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Written by Mike Hollow

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MIKE HOLLOW



LION FICTION

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The Essex County Borough of West Ham, 1940



Prologue

Friday 6 September 1940

He was alone, and there was no one to help him. Trapped in the silent space between two rows of graves, he heard every rasp of the madman's breath. The reek of stale beer soured the air between them as the dark figure grabbed his lapels and pulled him close. The attacker's face was vicious, and the cap yanked down onto his forehead was shabby. No witness could have identified him, even if there had been one in this gloomy wilderness of the dead. But Hodgson knew him well enough, and wished they had never met.

It was absurd. There were houses just a hundred yards away. He could trace the outline of their roofs and chimneys against the night sky to his right. But in the depths of the blackout, with not a light showing anywhere, he might as well be on the moon. The only people out at this time of night would be the ARP wardens and the police, and he could hear no sound of them. They would have plenty of things to attend to.

He knew he was trembling, but could not stop it. He was out of his depth, overwhelmed by a familiar surge of panic. His father used to say dogs and horses could smell fear, so maybe people did too. He remembered the two women who'd stopped him on Stratford High Street in the autumn of 1916 and given him a white feather. Perhaps they could smell cowardice on him. He could have made an excuse: he'd been officially ruled unfit for military service in the Great War because of his short-sightedness. But no, he just

took the feather without complaint and went on his way. He knew they were right: he was a coward through and through.

Now he heard himself babbling some futile nonsense about reporting this to the police. The man released his hold on one lapel, but only to slap him in the face. The sting bit deep into Hodgson's cheek, and his glasses rammed painfully into the bridge of his nose. He wanted to cry. It's just like the way gangsters slap hysterical women in the pictures, he thought. He knows that's all it takes with someone like me.

"Not so high and mighty now, are we, Mr Hodgson?" his tormentor snarled. "I think it's time you started putting a bit more effort into our little arrangement. Don't you?"

He flung Hodgson back against a gravestone. Its edge cracked into his spine and he slumped to the ground.

Humiliation. Again. All through his life. His wife might like to think he had some status because he worked for the Ministry of Labour and National Service, but he knew his post was shamingly junior for a man with twenty-four years' service. After all this time he still wondered if she knew what kind of man she had married. But *he* knew, only too well. He saw himself, eleven years old, and the gang that set about him on his way home from school, older boys looking for fun in their last term at Water Lane. His West Ham Grammar School uniform made him an easy target. When they snatched his cap and tossed it onto the roof of the nearest house, he understood for the first time in his life that he was a victim. They were just a bunch of fourteen-year-old boys, but he was outnumbered and powerless. Now he was outnumbered by one man.

"I will, I will," he said. "It's just difficult. You don't understand."

"Oh, I understand all right," said the man, hauling him back onto his feet.

Hodgson pushed his glasses back up his nose to straighten them. Now he could see the scar that ran three inches down the

side of his assailant's face, just in front of his ear. The man didn't look old enough for it to be a wound from the last war, and not young enough to have been involved in the current one. He tried not to think how he might have got it.

"You just look here, Mr Hodgson. You're a nice man, so I'm going to give you one more chance."

The sneer in his voice made his meaning clear. He pulled a crumpled piece of paper from his trouser pocket and stuffed it into the inside pocket of Hodgson's jacket, then patted him on the chest in mock reassurance.

"Right, Mr Hodgson, you just sort it for this little lot, and there's a pound in it for you for each one. Mind you do it right, though. If you don't, I'll shop you, or worse. Now you won't forget, will you?"

Hodgson hurried to give his assurance, relieved that the ordeal was over. Before the words were out of his mouth, he felt the first blow to his stomach, then a second full in his face, a third to the side of his head and another to his stomach. After that he lost count.

* * *

He became aware of a boot nudging his left leg.

"Been celebrating, have we, sir?"

He didn't know where he was or what time it was. His eyes stung as he strained them open. Two figures stood above him, silhouetted against the lightening sky. He couldn't see their faces, and took them at first for soldiers, or perhaps a Home Guard patrol, from the outline of their headgear. One of the men squatted down beside him, and now through a blur Hodgson could make out the word "Police" stencilled in white on the front of his steel helmet.

"I think you'd better come along with us so we can get you tidied up before your missus sees you," said the policeman.

Hodgson closed his eyes. He felt their grip on his arms, one either side, as they got him standing.

Every part of his body ached. He struggled to focus his mind and glanced down at his cheap black suit, crumpled and filthy. How was he going to persuade them he was a respectable civil servant when he must look like a common midnight brawler? Even worse, how was he going to explain all this to Ann?

He had to think of something. He had to find some way to stop that maniac destroying his life.

Chapter 1

There were times when Jago wished he wasn't a policeman. Right now he'd like to go out, cross the street and rip the thing off the wall. It had been stuck up there for so long, he reckoned most people probably ignored it, but it still made him feel angry. Everything about it was pompous and patronizing, he thought, like the government that had put it there.

He tried not to think about it. That wasn't why he'd come here. Apart from the view across West Ham Lane to that confounded poster, Rita's café was an oasis, a sanctuary of friendly welcome and good home cooking. Today, like time without number in the past, he'd come here for respite from the job, from crime, from the world.

He saw Rita approaching, cloth in hand and pencil behind her ear as usual. She wore her years well, he thought. A woman of a certain age, as the French put it – in other words fortyish, like himself, but already widowed for twenty-two years and with a daughter of twenty-three. In her floral-patterned apron and with her headscarf tied in a turban, she treated her customers as though they'd just popped round to her house for a cup of tea in the kitchen.

"Afternoon, Mr Jago," she said. "Enjoying the view?"

"No," he said. "Can't you get the council to take that poster down? It annoys me."

She peered out of the window. The brown paper tape that criss-crossed the glass had been up for a year now and was beginning

to peel away at the corners. She rubbed off a small smear with her cloth.

"I'm sorry about the state of these windows. I'll have to put some new tape up, I think, although why we bother I don't know. A year at war and we've never had a single bomb down this street. But what's wrong with the poster, dear? You mean that red one on the wall over there? It's in a bit of a state, isn't it?"

"Yes, but unfortunately you can still just about make out what it says. Look."

Rita read the words slowly.

"'Your courage, your cheerfulness, your resolution will bring us victory.' What's wrong with that, then?"

"Everything, I'd say. What idiot thinks you can win a war by being cheerful? They should try spending a few weeks in a trench up to their knees in mud, blood and rats, like your Walter and I did. Then we'd see how cheerful they were. And look: every time it says 'your' they've put a line under it. They might as well put one under 'us', too, and make it absolutely clear: we're the rulers and you're the ruled. It's a wonder one of those communists from the docks hasn't crept out in the night with a pot of paint and done it for them. What do these Whitehall pen-pushers use for brains?"

"Not your favourite poster then, Mr Jago? Honestly, I'm surprised at you. Coming out with things like that, and you a servant of the Crown. If people hear you talking like that you'll have to arrest yourself."

"Don't worry, Rita: for your ears only. I don't go round saying that sort of thing to everyone, but I know I can let off a bit of steam with you."

"I'll go up the road to the town hall if you like and ask them to scrape it off the wall, tell them it's annoying my customers and ruining my trade."

"To be honest, Rita, it wouldn't surprise me if West Ham Borough Council had left it there on purpose. Think about it:

you've got the world's worst propaganda poster, dreamed up by Chamberlain and his Tory government, and a council controlled by Labour for twenty years. They probably left it there deliberately to make a political point."

"I think you're reading too much into it. And in any case, the weather's nearly done it for you – it'll be falling off the wall soon."

She wiped the top of his table, then stood back and took a notepad from her apron pocket and the pencil from behind her ear.

"Now then, what can I get you? A spot of late lunch?"

"Just a pot of tea for two, please, and a couple of your delightful rock cakes. I'm waiting for my colleague to join me – he's just popped to the gents."

"I'll bring the tea and cakes over when I see him come back. Is it the young man I saw you coming in with? I don't think I've seen him in here before."

"Yes, that's my assistant, Detective Constable Cradock. I'm taking him to the football this afternoon. Familiarizing him with the local culture, you might say."

"Well, you've got very good weather for it; I hope you win. This constable of yours, he looks a nice young man. Might suit my Emily. Is he spoken for?"

"Sorry, Rita, I have no idea – and if I had I wouldn't tell you."

"I expect you miss your Sergeant Clark, don't you? He's back in the Army, isn't he?"

"Yes, he was called up when war was declared, with all the other reserves. We're so short of manpower these days I can't get a detective sergeant to replace him, so I have to make do with a constable instead."

"Same for me, dear," said Rita. "The last girl I had working here packed it in. Said she could get better money doing munitions work. Now I'm stuck with that Phyllis over there. Too slow to catch cold, if you ask me. Young people today don't know what hard work is, do they, Mr Jago?"

"It's not like it was when we were young, Rita, that's for sure. I look at Cradock sometimes and think I don't understand him. And it's not just a generation thing. It's the war: if you lived through it you see things differently, simple as that."

"Too true," said Rita with a sigh. "Twenty-two years now since my Walter was killed, and it's with me every day. But to most people I'm just another war widow, and who wants to think about that? Present company excluded, of course: you've always been very understanding. Sometimes I think I should have gone away, lived somewhere else, started all over again, but somehow I never did. Don't know why."

"Because people like you and me belong here, Rita, that's why."

"I suppose so. No place like home, eh? Still, there's no point getting miserable, is there? That doesn't help anyone. Look, I've brought you the paper to look at while you're waiting. Yesterday's *Express*. I know you like to see it."

She handed him that week's *Stratford Express* with a smile, then pointed at the wall behind him.

"Is that a new hat you've got there?"

"That's very observant of you, Rita. You should have been a detective."

She laughed.

"Not me, dear. I'm not clever enough. It's just that you're always so nicely turned out, not like most of the men round here, so I notice what you're wearing."

Jago took the hat down from the hook on the wall and smoothed it with his jacket sleeve.

"You're right. I got it last week. It's the first I've bought for five years, and I plan to wear it for the next five at least."

The hat was a charcoal grey fedora with the brim snapped down at the front. He didn't like to think what the men at the station would say if they knew what he'd paid for it. Even a detective inspector's salary didn't give much room for self-indulgence. If he'd

been a family man they might call it scandalous, but he had neither wife nor children, and his conscience was clear.

"Very nice too," said Rita. "You always look a proper gentleman."

She set off back to the kitchen, and Jago replaced his hat on the hook. He was peckish, and Cradock had not yet appeared. Get a move on, boy, he thought: I want my cup of tea.

Most of the Saturday lunchers had gone by now, but the café was still busy. Rita had the wireless on as usual, and beneath the customers' chatter he could make out the mellow voice of Hutch, crooning that it would be a lovely day tomorrow. All part of the national drive for cheerfulness, no doubt, he thought. But on a day like this it was almost possible to believe it. A week into September already, and still unseasonably warm: real seaside weather. Not that anyone was allowed within miles of the coast any more.

Cradock came into view at last.

"Come along, lad, I'm starving," said Jago. "What were you doing in there? I thought you'd set up camp for the duration."

"Sorry, guv'nor," said Cradock.

"Well, sit down. Your tea's on its way."

Moments later Rita arrived with their order and carefully set out the cups and saucers, tea pot, and strainer on the table, followed by two large rock cakes, each on a white china plate.

"There you are, gentlemen," she said. "Give me a shout if there's anything else you need."

She gave Jago a theatrical wink and departed. Jago saw the look of alarm on Cradock's face.

"Don't worry, she's only joking. Rita and I go back a long way."

He poured the two cups of tea and pushed one across to Cradock, then spooned sugar into his own from the chipped glass bowl in the middle of the table. He'd cut down from two sugars to one in January, when the rationing came in – doing his bit for the war effort – but his first taste of the drink was still agreeably sweet. He smacked his lips and gave a satisfied sigh.

"So how's your cheerfulness today, Peter?" he said, with a sideways nod towards the window.

Cradock followed his gaze and spotted the offending slogan.

"Reckon I'd feel cheerful if I was in the poster business, sir," he said. "Whoever prints them must make a packet. There's always some who do in a war, though, isn't there? It's an ill wind that blows no one a silver lining."

Jago inclined his head and stared into Cradock's face.

"And in English?"

"Sir?"

"Never mind: I got the gist."

Cradock took a bite of his cake.

"You were right about these rock cakes, sir," he said. "Very tasty, very sweet."

Jago rolled his eyes. "Leave the catch-phrases to the comedians," he said. "You're a police officer, not a music hall act. Do try to remember that. Too much time listening to the wireless, that's your trouble."

Cradock seemed to be concentrating too hard on pushing cake into his mouth to notice what his boss was saying. Jago picked up the *Express* and studied the front page. A couple of minutes later he tutted and lowered the paper to address Cradock again.

"Have you seen what the local rag has to say about those air raids last weekend?"

Cradock shook his head, his mouth still full.

"They make it sound like an entertainment. Listen: 'On Saturday and Monday afternoons many people had the thrilling experience of witnessing aerial combats in the district.' Thrilling experience? They won't find it so entertaining if the Germans start bombing us properly. And here: it says, 'An Anderson shelter in which five people were sheltering was blown to pieces.' Very nicely put. What it means is that five people were blown to pieces in their own back garden, but they don't say that. What are they

going to say when it's five hundred people a night being blown to bits?"

"You don't think that'll really happen, do you, guv'nor?" said Cradock, trying to catch the crumbs that fell from his mouth as he spoke. "I heard something on the news yesterday about Mr Churchill saying the air raids haven't been half as bad as expected and the sirens don't actually mean anyone's in real danger. Something like that, anyway."

"So you think we're past the worst of it, do you?" said Jago.

"Well, I'm not sure, sir, but it sounds quite positive."

"Yes," said Jago, "like that Ministry of Information advert they had in the papers. Do you remember it? 'I keep a cool head, I take cover, and I remember the odds are thousands to one against my being hurt.' So all we need to do is keep a cool head, and everything will be fine. And be cheerful, of course. It'll be some other poor soul who cops it, not me."

He gave a contemptuous snort and leaned closer across the table, lowering his voice.

"All I'm saying is I think things might get worse before they get better. Churchill may be right, the raids may not have been as bad as the government expected – I mean, before the war some people reckoned we'd have fifty thousand dead on the first day. But that doesn't mean they won't get worse in the future, especially now Hitler's only twenty miles away across the Channel."

"Well, best to look on the bright side, wouldn't you say, sir?"

"Oh, undoubtedly," said Jago. "Undoubtedly."

He folded the *Express* and laid it on the table. It was hard work educating Cradock. The boy wasn't a patch on Clark, but then everyone had to start somewhere. He blew onto his tea to cool it and took a sip, gazing thoughtfully up at his new purchase on the wall.

Definitely a good investment, he thought. Being able to choose what he wore was still one of the best things about plain-clothes

work. Two years in the Army and then more as a PC on the beat was enough uniform for a lifetime, as far as he was concerned. It took a bit of effort, of course. A hat, for example, could either work for a man or against him. The fedora, he was sure, worked for him.

The same couldn't be said, he thought, of the man who caught his eye across Cradock's right shoulder. He was a broad-shouldered type, hunched in conversation over a table a few yards away. Jago only had a back view of him, but he could see that the man's hat, a trilby of sorts, was a very poor choice. Too narrow in the brim for his ears, the only effect it achieved was to draw attention to the way they stuck out on either side of his head. Like handles on a vase, thought Jago.

To compound the offence, the man was wearing his hat while sitting at a table and eating. Rita's might not be the Ritz, but even so, that sort of behaviour marked him out as someone with a severe deficiency in taste, or perhaps in upbringing. Jago began to watch him, and noticed the aggressive gestures he was making towards the man sitting across the table from him. Whoever he was, the trilby man was no shrinking violet.

The other man presented a very different picture. He was facing Jago, so his expression was clearly visible. This one seemed to have better manners. He'd removed his cheap-looking black bowler, but he clutched it to his chest, both hands gripping the brim. It made him look as though he was praying, thought Jago. He was chubby, with blotched skin, and he looked uncomfortable in his very ordinary-looking dark suit and stiff collar. A junior bank clerk, perhaps, not far into his twenties. His face was that of a scared rabbit.

Cradock's voice cut through Jago's observations, curtailing them.

"What time's the kick-off, sir? For the football, I mean."

Jago shifted his gaze from the two strangers back to Cradock.

"Quarter past three," he said. "No need to rush your tea. We'll be there in good time. The crowds are so small these days they probably won't start till we get there."

Cradock looked relieved: he was still busy with his cake.

"And that reminds me, Peter. Here's another tip for you," said Jago.

"Yes, sir? What's that?"

"It's this: always take the lady's seat, unless there's a lady with you."

He was amused to see the puzzled look that crossed Cradock's broad face.

"I'm not sure I follow you, guv'nor. You don't get seats at a football ground, not unless you own the club." He thought for a moment. "You don't get ladies either, for that matter."

Jago gave him a patient smile. "Not at the match: I mean here. It's something my father told me. If ever you take a lady out to dinner, give her the seat facing into the restaurant. Or the café, for that matter."

"Why's that, sir?"

"To give her the view of the room. I think it's what he regarded as gentlemanly. Mind you, I don't think he ever had enough money to take ladies out to dinner, certainly not his wife. What I mean is, if you want to know what's going on in a place like this, take the lady's seat. That's how I know everything that's happening behind your back and you don't know anything."

Cradock was about to turn round, but the inspector motioned him to stay put.

Jago was focused again on the timid rabbit-face, who now looked even more agitated. The trilby man was moving to rise from his chair. Jago did the same.

"Stay where you are; I'll be back in a moment," he said to Cradock, and slid out from behind the table. He timed his move so that he crossed the man's path and brushed against his shoulder.

"Very sorry," he said to the stranger. "Wasn't looking where I was going."

The man turned for a moment and uttered an indecipherable grunt that Jago took to be an acknowledgment of the apology, then walked on. Apart from the ears, and a scar on the left side of the man's face, there was nothing particularly conspicuous about him. But Jago took a mental photograph of his face nonetheless. Old copper's habit, he supposed.

He walked on past the agitated rabbit. Left alone at his table, the young man was staring straight ahead, still clutching his hat, but now as if it were the steering wheel of a car, out of control and heading for a smash.