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Vengeance

Written by Benjamin Black

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Benjamin Black

VENGEANCE





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I

1

Davy Clancy was not a good sailor, in fact he was secretly afraid of the sea, yet here he was, on this fine summer morning, about to set out on it in a boat that looked to him like a large and complicated toy. It was, they all said, a perfect day to be on the water. They did not say it was a perfect day to be in a boat, or to be out sailing. No: *a perfect day to be on the water*, as if it was their motto or something. And they were all so jolly and brisk, smiling in a smug, self-satisfied way that set his teeth on edge. Unlike him, they knew what they were doing, the wind-burned men in yachting caps and khaki shorts and shapeless jumpers playing at being old sea-dogs, and their loud-voiced, leathery wives—sea-bitches, he thought, with a twinge of bleak amusement. He did not belong here, among these sailing folk with their lazy expertise; he knew it, and they knew it, too, which meant they had to behave twice as heartily towards him, though he could see that look in their eyes, that gleam of merry contempt.

It was June, and although it had rained every day the first week of the holiday, this morning was sunny and warm with not a breath of wind. The tide was high, and

the water in the bay had a sluggish, swollen look, the surface oily with streaks of sapphire and pink and petrol-blue. He tried not to think of what was below the surface, of the murk down there, the big-eyed fish nosing along, and things with claws scuttling around on the bottom, fighting in slow motion, devouring each other. Victor Delahaye had brought the jeep round to the front of the house that morning and they had rattled the ten miles over the mountain road to Slievemore Bay in silence. Going for a sail was the last thing Davy wanted to do, but it had not been possible to refuse. 'You can crew for me,' Delahaye had said the night before, in Sweeney's bar, and everyone had laughed, for some reason, everyone except Delahaye himself, and Delahaye's wife, who had looked at Davy narrow-eyed with that smile of hers and said nothing. And so here he was, about to venture out against his will on this frighteningly calm and innocent-seeming sea.

The Clancys and the Delahayes had been close for as long as anyone could remember. Samuel Delahaye and Philip Clancy had gone into partnership together at the turn of the century, running coalboats from Wales; later Samuel Delahaye had spotted the potential of the motor-car and the partners had opened one of the first big garages in the country, hiring in mechanics from England, France, Italy. The business had flourished. Although the founders were supposedly in equal partnership, everyone knew from the start that Samuel Delahaye was the boss and Phil Clancy merely his manager. Phil—poor Phil, as people were inclined to say—was not of an assertive disposition, and had quietly accepted his inferior role.

Now Samuel's son Victor was in charge of the firm, and Phil Clancy's son Jack was supposedly his partner, but it was still as it had been in the old days, with Delahaye in charge and Clancy his second-in-command. Unlike his father before him, Jack Clancy resented his subordinate position—resented it deeply, though he tried hard, and mostly with success, not to let his dissatisfaction show.

But a Clancy could not say no to a Delahaye, that was understood, which was why Davy Clancy had only smiled and shrugged when in Sweeney's the previous night Victor Delahaye, on the way to getting drunk and with a soiled look in his eye, had leaned over the table and invited him to come out for a sail in the *Quicksilver*. He knew nothing about boats, but everyone had laughed, and someone had clapped him on the shoulder, and what could he do but say, yes, thanks, sure, and bury his nose in his glass? 'Right,' Delahaye had said, smiling tightly and showing his teeth, 'I'll pick you up at nine,' and sauntered back to the bar. And that was when Delahaye's wife had looked over at Davy with that thin-lipped, mocking smile.

The two families spent their holidays together every summer; it was a tradition that went back to Phil and Samuel's time. Davy could not understand why his parents still carried it on. Old Phil was gaga now and in a nursing home, and Samuel Delahaye was in a wheelchair, and although Davy's father and Victor Delahaye kept up the pretence of friendship, it was an open secret how bad relations were between them, while Mona Delahaye, Victor's young wife—his second, the first wife having died—had barely a civil word to throw to Davy's downtrodden mother. Yet every summer the whole gang of them

decamped for the month of June to Ashgrove, the Delahayes' big stone house halfway up the back slope of Slievemore. The place had ten or twelve bedrooms, more than enough to accommodate Victor Delahaye and his wife and their grown-up twin sons, Jonas and James, as well as Victor's unmarried sister Marguerite—Maggie—and the three Clancys. This year there was an extra guest, Jonas Delahaye's girlfriend, Tanya Somers. Tanya, a student at Trinity College, cut so provocative a figure in her one-piece black bathing suit that the men in the party, except her boyfriend and, of course, Jack Clancy, hardly dared allow themselves to look at her, a thing that added to the tension in an already tense household.

This morning the little harbour was crowded with boats, their owners' voices sounding sharp and clear across the lifeless surface of the sea amid the snap of ropes and the clink of brass fittings. Victor Delahaye was greeted warmly on all sides—he was commodore of Slievemore Sailing Club this season—but he hardly responded. He seemed preoccupied, and the flesh between his heavy black eyebrows was knotted in a fixed frown. Davy supposed he had a hangover. Delahaye wore sandals and tailored white trousers and a sailor's dark-blue cotton shirt, and the rakish blue sailor's cap that he had brought back from a business trip to Greece. He had a tanned, craggy face that wore well its forty-something years. Walking dutifully behind him, Davy felt everyone must know him for the hopeless land-lubber that he was.

The *Quicksilver* was moored at the end of the stone jetty, its sails furled. Seen close up, it did not look at all like a toy, but had the sleekly menacing lines of a giant

white swordfish. Delahaye stepped nimbly down to the deck, but Davy hung back. He remembered being told once by a science teacher—Harkins it was, a Christian Brother, the one who had been sent away for interfering with the boys in the junior classes—that you could move a vessel as big as an ocean-going liner with just a push of one hand against the hull. He was supposed to be impressed, but the thought of such a huge thing being susceptible to the force of a boy's hand had filled him with dismay. Delahaye was already unwinding the mooring rope from the bollard. Sure enough, when Davy put his foot to the deck he felt the whole boat tilt a fraction, and his innards heaved. The contrast between the solid stone of the jetty underfoot and the boat's ponderous buoyancy made him giddy. He would probably be seasick, he thought gloomily, and saw himself hanging over the side, heaving and retching, while Delahaye stood above him with his fists on his hips, smiling in that cold, fierce way, showing his teeth.

Davy had wondered how the boat would be made to go, since there was no wind, but now Delahaye went to the back—the stern—and started up the outboard engine there. That there was an engine seemed to Davy a kind of cheating, and the thought bucked him up a bit. But then the boat yawed out from the jetty and swept in a tight turn on the oily water and he had to grab for the rail to keep from being thrown off his feet. Delahaye stood at the wheel, with his cap over his eyes and his jaw squarely set, looking like Gregory Peck as Captain Ahab. Once again Davy pondered the question of why he was here, aboard this boat that had seemed so large, tethered to the jetty,

and that now felt as if it were made of balsawood, skimming towards the broad and desolate horizon. He thought he might know why, and hoped he was wrong.

The speed surprised him. In a few minutes they had cleared the headland and turned towards the open sea. Delahaye was all business now, shutting off the engine and unfurling the sails and pulling on cords and lashing ropes to those brass things on the deck. There was a good breeze out here, and the surface of the sea had begun pricking up everywhere in dancing white points. Davy sat on a bench at the back—the stern, the stern!—and tried to keep out of the way. He might as well not have been there, as far as Delahaye was concerned. A black bird with a long neck flew past in a straight swift line a foot above the surface of the sea—where was it going to, in such a hurry and so determinedly? The big sails shivered and rattled and then suddenly the wind filled them and at once the boat bounded forward, lifting its pointed front—the prow, he told himself, the prow was what it was called—as if it would take to the air. Davy closed his eyes but that made him feel dizzy and he opened them again and fixed his gaze miserably on the swaying horizon. Everything was straining forward now, the mast and sails tensed like a cocked crossbow and the water slapping and sucking at the boards. He supposed they were not doing more than fifteen or twenty miles an hour—knots: are knots the same as miles?—but it felt as if they were going at an impossible speed, surging over the little waves and seeming barely to hold to the surface. His hands on either side were gripping the bench so hard his fingers had begun to ache.

Delahaye, satisfied that everything was set just so, pushed past him, going towards the back of the boat, and Davy caught his smell: salt, sweat, aftershave, and something else, something sharp, sour, bitter. He sat down at the tiller and Davy turned on the seat to face him. The peak of his cap still hid Delahaye's eyes. What was he thinking? Davy was suddenly afraid of more than the sea.

What was the point of sailing? Davy did not know, and had never dared to enquire. Sailing, doing things in boats, was as natural as walking, among the Delahayes. The Delahaye twins, Jonas and James, were champion yachtsmen, and had trophies to prove it; one year they had crewed on some millionaire's boat in the America's Cup. Even their aunt Maggie was an expert sailor. Davy's father had tried to get Davy interested, and Davy had done his best, but it was no good: he could not overcome his aversion to that uncanny, treacherous realm the main aim of which, as far as he was concerned, was to drag him under and drown him.

'You all right?' Delahaye growled, startling him. He nodded, trying to smile. He still could not see Delahaye's eyes under the peak of his cap but he knew he was watching him. What, *what*, was he thinking?

Davy looked back; the land behind them now was a featureless dark line. Where were they going? The horizon in front was empty. They were headed south, there would be no land now until—what?—Spain? Surely there would be a marker, a buoy or something, to tell them where they should turn around and start back. But on they went, and with every mile—every league?—they

travelled the sea deepened under them; he thought of it, the coastal shelf falling away steadily into silence and utter dark. He shut his eyes again, and again felt dizzy.

Delahaye was saying something about Davy's mother. 'Did you see her, this morning, before we left?'

Davy did not know how to reply. It sounded like a trick question, but what could the trick be? 'Yes,' he said warily, 'yes, I saw her. She made breakfast for me.' Queasily he conjured up again the rashers of bacon, the fried bread, the egg yolk leaking across the plate. His eyes closed, this time of their own accord. His mind swam.

'Good,' Delahaye said. 'That's good.'

Davy waited, but that seemed to be the end of the subject of his mother. He looked behind again at that thinning line of land. Should he suggest turning back? Should he say he had an arrangement to meet someone? It was half past ten. He could say he had an appointment, a date, at half eleven. But even as he heard himself say it in his head it sounded wholly implausible. Yet they could not just keep going like this, towards that bare horizon—could they?

'Do you talk to your father?' Delahaye asked suddenly. 'Do you and he . . . discuss things?'

Again Davy was baffled. What new line was this, and where was it headed? 'We have a pint together, now and then,' he said.

Delahaye made a dismissive grimace. 'No, I mean, do you *talk*? Do you tell him about your life, what you're doing, what your plans are, that kind of thing?'

'Not really, no.' Despite the cool breeze in his face Davy realised he had begun to sweat, and he could feel

the dampness at his wrists and between his shoulder-blades. 'My old man and I, we're not . . .' He did not know how to finish.

Delahaye pondered, nodding slowly. 'No,' he said, 'fathers and sons, they don't really talk, do they? I don't talk to the boys, the twins, not much, anyway. I did when they were young, but now . . .' With the hand that was not holding the tiller he fumbled a packet of Churchman's from a pocket of his slacks and got one into his mouth but did not attempt to light it. Davy wished he could see his eyes; there was the glint of them there, under the cap's peak, but it was impossible to guess at their expression. 'My father in his day didn't talk much to me,' Delahaye went on. He chuckled grimly. 'And these days, of course, we don't talk at all.'

There were two white birds now, diving for fish; they would fly up steeply in a fluttering, corkscrew motion and then flip themselves over and draw back their wings and drop like blades, making hardly a splash as they entered the water.

Davy made a show of consulting his watch. 'I wonder—' he began, but Delahaye was not listening, and interrupted him.

'He was a great one for self-reliance, my father,' he said. 'Self-reliance and loyalty. *A man is not much if he can't depend on himself*, he used to say, '*and nothing if others can't depend on him*.' He took the unlit cigarette from his mouth and rolled it between his fingers. 'I remember one day he took me into town in the car. I was—oh, I don't know—six? Seven? Young anyway. We were living in Rathfarnham then. He drove all the way across the city,

out to Phibsborough, or Cabra, somewhere like that, and stopped at a corner shop and sent me in to buy an ice cream for myself. I don't think I'd ever been in a shop on my own before.' He was leaning on the tiller now, relaxed, it seemed, and smiling thinly to himself, remembering. 'Anyway, he gave me the money and I went in and bought a wafer of ice cream—you know, a penny wafer?—and when I came out he was gone. Just—gone. No father, no car, nothing.'

He stopped, and there was silence save for the beating of the waves against the prow and the shrieking of the sea birds. Davy waited. 'What did you do?'

Again Delahaye seemed not to be listening. He tossed the cigarette backwards over his shoulder and the churning wake swallowed it. 'Funny feeling, I remember it, as if the bottom had fallen out of my stomach, my heart thumping. I must have stood there for a long time, outside the shop, rooted to the spot, because the next thing I was aware of was the ice cream dripping on the toe of my sandal. I can see it still, that corner, the kerb painted in black and white segments and a hardware shop across the road. Strange thing is, I didn't cry. I went back into the shop and told the shopkeeper my daddy had gone away and left me. The shopkeeper went out to the back and fetched his wife, big fat woman in an apron. They sat me up on the counter where they could get a good look at me, to see if I was fibbing, I suppose. The woman took what was left of the ice cream from me and wiped my hands with a damp cloth, and the shopkeeper gave me a barley-sugar sweet. I could see them looking at each other, not knowing what

to do.' He shook his head and chuckled again. 'I can still taste it, that sweet.'

When Davy tried to speak, his voice did not work the first time and he had to clear his throat and start again. 'What happened?' he asked. 'I mean—did he come back for you?'

Delahaye shrugged. 'Of course. It seemed like hours to me but I suppose it was no more than ten or fifteen minutes.'

'Where had he been?—where had he gone to?'

'Just round the corner. He took the shopkeeper aside and spoke to him, and gave him a pound. The woman looked as if she was going to spit on him, and marched back in behind the shop where she had come from and slammed the door. Then we went home. Here, take the tiller, will you?'

He stood up and they exchanged places. The arm of the tiller was damply warm where Delahaye had held it. Davy's palm was wet. He was still sweating, but he was cold, too, in his shirt and wished he had brought a windbreaker. It struck him with renewed force how absurd a thing it was to be out here, skimming over God knew how many fathoms. And people sailed for fun and recreation!

Delahaye was gathering in the sails, first the smaller one at the front and then the bigger one. 'Self-reliance, you see,' he said, 'a lesson in self-reliance. *You got a sweet out of it, didn't you?* was all my father said. *And I bet the woman was all over you. And you didn't cry.* That was the most important thing—that I didn't cry.' He had folded

the big sail expertly and was lashing it now to the horizontal part of the mast with salt-bleached cord. The boat faltered and seemed puzzled as it felt itself losing momentum, and dipped its nose and settled back with a sort of sigh, wallowing in the water, and for a second or two all sense of direction failed and the sea around them seemed to spin crazily on its axis. The sudden hush set up a buzz in Davy's ears. Delahaye, wiping his hands on his trousers, sat down on a big oak trunk set lengthways down the middle of the boat and leaned his back against the mast. He seemed weary suddenly, and lifted his cap to air his skull and then put it back on again, but not so low over his eyes as before. 'What I couldn't help wondering, even at the time, was: where did loyalty figure in this lesson I had been taught?' He looked directly at Davy now, with an odd, questioning candour. 'What do you think?'

Davy's fingers tightened on the tiller. 'About what?'

'Loyalty. You're a Clancy, you must know about loyalty—eh? Or the lack of it, at least.' His eyes were of a curious glittery grey colour, like chips of flint. Davy could not hold their steady gaze, and looked away. 'Come on, Davy,' Delahaye said softly, almost cajolingly. 'Let's have your thoughts on this important topic.'

'I don't know what to say,' Davy said. 'I don't know what you want me to say.'

Delahaye was silent for a long moment, then nodded, as if something had been confirmed. He stood up from the wooden trunk and lifted the heavy lid and fished about inside and brought out something wrapped loosely in an oily rag. He stood in thought for a moment, hefting the

thing in his hand. 'Loyalty,' he said, 'it's not valued any more, is it? Loyalty. Honour. What used to be called common decency. All gone, that kind of thing.'

He began to unwind the rag, and as he did so Davy heard himself say something, exclaim something—*Whoa!* it sounded like—and he looked about wildly, as if, even out here, there might be a place to shelter behind. And yet at the same time he felt almost like laughing.

'Yes,' Delahaye said, as if reading his mind and sharing in his desperate amusement, 'it is an ugly bugger, isn't it? A Webley, Mark'—he brought the pistol close to his eyes and peered at the frame below the cylinder—'Mark Six. Pa got it off a fellow in the Civil War, I think it was.' He glanced sideways at Davy with a sort of smile. 'Oh, yes,' he said, 'it works. I tested it.'

He sat down again, dangling the gun in both hands between his knees. It was an absurd-looking thing, all right, big and heavy and nearly a foot long, with a chamfered barrel and a hammer at the back like a silvery tongue sticking out. There was the faintest swell now, and the boat rocked gently from side to side, the small waves making a playful chattering sound against the hull. Davy tried to get his bearings from the sky, but the sky was empty. The boat seemed not to be moving at all, as if it were at anchor, but he supposed it must be drifting, at the mercy of tide and breeze, and that it only seemed motionless because there was nothing to measure movement against. He was amazed at how calm he felt, tranquil, almost. He might have been running in a race, a marathon that had been going on for so long he had forgotten he

was running, and only now remembered, when everything had come to a sudden stop. Why was he not frightened? Why was he not terrified?

'I'd send you for an ice cream, if there were any shops,' Delahaye said, and laughed, and turned the pistol about and put the barrel to his chest and pulled the trigger.

What amazed Davy was that there was so much blood; that, and the vivid redness of it, which made him think of those spiders or insects or whatever they were, tiny scarlet specks, that used to fascinate him when he was a child, as they crawled among the rose bushes in his grandfather's garden. The blood had a faint smell, too, spicy and slightly sweet. The bullet hole in the left side of Delahaye's chest was black in the centre with a ragged rim the colour of crushed raspberries. The blood had quickly soaked the lower half of his blue cotton shirt and the lap of his white trousers, and had dripped out between his legs and made a puddle in the bottom of the boat with a single rivulet running out of it. Davy had managed to ease the packet of Churchman's out of the pocket of Delahaye's trousers—it had seemed important somehow that the cigarettes should not get blood on them. He checked his watch, as if it was important, too, to know what time it was.

The gunshot had sent Delahaye sprawling, with a look of astonishment on his face, and for the first seconds Davy had thought the boat would capsize, so violently did it yaw from side to side. He pictured the two of them sinking together feet first through the water, down

through the glinting light into the shadows, and then on into the blackness of the deep.

The awful thing was that Delahaye was not dead. He would be, eventually, that was certain—Davy had never seen anyone die, yet he knew Delahaye was a goner—but for now he was still breathing, making wheezing noises, like a child when it has finished crying and is trying to catch its breath. Once he moaned, and seemed to try to say something. His eyes stayed closed, there was that to be thankful for. He had slid off the trunk and was sitting at a crooked angle. He had dropped the pistol between his legs, and the handle was in the puddle of blood in the bottom of the boat.

Davy leaned forward, holding on with one hand to the what-was-it-called, the gunwale—he *hated* boats, *hated* them—and picked up the weapon by the barrel and flung it out of the boat as far as it would go; it landed in the water with a comical plop. He sat back, and realised at once that he should not have thrown the gun away. They would not think he had shot Delahaye, would they? But what if they did? He swore, over and over, punching himself on the knee with his fist.

He looked about, scanning the sea in all directions. There was no other vessel in sight. What was he to do? Down in the middle of the boat there was a pool of water—it was there that the single thin rivulet of blood was heading for—that swayed and shivered as the little waves nudged against the sides. It was not a lot of water, but what if it was not rainwater, but seawater, coming from a leak? He remembered from films how leaks that

sprang in the hulls of ships widened in a matter of seconds until the sea was cascading in, washing sailors away and floating their bunks up to the ceilings. Maybe Delahaye had bored a little hole in the bottom, a little hole that would get bigger and bigger.

Davy looked at the dying man. His face was a bluish grey, like putty, and there was a film of moisture on his forehead and on his upper lip. His breathing was slower now. He looked at his watch and was surprised to find that not quite three minutes had passed since Delahaye had fired the gun—three minutes! It seemed to Davy that he was suspended high above the boat and looking down on all this, Delahaye slumped there, and the two puddles, one of blood and one of water, and himself, huddled in the stern, his two hands out and clutching to the sides in terror. For the first time it occurred to him that he, too, would die, lost out here in a sinking boat.

A plane appeared from the south, banking to the right, headed for Dublin. He jumped up and waved his arms frantically. The boat set up an angry rocking and at once he sat down again, feeling foolish and dizzy. The plane was too high, no one would see him, and even if someone did spot him he would probably look like some half-witted fisherman waving hello to the tourists as they flew in.

He examined the outboard motor. He had no idea how to start it. Should there be a key? He turned to Delahaye, and heard himself swallow. Did he have the stomach to search in those blood-soaked trousers again? He crept forward and ran his fingers over the outsides of Delahaye's pockets. He could feel no key. Maybe Delahaye had dropped it into the sea. *A lesson in self-reliance.* He sat

back once more on the bench. The sun was high now, shining directly on the crown of his head, he could feel the beads of sweat crawling on his scalp like insects. He thought again of those blood-red mites in his Grandad Clancy's garden.

Delahaye opened dazed eyes and frowned at the sky. He gave a rattly groan and struggled forward as if trying to get to his feet, spoke a string of incomprehensible words in what seemed a tone of irritation, then slumped back into silence and died.