

# DRACA

## EXTRACT FROM CHAPTER ONE: JACK

Getting to sleep was usually easy, with a little liquid help. It was staying asleep that was the problem.

One summer when Jack was a kid, the family stayed on a farm for their summer holidays, and the farmer set a magpie trap in his yard. In the centre, in a little cage within a cage, was a live one. The ‘call bird,’ the farmer said. He’d left it a dish of water and even a bit of dead pigeon to eat, but the thing flapped around making a lot of noise in that harsh, rattling way of magpies. As Jack and the farmer watched from inside his barn, three more magpies arrived and hopped down through the wire door to see what all the fuss was about. They went frantic when the farmer walked over and they couldn’t get out, and he shot them, one by one, with a .22 rifle he kept for vermin.

The Taliban hadn’t killed Jack outright because he was their call bird, but they’d used Dusty Miller for target practice. It was usually Dusty who woke Jack in the black hour before dawn, and always with the same pleading look, that way he’d stared at Jack as if he could do something. Dusty had come running back for him through the firefight in a mad, heroic, suicidal dash, and he was still coming back for him, pulling him out of the fug of sleep when the alcohol drained from Jack’s system and all that was left was the sour taste of guilt. Sometimes, in those first moments of wakefulness, Jack could smell roasting meat. Then he’d have to walk outside and breathe clean air, whatever the hour, whatever the weather. He’d have run, if he could. Even in summer, the air just before dawn can be pure as snow.

There was a line of peach in the sky to the east as Jack laced his boots outside the door, enough to show the silhouettes of trees and the outline of the boat seat, hunched like a monk’s cowl against the night. Grandpa’s carved dragon would be in there, invisible, black within black. Jack reached in to touch its snout, and settled beside it until there was enough light to see his footing.

On calm, moonless nights the dawn starts in the sea, not the sky. Its flat surface reflects a light the human eye can’t see. In time, the light softened to show tendrils of mist, still hanging between the trees and floating over the water. The outlines of the Scots pines began to form against it. Now the same two branches could be arms raised in surrender.

When the tide was just on the ebb it sucked at the beach below the cottage, a soft susurrant at the limit of hearing. In the pre-dawn darkness it sounded like whispering, so human that he strained to distinguish the words. The break of each wave could be a soft consonant, an ‘f’ perhaps, followed by a longer vowel as the water spread over the shingle and left a softer, lipping retreat. F-aay–th, f-aay–th, endlessly repeated. It was as if a mass of men waited there, watching, murmuring among themselves and all of one, menacing mind.

Enough. Jack didn't want to start that line of thought again. Breathe the dawn. He stood, walking towards the threat, not running from it. Soon the sandy path beyond the garden gate was a faint paleness between black gorse, and its softness masked his footsteps through trees that were just trees. The track led along the coast and away from the beach until the dominant sound was not waves but the pre-dawn cacophony of seabirds. A stream flowed out into the harbour in Freshwater Bay, tumbling off the hills fast enough to stop the inlet silting, and sweet enough to allow banks of reeds to form at the water's edge. Their sound was a soft, silken rustle, as real a bridge onto the peace of Witt Point as the rough logs across the stream.

On Witt Point, Jack sat on a stone, sniper-still, at one with nature and its morning routine. Navigation lights winked out in the harbour, sending brief pulses of green and red over the water. Grandpa said he found them comforting, these signposts of the sea. Now there was enough light to see shapes moving, black within grey: the snuffling waddle of a badger, the dainty steps of a deer through the trees. He could inhale sea smells and pine resin and dew-damp grass. There used to be a Saxon chapel here, though there was nothing left of it but mounds in the grass and a few corners of dressed, mossy stones that had been brought up when some trees blew down in a storm. Even so, the place was cleansing, as if it had absorbed centuries of devotion and could give back a little of that peace. It was a spot where thoughts could be allowed to float to the surface of the mind.

And that morning, Jack could feel his grandfather slipping away with the tide.

## **EXTRACT FROM CHAPTER TWO: GEORGE**

**(at Jack's grandfather's funeral)**

Then an older man came who could only be Jack's father and Eddie's son. All of them sandy haired, big boned and strong jawed. Jack's dad shepherded people outside the crematorium, shaking hands, the man in charge. He had the thick neck of someone who pumped iron, and a mouth that was a thin, straight line. When he smiled, the line got wider but didn't curve upwards, it just got bracketed by folds in his cheeks, sharp as the triangles on a navigation buoy.

George stayed on her bench because she didn't know anyone there apart from Jack, and he was busy with family. No one else came from the boatyard, not even Eddie's old sailing cronies. He'd lost a lot of friends in recent years, but that was sad.

George could learn a lot from watching people. At first, everyone looked the same. All in black, all with that funeral look as if they wore a passport photograph where their faces should be. She could make out the Ahlquist crowd, all hugs and kisses except Jack, and then there was an older man and two women who stood a bit apart, both more smartly dressed than the rest, and the only women in hats. A husband, wife and daughter, at a

guess. The man was a short, lean, military type who stood very square. When people came up to the older woman, she offered her hand palm-down, fingers drooping, as if she expected them to go down on one knee and kiss it. No one stayed with them, and the three kept to themselves as if they knew it was pointless to try to talk.

Jack moved between them and the rest, half belonging to both groups, neither oil nor water, looking stressed. Like all the men he was sweating in his dark suit, with spots of damp staining his shirt across his chest. The younger woman must be his wife, so the military man and the duchess were the in-laws, and the families didn't get on.

Jack waved when he saw George. Nothing too enthusiastic, but enough for her to wander over and say hello. She was ready for the mother-in-law's fingers. If you slide your hand under that kind of regal greeting, then grip and twist, you can turn it into a proper handshake. The duchess didn't like that. She didn't like George's looks, either. The duchess was tall enough for her eyes to be at the level of George's hair, and George saw her wince. So what? George liked orange. It's a strong colour, and it was only a streak. While Jack fumbled the introductions the woman's eyes dropped so she was looking down her nose at George's skirt, and her mouth pursed into a tight, wrinkly, cat's-arse circle of disapproval. Maybe yellow was a bit bright for a funeral, but there wasn't much call for dark, smart stuff in a boatyard. At least George had put a decent jacket over it, and she bet the duchess couldn't tell that the jacket came from a charity shop.

Jack's wife introduced herself as Charlotte. Very upmarket, with the sort of accent you hear in posh shops. Her handshake was straight, if a bit cool. She was tall, like her mother, and slender and attractive, unlike her mother. Her black straw hat was broad-brimmed so she had to tilt her head to one side to whisper in George's ear.

'Thank God for some colour. I think Old Eddie would have loved it.'

George decided she was going to like Charlotte. She stayed near her as they were ushered inside.

Twenty minutes later George was like, 'was that it?' A whole life, nearly eighty years, reduced to one reading, two hymns, a three-minute drone from Rent-a-Priest and a poem?

Jack's father gave the reading, bellowing it out like a fire- and-brimstone preacher. Isaiah 61, the order of service said.

*'The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me to bring good tidings to the poor.'* He stared at a young woman in the front row, with two young children beside her. Another Ahlquist by the look of her, and the kind of blonde who's gone way too plump with motherhood. *'He has sent me to bind up the broken hearted...'* She didn't look very broken hearted. She had big, dark eyes, a snub nose and puffy cheeks, like a seal pup with tits. Jack's father didn't strike George as a preacher, either, but he turned that stare towards Jack as he finished, and thundered, 'To proclaim the year of the Lord's favour, and the day of vengeance of our God; to comfort all who mourn.'

Rent-a-Priest did his job. He'd probably never met the man he was about to incinerate, even though he'd been fed the key facts and wrapped them up in lofty, churchy tones. Edvard Ahlquist, born into hardship as the son of a Danish sailor. Forty years a shipwright. Had his share of tragedy. Liked sailing and Nordic folklore. Let us pray.

Jack read a poem that was George's favourite. She didn't know many poems, but this one about the lonely sea and the sky had stuck, ever since she was a kid. Something in those words about steering a tall ship by a star had struck a chord. Other kids escaped into video games or petty crime but she was the loner who dreamed of sailing away. She couldn't even remember which school she had been in when she had learned it, but it had told her about a world beyond a dirty playground and the waiting gangs. She'd been in her late teens before she felt a tiller's kick for the first time, or heard Masefield's wind song, and then it had been like coming home. She still knew it well enough to shut her eyes and mouth the words with Jack.

Jack spoke with passion, as if he'd chosen that bit of the service. It was the only time some feeling for Mad Eddie came over. His voice caught, just a little, as he spoke those final words about a quiet sleep and a sweet dream when the long trick's over, and George opened her eyes.

He was watching her. Again. She blushed and looked away, angry with herself, but not before she'd seen that he was a bit full. He paused like he was collecting himself, then said, 'Sweet dreams, Grandpa,' as if he really meant it, but Rent-a-Priest was already standing to announce the final hymn. The next lot were waiting.

*'...Oh hear us when we cry to Thee For those in peril on the sea.'*

The priest looked bored as he pressed the button.