

The Fulcrum Files

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Prologue

Saturday, 26th September 1922

Ben Clayton sagged onto the stool in the corner of the ring. His legs were shaking and his arms were heavy, the gloves hanging off them like lead weights. He sucked the air back in quick harsh gulps, but it was thick and smoky and provided little relief. He tugged at the vest, slabbed to his skin with sweat, the blood rushing through his ears so hard he could barely hear Mr Daly's words.

'He may be bigger and stronger, but you are quicker and smarter – now use your head and stick to the plan,' said Daly.

Ben was only vaguely aware of the faces peering up at him, eyes ablaze under a sea of flat caps. The bodies, smelling of beer, horses and engine oil, were pressed hard up against the canvas, all around the ring. The crowd faded quickly back into the darkness, the clamour of the conversations ebbing and flowing around him. Daly's deft movements with the sponge wiped the sweat out of his eyes, and Ben could see clearly across the ring. Slater was staring at him.

'Go in low. His hands are always too bloody high. When you get in under him he drops 'em for a while. It puts him off balance, that's when you try to take his bloody 'ead off.'

Ben nodded, coughed and spat. He didn't take his eyes off Slater.

'One more round, and I reckon you're only a couple of points behind. This is not over by a long way,' hissed Daly.

Ben nodded again. The water from the sponge was ice cold on his chest. The rushing in his ears receded. The bell rang.

'All right, lad, off you go and remember the bloody plan,' finished Daly.

Ben stood. Daly ducked out of the ring, taking the stool with him. The referee waved them forward. Ben took three quick steps and then went up onto his toes. This had to be quick. He only had a couple of good punches left in him. Slater went for an early right as Ben came onto him. Ben slid under it and managed to get in a double to his rib cage. He felt the second blow connect all the way back down to his toes. Slater stepped back. Ben kept going forward. Slater twitched and dropped his hands as Ben ducked in towards him with a feinted right-cross to the body. If Slater saw the left coming for his head he didn't move fast enough to do anything about it.

Ben's blow crunched home on the other boy's chin. Slater went down as if he'd melted. Ben stepped back, too tired to raise his arms, but anyone could see that Slater wouldn't be getting up any time soon. Suddenly, there were people everywhere. They pushed past him and crowded around Slater. He heard the words in snatches, the meaning lodging in his gut like ice from Daly's bucket.

'He's out cold...'

'Is he breathing...'

'Bloody hell, get a doctor...'

'No get a car, we'll take him straight down to Dr Finnegan...'

'The hospital's not much further...'

Then Mr Daly was in front of him, holding his shoulders, his hot beery breath in Ben's face. 'It doesn't look good, lad, I better go with them. Are you all right to get home on your own? Your Dad's not here tonight, is he?'

Ben locked onto Daly's worried eyes, and heard himself say, 'I'm not going home, I want go to the hospital with him.'

Chapter 1

Friday, 28th February 1936

Ben Clayton first saw her as she moved onto the covered aft deck of the *MV May*, a thousand tons of resplendent luxury motor yacht, moored a few dozen yards away. She was a young woman of about his own age, pushing tresses of jet black hair off her face with one hand as she lit a cigarette with the other. And she was quite something, he thought, as she strolled to meet a glistening Riva launch at the *May*'s boarding platform. The exotic, unfashionably long hair tumbled onto a mink stole thrown casually over her shoulders, her slim frame outlined by the pencil-thin, camel hair coat. She held the cigarette in a long holder. A thread of smoke drifted from her lips. He couldn't have been more intrigued if it had been Greta Garbo playing Mata Hari – *who was she?*

The Riva's engine revs built, throbbing out across the oily waters of Portsmouth Harbour as soon as she was seated. The white-uniformed helmsman turned the boat towards where Ben stood aboard the *Windflower*; a hundred and thirty feet of just-launched, flush-rivet plated racing yacht, still moored at her builder's quay. Camper and Nicholson's was the oldest yacht building yard in the world, and right now it was also the most prolific. Almost everything of any size that raced at Cowes Week came from the board of their brilliant designer, Charles Nicholson. Never mind all the big, fancy motor yachts that would watch the racing, boats like the *MV May*, luxurious, floating homes for the smart set. They too were all designed and built in this Gosport yard, right opposite the Portsmouth Royal Navy base.

Ben pushed himself up from the winch that he was sitting on to meet her at the gangway. She disembarked from the Riva with the same easy grace, hesitating only to finish her cigarette before stepping aboard. 'Can I help you, Miss...' he asked, taking a quick glance at her feet, but the elegant court shoes had no heels to damage the brand new, yellow pine planking.

'Anna,' she said in a husky, warm, Home Counties English with the faintest trace of something more exotic, a tiny foreign inflection.

There was no clue in the reply as to what she was doing there, and why she felt sufficiently emboldened to come aboard the *Windflower* without so much as a by-

your-leave. If there was an answer, it was in her presence aboard the *May* – both vessels owned by Harold Dunwood, along with much else besides.

‘So, where is everyone?’ she asked. ‘Harold seemed to think that there was an absolutely *frantic* amount to do today.’ She waved up at the crane that had just lifted the mast into the yacht; still attached, as it would be until they had all the rigging in place.

‘The crew are having a cup of tea, getting warmed up after a soaking in that last downpour. We don’t need them for a while, not until Stanley Arbethwaite comes back. He’s down below, talking to Mr Dunwood,’ he replied.

‘Ah, I was wondering where Harold had got to,’ she noted. Then she added, ‘Mr Arbethwaite is obviously very important.’

‘Yes... he designed the mast, it’s unique, revolutionary, and he’s the only one who can really set up the rigging. In fact, I’d think he’d probably strangle anyone that tried to do it for him,’ Ben replied, with a slight smile. ‘I don’t suppose you could spare a cigarette?’ he added, lifting the soaking arms of his reefer jacket, ‘mine got a little wet.’

She flipped open her quilted, Chanel handbag and pulled out a slim silver case. He took the offered cigarette, and then discovered by tapping his pockets that he didn’t have either matches or lighter. She fixed her big, brown eyes on him as she lit his Park Drive – her gloved hand steady, a faint hint of perfume from her wrist as he bent forward to the flame. It was a seductive, unsettling gaze – with a slightly quizzical lift of the eyebrows.

‘The weather doesn’t seem terribly good for all this work,’ she said, frowning, as he pulled away, inhaling gratefully.

He followed her gaze out to the east, and saw for the first time the banked up storm clouds gathered – a jagged heap of ugly, mottled cumulonimbus. Where the hell had that come from? Even from this distance he could see the wall of rain traversing the South Downs as the storm closed in on them.

‘Bloody hell,’ he swore, then remembered himself. ‘I’m sorry...’ he started.

‘No matter,’ she replied and smiled sweetly.

He glanced hopefully towards the stern again, and this time was rewarded with the slight figure of Stanley Arbethwaite hurrying towards him. Ben nipped out the cigarette between his fingers, pushed the remainder behind his ear and then stuck his little fingers between his lips and whistled, loud and piercing. A head poked out of the

tea room window, and he beckoned urgently. Bodies started to file out of the door, headed for the gangplank, onto the deck and down below.

‘Quick smart,’ he urged a couple of stragglers.

‘Just saw this weather coming in,’ said Stanley, as Ben turned back to him. ‘Where’s that chair?’ he continued, flicking his cigarette butt over the side as he spoke.

Ben bent and grabbed the chair from the coil of rope. Stanley stepped in between the wooden seat and the harness, and began to attach the wire rope that would haul him up the mast. Ben started picking up tools and placing them in the bag tied to the side of the chair. He caught Stanley’s eye. For a moment, the older man maintained his serious expression, but he couldn’t keep it up and smiled.

‘Happens we have us new jobs,’ he said, dipping his head to look in the bag, revealing the bald patch on his crown. ‘I’ll need the other spanner, too...’ he added.

‘And?’ said Ben, ignoring the request for the spanner.

‘Quarter more money again than what we’re getting at Supermarine,’ replied Stanley.

‘Ruddy hell!’ said Ben.

‘The spanner, my boy, the spanner,’ prompted Stanley, and Ben stooped for the tool, all his attention still on his friend. ‘Dunwood will take us on the payroll for his factory, but we’ll stay with the *Windflower* for the summer, finish the mast properly...’

‘You’re going to America with him?’ interrupted Ben, as Stanley pulled the spanner from his motionless hand.

‘Ready below,’ yelled Stanley. A second later the rope started to go tight and he eased his weight into the chair. He turned back to Ben, ‘*We, Ben! We are going to America with the Windflower!*’

‘We?’ Ben strangled the word.

Stanley Arbethwaite started to rise off the deck, lifted by the men below on the winch. A broad grin pushed up the deep worry lines around his eyes. ‘Yes, both of us – he says you can help on the *May* when there’s no work to do on the mast.’

Ben felt the breath gasp out of him; he clenched both fists hard in triumph – it had been his dream for as long as he could remember. The thought of working on the *May* reminded him of Anna, and he glanced around. But she had disappeared – doubtless beating a retreat at the arrival of so many of the great unwashed. Then a fat, solitary

raindrop landed at his feet on the wooden deck, and the first gust of wind tugged at his jacket. He glanced upwards, and in that instant, everything changed.

‘Bloody hell,’ he said, his voice rising to a frantic yell, ‘Stop! Stop on that winch!’ But even as he watched there was a fearful shout, and Stanley started to accelerate away from him.

Ben was aware of nothing but the inexorable combination of scientific law and fate that pulled his friend upwards. Stanley was turning, twisting in the chair, fending himself off the mast as he bounced upwards ever faster. Ben saw the impending impact coming – a spin of the chair, an unknowing, fateful push from Stanley’s right foot, then there was a sickening crack as his head connected with the jib of the crane. A curious whining noise resonated down the hollow, duralumin mast as the spinning pulley reached its peak just before the entire weight of the wire rope slammed the chair and Stanley’s inert body into the top of the rig.

But Ben was already heading for the crane. Only he and Stanley knew that in the frenzy to get the mast ready for the boat, they’d just had time to fit that single wire rope into place on its pulleys. And now the only way to reach Stanley to bring him back down was to climb the crane and then the mast. He raced up the ladder to the cabin and, under the gaze of an astonished driver, climbed out through the maintenance access port and onto the jib. Beneath him there were cries and shouts, but he heard nothing as his mind narrowed to the task. He crawled out onto the square beam of latticed metal work. It was wet and slippery beneath his fingers, but he could grip the narrower cross-struts and his plimsolls found some purchase on broken bubbles of rough rust. He glanced down – he was out over the deck of the yacht now and it was a long way down already.

A rogue gust of wind snatched at him and he tensed to regain his balance. Looking up it seemed as if someone had tipped the sky and poured it towards him, dark and angry. Urgency pushed him on faster, more recklessly, snatching at the struts. Then the rain hit hard. Ben wobbled, prone on the end of the jib. *Bloody madness* – he thought, but there was no other way. The hook of the crane was attached to a harness round the mast, about eight feet below his position. Rising straight up from there, the mast passed less than a couple of feet in front of him. He tried to look up into the deluge, and couldn’t keep his eyes open. But he knew what was there; he had been over every inch of that mast so many times he could see it clearly in his mind.

He lurched into a crouch and then half fell, half lunged outwards. He got both arms as far round the mast as he could in a desperate bear hug and then started to slip. His feet scrabbled and kicked for something, anything ... and found a grip, he couldn't see what and didn't care. His downward slide had halted and that was all that mattered. He tried again to look up, and again the rain pummelled his eyes shut. The wind plucked at his trousers, battering the canvas against his goose-bumped skin. He pressed his forehead to the cold metal, water streaming through his hair, washing it into his eyes, rain dripping from his nose. He pulled away from the mast a little and saw the solid rigging rods strapped in place beside it. He carefully eased his grip and shifted to get hold of a couple of them with his hands. Then he reached up and pulled, feet scrabbling until they too, found purchase.

It was desperately slow – but he found enough traction on all the rigging to make steady progress. Eventually, the mast section narrowed to the extent that he could get a grip around it with his legs. But as he rose higher above the shaky security of the mast's attachment to the crane, it started to move under him in the wind, shifting his weight unnervingly. In one of his sporadic, punishing attempts to look up, he glimpsed a shape. The knowledge spurred him on and the next thing he knew there was something soft against the skin of his scalp. It was Stanley's hand.

Unconscious, Stanley had flopped back in the chair and harness, arms dangling loosely towards the deck. His left leg was trapped between the chair and the mast, and that was all that was stopping him from sliding backwards off the wooden seat to his death. As Ben assessed the situation, a trickle of blood dripped from Stanley's fingers above him. There was no time to lose. Ben was perhaps three feet from the chair itself. He had to add his weight to Stanley's and at the same time stop him sliding out, so the crew could lower them both back down to the deck. He shuffled carefully up the last few feet. Then he lunged through the chair's harness and grabbed Stanley's belt with his left hand, swinging his right to hang onto the top of his friend's old woollen jumper. The only thing holding Ben to the mast now was the vice-like grip he had with his legs. He started to let his weight come onto the chair; the harness creaked, but they didn't move.

Then his legs were torn free and his heart leapt up his throat. An instant later, he realised they weren't falling – someone had control of the wire rope below decks. Momentary relief swept through him as they bumped and shuddered down the mast. But hanging off the chair by one arm crooked around the harness, the other holding

Stanley in place, he was at the limit of his stamina. It seemed impossible that he could hold on long enough, but they were being lowered a lot faster than he realised. The brakes came on a few feet off the deck and the shock broke his fragile hold. He fell – so exhausted and drained that he barely registered the fact before he hit the deck in a heap.

After that it was a blur. There was a stabbing pain in his hip. The crew gathered round him, he was helped to his feet – feeling woozy, head spinning, almost in a dead faint – but he insisted that he was fine and that they should tend to Stanley. There were plenty of men for that too, and in moments, Stanley was rushed up the gangplank using a canvas sail bag as a make-shift stretcher. Ben stumbled behind him. Stanley Arbethwaite was eased into Harold Dunwood's Bentley and a woman from the office climbed in the back seat with him, trying desperately to stop the flow of blood from his head wound. Ben was bundled into the front.

'Go, go!' he urged the driver, as soon as the door slammed shut behind him.

'Mr Clayton?'

'Hmm?' Ben Clayton turned back to the policeman. 'Sorry...' Miller he'd said his name was, Detective Sergeant Miller. 'Sorry, Sergeant Miller... I... I just...' he waved at the door of the hospital room in which Stanley Arbethwaite was fighting for his life.

'It's all right, sir, but if you could perhaps just explain that a little more,' Miller's tone was not unkind, the eyes steady above a bulbous nose and large moustache. 'You're saying that the weight of this wire rope pulled him up the mast? It wasn't the lads pulling on it?' A nurse swept past, the starched white wings of her headdress tapping her shoulders, her heels clicking on the spotless parquet floor. Hot water throbbed and gurgled through the pipes and radiators; the electric lights hummed. An uncrowned Edward VIII peered down on a scene of calm and order from a picture on the far wall. Then the weight of an influenza campaign poster finally overcame the limited resistance of a single drawing pin, and fell to earth with a flutter. Miller stood up from the bench where he sat beside Ben, and walked over to replace it on the wall. There was a squeak of boots on wax polish. He sat back down. 'So, this er, wire rope, sir?'

Ben shrugged a little deeper into the dressing gown they had provided when they took his clothes away to be dried. ‘Think of it like a set of scales,’ he started. ‘The pulley at the top of the mast that the halyard turns around is the fulcrum...’

‘The fulcrum?’

‘Sorry... I mean the pivot... or balance point.’

‘Ah, all right, sir, I’ve got it, carry on.’

‘Stanley was hoisted up the mast by men working on a winch, pulling down on the wire rope on one side of the pulley. As Stanley rose up the mast on the other side, the combined weight of him and the wire on his side of the pulley was reducing. The mast is so tall that it got to a point where the weight of the wire rope on the other side of the pulley was greater, so it took over and started dragging him up the mast. It was nothing to do with the lads pulling him up there. He wasn’t moving fast at all until the weight of the wire rope itself took over.’

‘And how tall is the mast, sir?’

‘Just over 150 feet,’ Ben shifted as he spoke to take the weight off his bruised hip and ease the pain.

‘I see, so was it Mr Arbethwaite hitting the top of the mast that injured him?’

‘No. He was desperately unlucky. He hit his head on the crane on the way past. Otherwise he would probably have got away with bruises or a broken limb.’ He looked back to the door, willing it to open with a flood of good news. But nothing had happened since Vivian Arbethwaite, Stanley’s distraught wife, had arrived pale-faced, and disappeared inside without a word. The waiting was awful. He hated hospitals and with good reason – the smell of antiseptic and wax polish, the fading flowers and over-ripe grapes – and this time was worse, much, much worse.

Miller bent his head to scribble in his notebook. ‘What do you normally do to prevent this happening?’ he asked.

‘It’s the practice to tie another rope to the bottom of the chair that the man is sitting in. This second rope, it’s called the downhaul, rises with the chair, adding weight as it goes up. It also gives you something to pull on if it threatens to get out of control. Anyone under seventeen stone needs the downhaul – and Stanley Arbethwaite is five foot six and no weight at all,’ replied Ben. He looked the policeman in the eye, ‘I was with Stanley before he went up there. It was my responsibility to check that the downhaul was attached.’

DS Miller held his gaze for a moment before asking, 'And what was your job on this yacht, sir?'

'I helped Stanley to design the mast.'

'And what would be your experience for doing such a thing?'

'We're both engineers at Supermarine.'

'Oh, the aircraft company?'

'Yes, in Woolston, although what we were doing for Mr Dunwood was nothing to do with Supermarine. It was more of a favour.'

'A favour?' said the policeman, a little incredulously.

'Yes,' Ben hesitated, 'I'd seen pictures of a mast like this being used on one of the American boats, and I knew Mr Dunwood wouldn't stand a chance racing against them if he goes over there with a wooden one. So... we offered to help, to design the mast and... sort of manage the construction. I er...' Ben swallowed, his mouth dry. 'I wanted to do it, sailing's my thing. I needed Stanley's help, but he was keen, that's what Stanley was like – he'd help anyone he could. But if I hadn't got him involved, then he wouldn't even have been there yesterday. It's all my fault, the whole thing.'

Miller's head dropped; there was just the sound of his pencil scribbling. 'So you've known each other for a while have you, you and Mr Arbethwaite?' he asked, eventually.

Ben coughed to clear his throat before he replied. 'I lodge with Stanley and his wife, at their home in Hamble. I've been living there for a couple of years, but I've known him since I started at Supermarine in '31, when I came down from Cambridge. Everyone at Supermarine knows Stanley; he's their top structural man.'

'So how did you meet Mr Arbethwaite?'

Now Ben looked at Miller. 'I don't see what this has got to do with the accident?'

'I have to fill out a report, sir, and they'll expect to see some background. Any accident involving someone who worked for Supermarine is going to attract attention. All those Schneider Trophies, the world speed records, that plane going over four hundred miles an hour and all that – that's important stuff that is, especially if there's going to be another war. Any nasty happenings to anyone at Supermarine, no matter how innocent looking, is going to attract the attention of my Inspector. So if you don't mind, sir.'

Ben stared at him. 'There's not going to be another war.'

Miller held his gaze for a moment, then made another note. When he looked back up he had a puzzled frown. He rubbed his forehead with the back of his hand, and said, 'If you don't mind me saying, sir, you look familiar... you didn't by any chance do some boxing when you were younger?'

'A little.' Now Ben was frowning.

'I knew it, I saw you fight, ten, twelve years ago now. Fast hands, very fast hands, everyone said you were the next Ted Lewis. Wasn't there talk of a deal to fight at Premierland and then... well, I always wondered what happened?'

Ben shook his head. 'I stopped.' He clasped his hands. 'Lost the taste for it.'

The door opened. The doctor came out first and gave a faint shake of his head. Then Mrs Arbethwaite appeared. Her face completely white, the steadying grip of a nurse at her elbow. Ben lurched off the bench towards her and took her hands, which were clenched into tight fists.

'I want to go to Elsie's,' she said, rocking slightly, her eyes fixed on Ben, tears welling. Then the puffy, dark lids closed and she moaned, a most terrible keening.

It cut Ben to the core, and his mind froze in a blank, horrified panic. Then he remembered – Elsie was her sister, in Winchester. He latched onto the need for action. 'Do you have a telephone?' he asked the doctor. 'I'll get us a car.'

'In my office,' the man replied, indicating up the corridor. Then he added, 'The nurse will stay with Mrs Arbethwaite.'

Ben nodded, squeezed her hands one more time, and then followed the doctor.