

# Blackwater

Conn Iggulden

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# CHAPTER ONE

I STOOD IN THE water and thought about drowning. It's strange how the sea is always calmer at night. I've walked along Brighton beach a hundred times on cold days and the waves are always there, sliding over and over each other. In the dark the water is smooth and black, with just a hiss of noise as it vanishes into the pebbles. You can't hear it in the day, over gulls and cars and screaming children, but at night the sea whispers, calling you in.

The swell pulled at the cloth of my best black suit, reaching upwards in the gentle rise and fall of unseen currents. It felt intimate somehow, as if I was being tugged down and made heavier. Even the icy Brighton wind had grown easy on my skin, or perhaps I'd just gone numb. If I had, it was a welcome numbness. I'd spent too much time thinking and now there was just the final choice of walking into a deeper dark.

I heard the crunch of footsteps on the shingle, but I didn't turn my head. In dark clothes, I knew I would be almost invisible to the dog walkers or late night revellers, or whoever else had braved the cold. I'd seen a few pale figures in the distance by the pier and heard high voices calling to each other. They didn't touch me. There was something wonderful about standing in the sea, fully clothed. I'd left the land behind me, with all its noise and light and discarded chips in lumps of wet paper. I tasted bitterness in my mouth, but I was free of fear and guilt, free of all of it. When I heard his voice, I thought it was a memory.

'Now how bad can it be, to have you standing out there on a night like this?' he said. My older brother's voice. I could not help the spasm of nervousness that broke through my numb thoughts. I had been there for hours. I was ready to walk into the deep water until my clothes grew heavy and I could empty my lungs in a sudden rush of bright bubbles. I was ready, and his voice pulled me back, just as securely as if he had cast a line that snagged on my jacket.

'If you go in now, you'll drown us both,' he said. 'I'll have to follow you, you know that.'

‘And maybe just one will come out,’ I replied, my voice rough. I heard him laugh and I couldn’t turn to face him. I’d feared him all my life, and if I turned I knew I’d have to look him in the eyes. I heard him chuckle softly.

‘Maybe, Davey boy. Maybe it would be you.’

I thought of a boy we’d both known, a lad with a cruel streak a mile wide. His name had been Robert Penrith, though even his mother called him Bobby. I can see her face at his funeral, so white she looked as if she was made of paste. I’d stood at the side of a damp hole in the ground watching the box being lowered in and I remember wondering if she’d ever known how her son had terrorized us.

He liked humiliation more than pain, did Bobby. His favourite was the simple thing of forcing you down to the ground with your legs right over your head, so pressed that you could barely take a breath. When he did it to me, I remember his face reddening with mine, until I could feel my pulse thumping in my ears. Even as young as I was, I knew there was something wrong with the way he grew so hot and excited. As a man, the thought of being so helpless makes me want to scratch myself.

I think my brother killed him. I'd never had the nerve to ask outright, but our eyes had met as the coffin dropped down into the hole between us. I hadn't known how to look away, but before I could he'd winked at me and I'd remembered all the secret cruelties of his life.

Bobby Penrith had drowned in a lake so far north of Brighton it was like another world. My brother had dared him across on a day when the water was so cold it turned the skin blue. My brother had made it to the other side, to where we waited in a shivering group. He climbed out as if he was made of rubber, flopping and staggering before leaning on a rock and vomiting steaming yellow liquid onto his bare feet.

I think I knew before anyone else, though I stared past him with the others, waiting for a glimpse of Bobby's red scalp coming doggedly in. It took divers to bring him back in the end, beaching his body three hours later, with the lake busier than the tourist season. The police had interviewed us all, and my brother had been in tears. The divers had cursed with all the anger of men who fished for dead children on

bitter days. We felt their scorn like blows as we shivered in rough red blankets.

I'd listened while my brother told them nothing worth hearing. He hadn't seen it happen, he said. The first he knew of the tragedy was when he reached the far bank alone. I might have believed him if he hadn't seen Bobby hurting me only the day before.

You never really know when a story starts, do you? Bobby had decided I deserved a special punishment, for breaking some rule of his. I'd been crying when my brother came by and Bobby let go. Neither of us was sure what he might do, but there was a hard tightness to my brother that even lads like Bobby found frightening. Just a glance at his dark eyes and a face that looked a little white over the bones and Bobby had dropped me straight away.

The two of them had looked at each other and my brother had smiled. A day later and Bobby Penrith was cold and blue on the side of Derwentwater. I didn't dare ask the question and it had settled inside me like a cold lump. I felt guilty even for the freedom it brought me. I could walk past Bobby's house without the usual terror that he would see me and fall into

step at my side. The boy had an evil streak in him, but he was not a match for my brother and only a fool would have tried to swim on a November day. Only a boy who had been frightened by an even bigger fish than he was.

In the utter darkness of the Brighton shingle, I began to shiver with the cold. Of course he noticed, and I heard a note of amusement in his voice as he went on.

'They say suicides don't feel pain. Did you ever hear that, Davey? They cut and cut away at themselves, but they're so wrapped up in their own heads that the cowardly little shits barely feel a sting. Can you believe that? It is a strange world.'

I hadn't felt the cold before. I thought it was numbness, but now it seemed to hit me all at once, as if the wind was tearing right through the skin. My hidden feet were aching with a cold that gnawed up the bones of my legs. I crossed my arms over my chest and I felt it all coming back to me. I would have given anything for numbness then. The alternative was terror and shame.

'Are you going to tell me why my brave little brother would be out standing in the sea on a



cold night?' he went on. 'The wind is freezing the arse off me, I can only imagine what it must be like for you. Davey? I'd have brought a coat if I'd known.'

I felt tears on my cheeks and I wondered why they weren't turning to ice with the cold that pierced me.

'There are things I can't bear any more,' I said, after a time. I didn't want to talk about it. I wanted that fine and simple mood I'd been in when he arrived, when I was calm. My bladder had filled without me noticing, and now it made itself felt. Every part of me that had been ruled by my misery now seemed to have woken and be screaming for attention, for warmth. How long had I been standing there?

'I have an enemy,' I said softly. There was silence behind me and I didn't know if he had heard me or not.

'How deep are you in?' he said, and for an insane moment I thought he meant the water.

'I can't handle it,' I said, shaking my head. 'I can't . . . I can't stop it.' More tears came and at last I turned to face the man my brother had become. His face was still stretched over his bones and his hair was a dark bristle over pale

skin. There were women who thought him handsome to the point of compulsion, though he never stayed long with one. It seemed to me that his cruelty was there for the world to see in that hard face and watchful eyes. I was the only one who thought this. The rest of the world saw what he wanted them to see. He had brought a coat, I noticed, despite his words. His hands were dug into the pockets.

‘Let me help,’ he said. The moon gave enough light to see the rising shingle behind him. A million tons of loose stone at his back should have made him insignificant, should have reduced him. Yet he was solidly there, as if he’d been planted. No doubts for the man my brother had become. No conscience, no guilt. I’d always known he was lacking that extra little voice that torments the rest of us. I’d always been afraid of it, but when he offered, I felt nothing but relief.

‘What can you do?’ I said.

‘I can kill him, Davey. Like I did before.’

I could not speak for a long, slow breath. I hadn’t wanted to know. My mind filled with images of Bobby Penrith flagging as he swam in freezing water. My brother was a fine swimmer

and it would not have taken much to hold him under, to exhaust him. Just a flurry of splashing and then the smooth strokes towards the shore, arriving as if exhausted. Perhaps he had been. Perhaps Bobby had struggled and fought back with all the strength of desperation.

I looked into my brother's eyes and saw all of the years between us.

'Tell me,' he said.