since they were close to the docks, the river police were right in the middle of the action. Fire sprung up among the warehouses around them. Moored vessels sustained direct hits. Dock workers were sent scurrying for cover. The

Gothas kept up their barrage relentlessly until all their bombs had been dropped then, content with their work, they turned in a wide circle and headed for the south coast. Behind them they left chaos and confusion. Everitt White summed the attack up in one word.

‘Bastards!’

When he looked down at the river once more, he saw that they had company. A dead body was bobbing up and down only yards away.



## CHAPTER TWO

It was not the best way to return to work. Harvey Marmion had had to force himself to go back to Scotland Yard that morning. He'd taken ten days' leave in order to search for his son, Paul, who had run away from home months earlier, but it had been a fruitless venture. For all his efforts, Marmion had found no sign whatsoever of him. He couldn't even come back with the reassuring news that Paul was still alive because he had no evidence of it. All that he could tell his wife was that they would find their son one day. It was cold comfort. Arriving at his office usually gave him an instant stimulus. Instead of being primed for action now, however, Marmion simply wanted to curl up in a corner and hide away. As a detective, he had an excellent record of success behind him. Yet when it came to tracing his only son, he'd failed abysmally.

Joe Keedy tried to cheer him up.

‘Paul can look after himself,’ he said.

‘Why doesn’t he just tell us where he is?’

‘He has his reasons.’

‘I’m one of them,’ admitted Marmion. ‘We were never close. Other fathers get to spend time with their children but shift work stopped me from doing that. I let him down, Joe. I’m afraid that Paul left home because of me.’

‘That’s nonsense.’

‘I was so proud of him when he joined the army. Life in uniform brought out the best in him at first. He blossomed. Then came the Somme and that ruined him. It wasn’t so much the physical wounds. He got over most of those in time. It was his mind.’ He heaved a sigh. ‘Paul couldn’t even be civil with us any more.’

‘That was *his* fault, Harv, not yours.’

‘We were all at fault – me, Ellen, Alice and even you, to some extent.’ Keedy bridled. ‘You can’t blame me because he hopped it.’

‘You’re part of the family, Joe, and that’s what he’s turned his back on.’

‘Since he got back from the army, I hardly ever saw him.’

‘Neither did I. That’s why I feel so guilty.’

Marmion made a conscious effort to shake off his lethargy and dispel his gloom. Forgetting his son, he asked to be brought up to date with the investigation on which Keedy had been working during his absence. The sergeant pulled out his notebook. He was concise yet comprehensive. His report provided a good basis for discussion and they traded ideas freely. Time slipped more easily past and Marmion began to feel at home once more. They were just about to go off to the canteen when the door was flung open to reveal the tall, slim figure of Superintendent Claude Chatfield.



‘Ah,’ he said, seeing Marmion, ‘you’re back at last.’

‘I tried to report to you, sir, but you were busy with the commissioner.’

‘We had a lot to discuss – until the air raid interrupted us, that is.’

‘What air raid?’ asked Keedy.

‘Are you deaf, man? German aircraft have been pounding the docks this morning. There’s been significant damage and many fatalities.’

Marmion was surprised. ‘Zeppelins don’t usually attack in daylight, sir.’

‘This was a raid by Gothas, apparently,’ explained Chatfield. ‘How they got this far, I shall never know, but it’s given us a nasty shock. The war is no longer something that’s happening on the other side of the English Channel. It’s right here.’

‘You mentioned fatalities, sir.’

‘I can’t give you a number but it will be a distressingly high one. The latest information I have is that there was a direct hit on a school in Poplar. The bomb detonated in the basement where the youngest children were being taught. You can imagine the disaster it must have caused. It’s inhuman,’ said Chatfield with sudden passion, ‘and it’s happened right here in London. None of us is safe any longer.’

It was a grim prediction. With its recurring defeats and setbacks, 1916 had been a dreadful year for the Allies. Its few victories were bought at enormous cost. There seemed to be little visible progress in the succeeding year. Trench warfare had moved the conflict close to a stalemate. British tanks had been lauded as the weapons to change the face of the war but it had simply not happened to the degree imagined. The latest outrage would tilt the advantage in favour of Germany once more. The sight of bombers flying at will over the capital was a far more

powerful image than a photograph of tanks stuck in the mud on the Western Front.

‘However,’ said Chatfield, fussily, ‘let’s concentrate on our own work. We can leave the emergency services to deal with the aftermath of the air raid.’

‘The sergeant has been telling me what I’ve missed,’ said Marmion. ‘I’m well prepared to continue with the investigation now.’

Chatfield was peremptory. ‘I’m assigning it elsewhere.’

‘Why?’

‘Because something more important has come up,’ explained the other. ‘Trying to solve a spate of burglaries is not the ideal use of your time. You and the sergeant are at your best when you have something to get your teeth into.’

‘That’s true,’ agreed Keedy.

‘A corpse has been hauled out of the Thames. It’s not another case of suicide this time. We’ve had our fair share of those. There’s clear evidence of foul play. I want you to handle the case, Inspector,’ he went on with a shrewd glance at him. ‘I take it that you’re up to it?’

‘Yes, sir,’ replied Marmion, firmly.

‘If you need more time to settle in . . .’

‘I’m fine, Superintendent. All we need are the details.’

Chatfield handed him a sheet of paper. Marmion was annoyed at the suggestion he might need time before he was functioning properly in his role at Scotland Yard. He showed no irritation, however, because Chatfield had been very accommodating. The two men had never liked each other and there was always a residual unease between them. When he’d applied for leave, Marmion had expected some opposition from the superintendent but it never came. A father himself, Chatfield

encouraged him to go in search of his missing son. Marmion was very grateful for the unconditional support.

‘Did you make any headway?’ asked Chatfield, softly.

‘No, sir,’ replied Marmion. ‘To be honest, I made none at all.’

‘I’m sorry to hear that.’

‘We won’t give up the search until we find him.’

‘How is Mrs Marmion?’

‘My wife is . . . doing her best to remain hopeful, sir.’

Ellen Marmion was struck by the paradox every single day. Having wanted her son to go, she was in despair at his disappearance. When Paul was there, she’d found his presence both intrusive and worrying. He’d been so rude to any friends she’d invited into the house that she stopped asking them to come there. He showed his mother no respect, still less any affection. It was like having a stranger living with them. Since her husband worked such long hours, the burden of dealing with their brusque and uncommunicative son fell on her. It had been a struggle for Ellen simply to get a few words out of him. Paul had treated her with something approaching contempt. And yet she wanted him back. She longed to be reconciled with him.

Pain, anxiety and guilt had combined to take its toll on her. Ellen had been a plump, attractive, middle-aged woman until her son had been invalided out of the army. All of her old vivacity had now drained away. Her eyes were dull, her brow wrinkled, her shoulders hunched and her whole body seemed to have shrunk in size. Alice was all too aware of the physical changes in her mother. It was one of the reasons she tried to spend more time at home. She wanted to offer love and companionship. What she was unable to do, however, was to still the demons in Ellen’s mind.

‘I thought that your father would find him somehow.’

‘So did I,’ said Alice.

‘That’s his job, after all – searching for people.’

‘Tracking down criminals is a different matter, Mummy. There’s usually a trail of evidence to follow. Paul didn’t leave that. We had no clue as to where he might have gone. When he first set out, he probably had no clue himself. He just wanted to get away from us.’

‘Away from *me*, you mean.’

‘Away from the situation he was in,’ corrected Alice. ‘He felt trapped and worthless while he was here – and you mustn’t think that it was because of you. The blame lies with this terrible war. That’s what destroyed him.’

‘Other young men had worse injuries and learnt to live with them.’

‘Paul couldn’t manage to do that.’

‘We were ready to help him in every possible way, Alice.’

‘He spurned our help. There was an element of cruelty in that.’

‘I know,’ confessed Ellen. ‘He wanted to *hurt* us.’

She hugged her daughter impulsively. Alice was in the Women’s Police Service but, because her shift didn’t begin until that afternoon, she’d spent the morning at home again. Her mother had been distressed when she’d first moved out to enjoy a degree of independence. Looking back, Alice was glad that she’d done so. Being stuck at home when her brother was there would have created an even more fractious household. Though she sympathised with her mother’s plight, Alice felt that she’d made the right decision.

When she broke away, Ellen’s eyes were moist with tears.

‘My biggest fear is that Paul will . . . end it all.’

‘No, Mummy, I don’t think that’s likely somehow.’

‘But he said in effect that his life was not worth living.’

‘That doesn’t mean he’s been thinking of suicide,’ said Alice. ‘If he’d reached that stage, he’d have done something about it long before now.’

‘You read such awful stories in the newspapers. There was one only yesterday about a disabled soldier who slit his throat because he’d lost both legs and no longer felt like a proper man. And there have been lots of others.’

‘Those are the exceptions, Mummy. As you said earlier, most victims have found a way of pulling through. Paul will survive somehow. He’s got far too much sense to want to do anything desperate.’

‘Running away from us was an act of desperation.’

‘He might have thought he was *helping* us, Mummy.’

‘*Helping* us,’ echoed Ellen. ‘He frightened me to death.’

‘I’m trying to see it from Paul’s point of view.’

‘I did that when he was here. It was a waste of time.’

Alice glanced at the clock on the mantelpiece. ‘I must be going.’

‘Thank you so much,’ said Ellen, squeezing her daughter’s hands.

‘I’ll come again as soon as I can.’

‘Don’t go yet. There’s something I must tell you. I haven’t had the courage to tell your father yet. I’m not sure that I ever will. But . . .’ Ellen was clearly wrestling with mixed emotions. She took a deep breath before plunging in. ‘When he spent all that time searching and came back empty-handed, I was very upset at first. Then I remembered what I had to go through when Paul was here and . . . well, part of me was glad he wasn’t found. Isn’t that a dreadful thing for a mother to admit?’ she said, biting her lip. ‘But it’s true. I’m not sure that I ever want him back, Alice.’

The detectives were familiar visitors to the police morgue. Since they dealt almost exclusively with murder investigations, their work often

began there. While he was not squeamish, Marmion never enjoyed being obliged to view cadavers, especially if they'd been butchered in some perverse way. Keedy, by contrast, took it all in his stride. Having worked in the family undertaking business, he'd been cheek by jowl with death on a daily basis and was accustomed to the hideous distortions it could inflict on the human body. The information that had taken them there was scant. All they knew was that an unidentified, middle-aged white male had been pulled out of the Thames earlier that morning.

Entering the building with his usual flutter of trepidation, Marmion was delighted to see someone he recognised. The burly frame of Everitt White was seated on a bench. He got to his feet instantly and extended a gnarled hand.

'How are you, Harvey?' he said, pumping away. 'It's good to see you again.'

'It's good to see *you*, Everitt,' said Marmion, noting the strength of the handshake. 'You've found us another customer, I see.'

'I like to keep you busy.'

'You remember Sergeant Keedy, don't you?'

'Yes, I do.' He shook hands with Keedy. 'You're looking spick and span.'

'Someone has to set standards,' said Keedy with a grin.

It was a gibe at Marmion who always looked shabby even in his best suit. Keedy, by contrast, took great pains to look smart. White was in uniform and manifestly proud of his rank. Marmion showed him the sheet of paper he'd been given. When he'd glanced through it, White handed it back.

'I can add a few things to that,' he said. 'For a start, I can tell you exactly where the poor devil was found. We were too busy watching the

air raid to spot him at first.' He waited until Keedy had his notebook out. 'Ready, Sergeant?'

'Yes, I am,' said the other. 'Fire away, Inspector.'

'This chap is unusual. Bodies usually stay underwater for one or two weeks. My guess is that he was only dumped in the river three days ago at most. Don't ask me why or I'll talk for the whole afternoon. My judgement is based on years of pulling corpses out of the Thames. Trust me.'

'How was he killed?' asked Marmion.

'He was strangled. The marks around his neck tell their own story.'

'Is there anything else of interest?'

'Before he made a big splash,' said White, 'he was robbed. His wallet, watch and cufflinks were taken. His shoes are missing as well, but they could just have been eased off by an undercurrent.'

'What kind of man was he, Everitt?'

'Oh, he's not short of a few pennies, I can tell you that. His suit has real quality and his shirt probably cost more than I earn in a month. When we'd hauled him aboard, my immediate impression was that we had a wealthy businessman in the galley.'

'Are you still using those old things?' said Keedy. 'You should have gone beyond rowing boats by now. Why not use a steam-powered vessel?'

'We tried a couple of them,' replied White, 'and they just weren't up to it. Three strong men in a galley are much more reliable. That's why you've had a steady supply of bodies from us over the years.'

'This latest one takes priority now,' said Marmion. 'One of us has to go in and take a close look at him. I'm volunteering you, Joe.' Keedy gave a hollow laugh. 'If there's no identification on him, we'll need

some of his effects. Since he's so well dressed, he may have an expensive London tailor.'

'I'll ask him,' said Keedy.

After an exchange of farewells with White, he went off and left the two old friends alone. White narrowed his eyelids as he peered at Marmion.

'You look tired, Harvey.'

'I feel exhausted.'

'Has that swine of a superintendent been making a nuisance of himself?'

'No,' said Marmion, 'he hasn't. In fact, Chat has been very understanding. Our son decided to run away from home and I was granted ten days' leave to find him. Chat urged me to go.' He shook his head sadly. 'It was a wild goose chase. I only came back to work today.'

'I'm sorry to hear about your son.'

'We all have our crosses to bear, Everitt.' He forced a smile. 'Let's go back to the murder victim. When you first saw him, did you draw any other conclusion?'

'Yes, I did.'

'Go on.'

'It's based on instinct rather than on any evidence.'

'I'd still like to hear it.'

White ran a contemplative hand across the lower part of his bulbous features.

'I think he was killed as a warning to others,' he said. 'That's why he was allowed to bob back up to the surface. If his killer had wanted him to disappear altogether, he'd have attached weights to keep him underwater indefinitely. But he deliberately let him pop up for us to find.'



'It's an interesting theory, Everitt. I'm not sure that I'm convinced by it.'

'There's something I haven't mentioned.'

'Oh?'

'His tongue has been cut out.'