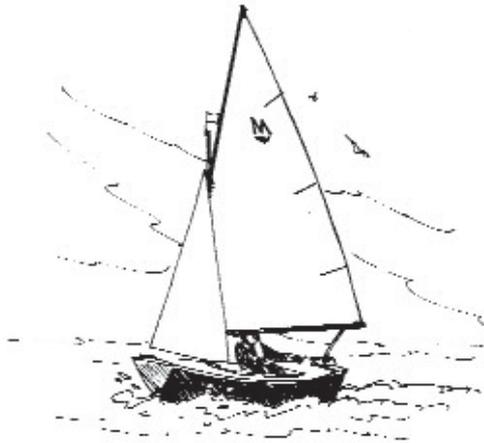


The Salt-Stained Book

Julia Jones

VOLUME ONE
OF THE *Strong Winds* TRILOGY



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Contents

- In the Barents Sea* 7
1. Book Stopped 9
 2. Ambushed 20
 3. By the Shores of Gitche Gumee 33
 4. An Aid to Buoyancy 42
 5. A Rescue Myth? 49
 6. Awful Anna 61
 7. Allies 71
 8. *Lively Lady* 81
 9. *Snow Goose* 93
 10. Family Activity 102
 11. A Wicked Plan 115
 12. Answers and Questions 127
 13. If Not Duffers 138
 14. Low Water 149
 15. T.E.A.M. 160
 16. A Forgotten *Hispaniola* 171
 17. The Black Spot 180
 18. Going A.W.O.L 188
 19. The Salt-Stained Book 198
 20. Dinghies in the Dark 212
 21. *Strong Winds* 228
 22. Gongs for Gold Dragon 242
 23. The Word is Mum 257

From the Cabin Bookshelf (etc) 266



This book is dedicated to Bertie, its first reader.

HMS Sparrow, the Barents Sea, February 17th 1945

The ship he was watching disintegrated before his eyes. He couldn't breathe. Refusing to believe what he saw. Then, seconds later, the explosion. Muffled. Horribly real. Gut-punching. A U-boat so close ... a torpedo ... how could ... ?

Dark, thick, obliterating smoke.

"All hands!" he shouted. "To your stations! Starboard ninety degrees. Full ahead and man the boats!"

They raced to the spot but there was nothing. Nothing left of his brother's ship but a few pieces of driftwood and the reek of oil. His seaboats were launched within minutes. Their crews trained, intent, methodical. All eyes searching for survivors.

But there was little hope. No one could live long in these icy waters and the weather was worsening. Already the swell was increasing, lifting then hiding each boat. The wind was freshening fast. He could see the white streaks of driven foam that foretold a gale. He knew he should recall his men and move on. It was his duty.

He gave the order. Then he handed over command and left the bridge to meet the returning boats. They had brought no one with them alive. The storm spread like a bruise across the sky as the last of the seaboats was winched on deck. He stared at his men as if they had become strangers: his ship no longer his.

Then, receding into the emptiness behind them, he saw a white face between the tossing waves. An arm flung up.

"Ned!" he shouted. "Ned! Hang on, old chap, I'm coming!"

He was over the side before they could stop him. Forgetting, in that instant, everything except the younger brother who he loved.

He was lost at once in the churning wake of his own ship's propellers.

There was nothing they could salvage. Only the second lieutenant, standing by, noticed the slim blue book that fell from his captain's pocket as he made that suicidal plunge. It lay open on the deck for a moment, pages whipping in the arctic wind. A scattering of spray wet it like salt tears; then a bigger gout of water reared up over the metal bulwark and splashed heavily down on the abandoned volume. It was sodden now and lifeless. In another moment it would be washed out through the scuppers and follow its owner to the deep.

The second lieutenant stepped forward and put the soaking book safely in his duffle pocket. The captain must have next-of-kin. Perhaps not parents but he thought he'd heard him mention sisters...

Both brothers lost.

Poor girls. They would be desolate. What comfort could it be if he sent back a single, salt-stained, book? Perhaps he'd keep it as his own memento; put it in the club library if this war ever ended.

The ship steadied on her course. The throbbing rhythm of her engines was restored, her radar swept the bleak horizon, sonar plumbed the killer depths.

Greg Palmer had been a good captain. His book belonged to seafarers.



CHAPTER ONE

Book Stopped

Colchester, Essex, September, 2006

When Skye Walker thought that they were close to meeting Donny's Great Aunt Ellen, she did a very odd thing. She drove them to a town and bought a book.

In many families this would not have been unusual. Mothers of thirteen-year-olds quite often drive into towns and it's not unknown for them to visit bookshops together —as well as buying clothes, sports equipment and electronic games. But for Skye and Donny this was a first time and it looked likely to be their last.

Skye's instincts warned them that there could be trouble but she'd got it coming from the wrong direction.

"Great Aunt Ellen," she had signed. "From the land of the Dakotahs."

Donny had nodded. They both felt wary of this new relation.

"Why should we buy a book?" he signed back. They were stamping out the remains of their small campfire and concealing all traces of the night they'd spent down an empty farm track in the last stages of their journey south.

"Nokomis said that it would help you."

If that's what Granny had said, that was okay by him.

So far in Donny's life, he'd always lived with Skye and Granny. Their rented bungalow on the outskirts of Leeds had

☞ THE SALT-STAINED BOOK ☞

been their safe place, their private world. They had their own language – sign language – told their own stories, looked after each other. Donny went to school of course and did all the normal things – but normal at school and normal at home were different normals. They didn't usually mix.

The private world was mainly for Skye, his mum. She was the one who used the special names. In the normal world Granny's name was Edith, not Nokomis.

Edith Walker and Ellen Walker. Sisters. That should have been all right. Except Donny and Skye didn't know anything about Ellen. Hardly even that she existed until now.

Granny was dead. She had a stroke and lay helpless; then she had another and was gone. After that it was like the fence had fallen down. Social Services and Learning Services and Health Services and Welfare Rights Advisers and Mental Health Officers and Housing Officers and Disability Living Consultants began coming in one after another to make Assessments of him and Skye. Mostly Skye. They asked the same questions time and again and didn't seem to listen to the answers.

Quite often these unwanted visitors didn't even bring a signer when they came to Assess Skye. This bewildered Donny. Surely they must have known that his mother had been profoundly deaf from birth and was so dyslexic as to have almost no idea of written language. Else why had they come?

They had Concerns, they said.

Granny, who organised everything, hadn't quite organised

☞ BOOK STOPPED ☞

their survival without her. Death had been too quick.

The first thing that had happened was a man they didn't know came and searched Granny's room. He was a small man in a suit and a dark tie. He showed them some sort of ID but Donny wasn't really clear who he was. He said it was routine. To ascertain the Last Wishes. Maybe he was an undertaker or a lawyer or something. They didn't see him again so Donny couldn't ask him what he'd thought the Last Wishes were.

It was the small man who had found the letter in Granny's drawer. It was right on the top, very tidy and was addressed to her only surviving relative, her sister, Miss Ellen Walker, Shanghai, People's Republic of China. It could have been there for a while, Donny didn't know, but it was ready stamped and licked shut. The small man said he'd take it. He'd post it for them. No need to worry.

Donny was suddenly certain that he didn't want this man to have Granny's letter. He grabbed it back from him quite rudely and ran out of the house and down to the corner of the street where there was a post box. He shoved it in and as he turned to walk home again he saw the post van pulling up to make the afternoon collection.

The small man had left by the time he returned. Granny's address book and her most recent diary had left too.

"Who is Great Aunt Ellen?" he'd asked Skye later.

But Skye's signing had gone wobbly.

"Pirate," he thought she said. Or was it fighter? She'd started counting complicated patterns on her worry beads and rocking slightly. It had been a horrible day and they were both

☞ THE SALT-STAINED BOOK ☞

tired and sad. So Donny had put his arms around her and hugged her tight and soon she hugged him back.

Donny didn't ask any more questions about Great Aunt Ellen. He just made sure that he was up and ready for the postman every morning. Skye couldn't read but he could.

The letter must have taken ages getting to Shanghai because they'd had Granny's first and second funerals by the time Great Aunt Ellen's answer came. Maybe the stamps had been wrong.

The first funeral hadn't been much good. It was in the crematorium and there was only him and Skye and a couple of neighbours. And a social worker. Donny supposed one of them must have organised it. The man giving the talk didn't seem to know anything at all about Granny. He even said she'd 'taken on' Skye as if she was some heavy burden rather than a beloved daughter. Donny'd been signing the service to his mother but he skipped that bit.

Skye hadn't looked very interested anyway. In the first weeks after Granny died she'd spent a long time working on a piece of wood, which she'd said was called a grave-post. It was brightly coloured and carved in ways that were particular to Granny. Donny thought it was beautiful. He expected they would keep it for ever.

When Skye had finished she left the grave-post one last night and a day in Granny's room with all Granny's clothes and hairbrushes and things. Then she took it out into the garden and burned it.

As the sparks flew up into the twilight, Skye signed to him that they were letting Granny go and all her problems and her

☞ BOOK STOPPED ☞

pain and they would keep their happy memories. What problems? What pain? Donny wondered briefly. Skye stretched her arms upward in farewell; the paint blistered and flared. The edges of the flame burned black.

Granny's clothes and shoes and brushes and bed-sheets went into a bin liner and Donny never saw them again.

It was a pity they couldn't get rid of the visitors so easily. Then they'd have got on okay. Donny thought so anyway. He went to school as usual and did the shopping while Skye washed and wove, baked flat bread and cooked aromatic meals. He tried asking if there was paperwork that they ought to do. He thought he needed to understand Skye's money and how they paid the rent and things. But of course the visitors told him not to worry which wasn't any help at all.

Then he very nearly missed getting Great Aunt Ellen's telegram because he hadn't expected it to come by messenger and he was so fed up answering the door to people with clipboards and zipped cases.

He read the telegram to Skye (or part of it) and they left. As soon as the school term ended Skye packed their food and clothes, and the few things they cared about, into the camper van that Granny had used for holidays.

"Going to wait for Aunt Ellen," she'd signed. "Better a Dakotah than these frowny-faces. You tell me where."

They could have walked it faster. It took them all of August to come south, travelling a few miles most days and stopping when they liked somewhere. They used country roads and stayed in woods and on the edges of fields. Skye drove (very

☞ THE SALT-STAINED BOOK ☞

slowly) and Donny navigated. People were usually surprised that Skye could drive at all. Granny had taught her years ago when they'd been staying on a big campsite for their summer holiday. Then she'd gone to some special tribunal to get her a licence. Granny had been like that: always ready to fight for Skye.

By the time they got near the end of their journey it was September and Donny should have been back at school. That was when Skye signed that they needed to go into a town. A town with big shops: a town where they could buy a book.

"You don't ask much, do you, mum," he didn't say. He could see from the road map that they were quite near a place called Colchester which looked big enough to have a bookshop but he hadn't got a town plan and there'd be pedestrian areas and one-way systems. How was he going to get them in there? He couldn't sign to Skye while she was driving because she had to watch the road. They'd get lost and she might panic.

In the end he decided that they should go into the first car park they found and walk the rest. Symbols were okay so he drew her a white P in a blue background and showed it to her before they left. It got them into the car park anyway. They might have used some sort of service entrance by mistake but they'd done it. They'd parked the van and bought their ticket and now they were in the bookshop.

"We'd like a book with children and an island please," Donny asked. "And a lake. And boats."

Skye seemed to know exactly what they'd come for. She wanted pirates and treasure as well. A green parrot. All of them, in one book. Quickly.

☞ BOOK STOPPED ☞

“No,” he said, “I don’t know what it’s called. Or who wrote it.”

Skye was getting excited and Donny was finding it increasingly hard to keep up with her and to interpret her sign language for the bookshop staff.

“No, we haven’t seen it on TV. We haven’t actually got a TV. And I don’t think it can be a new book because my Granny told her about it. And she’s dead.”

This was embarrassing. A crowd was beginning to gather as if they thought this was performance art – like juggling in the street or pretending to be a statue. People did often stare at Skye. Mainly Donny didn’t take any notice but today it was getting to him. Okay, Skye was ... unusual-looking. She was tall and big with a coppery skin and long dark hair which she plaited with bright ribbons. She wore tie-die kaftans and beaded skirts, which she made herself, plus lace-up shoes, a man-size anorak and sensible woolly jerseys.

The anorak and jerseys were Granny’s choice. Old Nokomis (a.k.a. Miss Edith Walker) had been a small neat woman obsessed with keeping people warm. When Donny was younger she’d regularly sent him to school wearing two vests and two jerseys and two pairs of socks. It was as if she couldn’t quite believe that schools had central heating.

Dear Granny ... Donny missed her every single day. But he did sometimes wish that she and Skye could have harmonised their taste in clothes.

“That’s sick! I know what she wants!”

One of the shop assistants – a girl dressed as a Goth with a white face, black clothes and studs – gave a sudden, delighted

☞ THE SALT-STAINED BOOK ☞

smile and turned purposefully to the children's section.

"She wants *Swallows and Amazons!*"

The book she pulled out was a bulky beige and purple paperback, with some crudely drawn children on a turquoise sea. Skye looked uncertain. Then the girl opened the front cover and showed her more pictures and a map of a lake. There were drawings all through the book. Skye's face brightened. She seemed hugely relieved.

"Granny's secret book," she signed to Donny. "For you. Explains."

He paid the assistant gladly though it took almost all the rest of their money. That didn't matter: they'd still got lots of tinned food on the van and they wouldn't need to buy much more petrol now. Donny knew that he could always understand his mother when she was calm and they had time. She would tell him later what it was that Granny had wanted this *Swallows and Amazons* book to explain. What the secret was.

As it turned out there wasn't a later. They took a wrong turn in the car park and the camper van got stuck under a height bar. Then a queue built up and people began hooting and sticking their heads out of their windows and shouting. The car park manager was called and a breakdown van.

Skye couldn't hear the shouting but she knew they were trapped. Like a squall coming out of sunshine she had the worst panic attack she'd had for years. She clutched the steering wheel until her knuckles showed white and she screamed.

Then someone called the police and the police noticed that

☞ BOOK STOPPED ☞

the van's tax disc was out of date and Donny didn't know about its insurance or its MOT or where Skye kept her driving licence. He knew she had one but he wasn't sure that they believed him.

All the while Skye was screaming. And there was nothing he could do to help.

In the end he sat down in despair and cried as he hadn't cried for years for himself and for her and for dear dead Granny, who would certainly have checked the tax and insurance before they went on holiday and would have known where all the papers were. Granny would have seen in advance that the van wasn't going to make it out beneath the bar. He should have seen it. He was useless. How long before Great Aunt Ellen would get here and take over all this responsibility?

Plenty of people did get there. A fire engine arrived and an ambulance, then a second police vehicle. Two of the firemen took down the height bar; then a truck arrived and hooked up the camper van to winch it onto a low trailer.

"Where are you doing with our van?" Donny asked but they didn't answer him. "You can't just take it, it's got all our stuff in it!" he shouted.

"You'll have to speak to them about that," said the truck driver jerking his thumb towards the policemen who were talking into their radios. Then he swung himself up into his cab and towed the van away.

A paramedic in a fluorescent jacket tried to offer Skye a sedative. She let go the steering wheel and knocked it from his hand. She got out, looking wildly round for Donny. Quick as anything, as if they'd been waiting for the chance, they put

☞ THE SALT-STAINED BOOK ☞

some sort of jacket on her, strapped her to a stretcher and gave her an injection.

Then the stretcher was inside the ambulance and there was a policewoman standing next to Donny telling him not to worry and his mum would be all right now.

“Where are they taking her? I need to go with her.”

“Not in the ambulance, dear. You’re too young. They’re taking her to the hospital and she’ll have a nice sleep.”

“I’m thirteen. I need to be there. For when she wakes up.”

“No. Not just now. We’ll take you home and find someone to look after you. Where’s your dad today?”

“I don’t have a dad.” He’d never had a dad. He didn’t know anything about his dad at all. Dads didn’t feature. Skye hadn’t had one either.

The policewoman didn’t look especially surprised.

“Well, there must be somebody. Don’t you have any other relations? Friends? A neighbour maybe who can keep an eye on you? Where do you live? We’ll run you home and I’ll stay while you get in touch with someone.”

“No. We don’t live near here at all. We’ve come from Leeds. We’re planning to meet my Great Aunt Ellen. I really do need to be with Skye. She doesn’t like hospitals. They frighten her.”

“Skye?”

“My mum. It’s difficult for her to understand people because she’s deaf. I’ve learned signing. I can explain.”

“They’re used to deaf people in hospitals, dear. She’s in the best place. It’s you we’ve got to worry about. Where are you meeting Auntie? Can I give her a ring and tell her we’re bringing you round to her house? What’s Auntie’s number?”

☞ BOOK STOPPED ☞

“No!” Donny was feeling desperate. “She’s not here yet. We’re meeting her at a place called Shotley. We were going to wait for her. I need to be with Skye.”

“Never mind Mum. Let’s just think about Auntie. Shotley’s not too far away. I’m sure she won’t mind coming a little early if we let her know that Mum’s been taken ill. Does she have a mobile?”

“NO! She’s coming from China. In a ship ... I think ...”

The policewoman was looking disapproving now. Oh why did Great Aunt Ellen have to be so awkward? Why couldn’t she have been like Granny?

But it was no good thinking like that. He needed to sound confident, even if he wasn’t. He looked at the policewoman and tried to smile.

“We’ll be quite alright waiting in the van. Skye likes the van. We’ve had lots of holidays in it before.”

“With proper tax and insurance I hope. No, young man, if your mother’s ill and there’s no one else in the area to look after you, I’m afraid you’ve going to have to come back to the station with me. We need to have a little chat with the Child Protection Unit.”



CHAPTER TWO

Ambushed

Tuesday, September 12th

It was a good thing, thought Donny, that no one had asked to see the actual message they'd received from Great Aunt Ellen. He hadn't even told Skye exactly what it said:

YOUR SIGNAL RECEIVED AND UNDERSTOOD.
STRONG WINDS CRATED BUT NO BILL OF LADING
YET. PLAN TO TRAVEL STEERAGE. EXPECT
DESTINATION FELIXSTOWE. ETA LATE SEPTEMBER.
RENDEZVOUS SHOTLEY. NO LANDLUBBERS. ELLEN.

It was all very well Great Aunt Ellen saying that she'd understood whatever Granny had written. But the only bits of her message that Donny had got his head round were that she was planning to arrive sometime late in September at some place called Felixstowe and would meet them at some other place called Shotley.

When he'd looked it up on the Great Britain road map, Shotley seemed like a pretty small town. It was down in the East of England across a river from Felixstowe, which was a port. So that part of the telegram was okay and that was what he'd read to his mother. The rest was not so obvious at all.

Once they'd started their long journey south, he had asked Skye, casually, whether she knew anything about this 'Strong

AMBUSHED

Winds' but she'd shaken her head and hadn't answered for a while.

Later she reminded him of the four winds in their favourite poem. Granny had had a small collection of Everyman classics which she had read and signed to him and Skye during their long peaceful evenings together. The collection was small because Granny hated clutter: if there was a book they didn't want to read again she got rid of it. If they liked it they read it again. Often. She used the library as well and Donny got books from school.

The book that had somehow slipped off Granny's shelf and into all their lives had been Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's *Hiawatha*. And that had started with winds.

The West Wind, mighty Mudjekeewis, had been Hiawatha's absent father. He was cunning and potentially treacherous as well as invincible, not the sort of dad who you'd want to take along to parents' evening or spend a Sunday watching cricket. The South Wind was fat and lazy and the East Wind was basically okay. The wind that Granny had really hated, in life more than in the story, was the strong North Wind, fierce Kabibonokka. How she had locked the windows and drawn thick curtains when wild gales from the north came howling over the Leeds housetops. She'd be tense and somehow far away. You couldn't talk to her then.

But you couldn't put winds in a crate. 'Strong Winds' sounded more like a thing – or things? Maybe it was a piece of art. Something valuable that she didn't want to leave behind. He'd find out eventually, he supposed. Strong Winds was (or were) the least of his worries. He didn't know what a

☞ THE SALT-STAINED BOOK ☞

'bill of lading' was or an 'ETA', and the bit about 'no landlubbers' was scary. Donny had a bad feeling that he and Skye were definitely landlubbers – whatever that meant. Yet Great Aunt Ellen was their only hope if they were going to escape the welfare people.

If ...

Once the ambulance had gone, the policewoman took him to the Colchester HQ and called a duty social worker. Her first suggestion was that Donny should be sent straight back home to Yorkshire. By taxi if necessary.

It turned out, however, that he didn't have a home in Yorkshire any more. Granny's death and their summer's travelling had put them behind with the rent. The landlord had repossessed the bungalow and had already let it to someone else.

"Great Aunt Ellen'll be here soon," said Donny. He needed to sound certain even if he wasn't.

Then there was talk of finding temporary bed-and-breakfast accommodation for the two of them, if Skye was well enough.

"That'd be good," Donny agreed, "except we haven't got much money. There's still plenty of food in the van. We'll be quite alright if we can just park it somewhere near Shotley and wait."

But the van had been seized – that was the technical term. It meant it had been taken off to some dump somewhere and they'd have to pay to get it back or it would be scrapped. And, as Skye's money had pretty well run out even before they'd bought that book ...

The social worker phoned the hospital administrator who

AMBUSHED

put her through to a ward sister who said that Skye seemed muddled and unresponsive. She hadn't properly come round from the sedation.

"I ought to be there," said Donny. "She's my mum. She needs me."

But then, fatally, someone from Leeds phoned to say they had Concerns about Skye's ability to care for Donny. They quoted their Assessments.

And Donny wasn't going to be allowed to care for Skye because it wasn't long before the hospital phoned again to say they'd had a Conference and decided to transfer Skye to a mental ward in a different town where she could have tests and be given more sedatives. Four times a day if necessary.

Donny felt like he was in a nightmare. How could he make them understand?

And it got worse.

No mum, no granny, no address or phone number for Great Aunt Ellen. That meant Donny was officially At Risk. The policewoman told him that they'd applied for an emergency order so he could be Looked After. She seemed to think that she was doing something helpful.

"We need to know that you're quite safe until Auntie comes. Then we'll talk to her and find out what her plans are."

"But she told us to meet her at Shotley!"

Great Aunt Ellen hadn't sounded that enthusiastic about having them. Especially if they were landlubbers. If they weren't waiting at Shotley when she arrived she'd probably turn round and go straight back to China. Wasn't there anything he could say?

☞ THE SALT-STAINED BOOK ☞

Two more people came into the room just then. They made everything feel squashed and smelly. The man was wearing a policeman's cap which he didn't take off: the woman had a hard face and a frilly blouse.

The policewoman and the social worker stood up and offered them their seats. No-one said why they were there. Or if they did, Donny didn't get it. This man should be in the Guinness world records. He'd had to turn sideways to get through the door.

"You can drop that story," said the man to Donny. "Port of Felixstowe's where your alleged great aunt claims that she's arriving. Shotley's a blind. There's no *legal* passenger traffic from Shanghai to Shotley – and very little to Port of Felixstowe. I've a Special Role in Port of Felixstowe – checking for *il-legals*. We'll be on the lookout for your alleged great aunt. There's no chance she'll slip past us."

Huh? Even though they'd been treating him like he was totally pathetic, the policewoman and the social worker had obviously been trying to sound nice. This man was rude and angry straightaway.

"My Great Aunt Ellen's not illegal," he said. "And she's not alleged either. Her name's Miss Ellen Walker. She's my granny's sister and the only reason I've never met her is that she's been living in Shanghai and we've been living in Leeds."

"That's quite enough from you." The policeman jabbed at the table with his pudgy forefinger. Donny couldn't help staring. What was his problem? "The duty officer ran a computer check on your alleged great aunt as soon as you came in. We don't spend public money having kids looked

AMBUSHED

after if there's family available. He found no trace of your Miss Ellen Walker – as you call her ...”

“That's because it's her name.”

The policeman stood up again and moved very close. He smelled sweaty.

“Mind your manners, young man. We've done the checks. She hasn't shown up. Port of Felixstowe's for container traffic only – as I'm quite sure you know – and none of the shipping companies have any Miss Ellen Walker being registered to travel. Passenger or crew member.” He leaned even closer blocking out the rest of the room. “She's got no UK passport, no tax records, no medical card. There's been no visa application and you've given us no contact details. Your next of kin are Miss Edith Walker, deceased and Ms Skye Walker ... incapable. There's no father prepared to put his name to your birth certificate and, as far as I'm concerned, at this moment in time, your great aunt doesn't exist. Not *legally*.”

He sat down again, buttocks ballooning over the edges of his chair. He planted both legs wide apart, put his hands on his massive thighs and leaned forward. He was watching Donny all the time out of piggy-sharp colourless eyes.

“I'm on your case as per procedure. Until we meet Miss Ellen Walker, and she satisfies us of her identity and her right of entry into this country, I'd like to formally advise you that I'll be keeping a very close watch indeed. On *you*.”

No Great Aunt Ellen on a list? Perhaps she wasn't coming...

Donny took a deep breath and gulped down his panic. Great Aunt Ellen's message had been definite about that if nothing else. Rendezvous Shotley, she'd said.

☞ THE SALT-STAINED BOOK ☞

Should he pull the paper out and show it to them? That would do it.

No. Not to this man. No way! Great Aunt Ellen was Granny's sister. There would be some good reason.

Then Skye's word 'pirate' popped into his mind.

"... and Aim going to make quite sure you attend school while you're with us."

This was frilly blouse. Was she even weirder than the fat man? She was wearing a short leather skirt and the pointiest pair of shoes that Donny'd ever seen in his life. They were sort of snakeskin sandals with criss-cross thongs that went right up to her knees. After that there was so much bare leg that Donny had to look away.

The social worker had fetched her a cup of special herbal tea. No one else got one.

"Aim Denise Tune. Aim the Education Welfare Officer. Aim developing my role in a multi-authority context under the next government initiative."

Her waves of perfume came rolling in over the fat man's b.o. Donny started to feel a bit giddy. He wondered if he could ask someone to open a window. Probably not.

The way she said 'I'm' was amazing. It had a sort of special emphasis and came out as 'aim'. He guessed he was her target for today, getting riddled with government initiatives: Aim... FIRE!

"Aim talking to Suffolk even as we speak," she continued, drawing attention to her own remarkable powers. "Shotley's in Suffolk. We're in Essex. Health's going to keep the mother. But Aim sending him on as an example of co-operation. It

☞ AMBUSHED ☞

shares the costs as well.” She grinned toothily at the other adults. Then she turned to Donny and tried to look caring.

“You’ll be available in Suffolk for your ... Aunt to maik e any appropriate application. You’ll be kept very ... Saife.”

Donny could see that her smile was as phoney as the rest of her. “I think I should stay near my mum,” he repeated.

“Your ... mum’s not well. You can have Contact when she’s better. You’re fortunate Ai’ve been able to find you a placement at such short notice. We don’t have Yorkshire’s budget!” Another smirk to the audience. “This is Sandra. She’s your social worker. Ai’ll be monitoring.”

Wednesday, September 13th

That was probably Tuesday. Which meant that the next day was Wednesday and Donny was sitting on a school bus in Suffolk.

He’d been left in the room once the meeting was over, then put into a police car and driven to a tall, grey vicarage somewhere between Ipswich and Shotley. The vicar was called Wendy and she was his Primary Carer together with her husband who was called Gerald. They’d asked him whether he had any allergies or eating disorders and when he’d last been to the dentist. Then they’d given him some cold supper and shown him to his room.

To be fair it had been pretty late.

The room had been cold and empty. Donny hadn’t brought anything with him. Except the book. He still had it – the ugly paperback that had caused all this trouble. He’d been holding it when they’d got stuck in the car park and unbelievably it

☞ THE SALT-STAINED BOOK ☞

had stuck with him all this time. Without him even noticing. He didn't feel that encouraged by it.

He'd helped Gerald to make up the narrow bed and Wendy had given him a pair of pyjamas that looked like they'd been left over from the parish jumble sale and some clean underwear for tomorrow. A glass of water and a toothbrush. The pjs were crumpled from being in a bin bag but the toothbrush was new: Gerald put its packet in a container marked 'plastics – misc'.

Then they'd said good night and left him on his own.

Donny was tired. Really tired. This had been the worst day of his life but he knew that there was no way he was going to manage to get to sleep. When he lay in the dark, even if he shut his eyes, he couldn't stop himself thinking of Skye. Would it be dark in the mental ward as well or were there dim lights and unfamiliar shadows and the huddled shapes of strangers?

He got out of bed and switched the light back on. Skye had said that this was Granny's book and it would explain. So far all it had done was get them in this mess. Some sort of secret? It sounded as if Granny had told Skye that she wanted him to have it. It must have been before she died. Why hadn't she got a copy of her own? That was pretty strange.

Swallows and Amazons? Skye loved swallows. She called them 'shaw-shaws'. She used to stand and watch them when they started gathering on the telephone lines before their long flight south. He needed to make sure she didn't miss them this year... So maybe he needed to give this book a try?

It wasn't at all what he'd expected. But then what had he

AMBUSHED

expected? How could a book which was obviously about kids a long time ago help him cope with this nightmare now? It was good though because the kids in the book had the same surname as him. They were called Walker too.

The kids in the book were on holiday. They had a father away in the navy somewhere and a mother who was so posh that she even had a nurse to look after her baby! The kids wanted to go sailing on a lake and camp on an island and the first chapters were all about them packing up to set off. Someone had lent them a boat. As if anyone would just lend a load of kids a boat!

The boat was called *Swallow*. Not a bird; a fourteen foot dinghy with a brown sail.

Donny caught his breath and shivered in the empty room. Not cold any more, tingly. Not lonely either. He could see that dinghy – *Swallow*. Even before he got to the picture. He ran his hand round her varnished gunwale. Smooth glossy wood and such a beautiful shape: generous and reassuring and yearning to set out on adventure.

He pummelled the thin pillow to make it a bit softer and snuggled down in the bed to read more. He felt an excitement he couldn't understand.

The older of the two boys in the book had his own name – John, John Walker – the name he'd been given when he was born. No one who knew Donny ever called him John. It had been 'Johnny' when he was a baby then, apparently, when he'd started talking, he couldn't say Js properly so he'd called himself 'Donny' and it had stuck. It was one of the words his mum could almost say, "Doh ... doh."

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Anyway ... this John wasn't a bit like him. This John took things seriously. He was a real leader. His mum and dad trusted him to look after all the other children and their boat and everything.

Like no-one trusted Donny. How would Skye know that the fat policeman and the horrible woman were keeping him away from her? That he wanted to come. Wherever she was.

Donny got back into his story again quickly. He'd be hammering on the walls if not.

John-in-the-book was a really good sailor. So was his sister. It seemed like they all were. They stepped the mast and found cleats under thwarts. Then they pointed her bows into the wind and hauled away ... boom, yard and sail; painter, forestay, sheets and halyards; blocks and sheaves; tiller and rudder. He didn't properly understand the words but the language was lovely. It was like words that he'd known before he knew any words at all. Magic words.

Donny found he was shaking slightly. Breathing a bit fast.

So he sat up in bed again. Looked round the bare room. There were no other books or pictures in here but the carers had left some plain scrap paper, a pencil and crayons.

Donny began to draw a diagram of how he thought John-in-the-book was fitting the dinghy equipment together. The words fell easily into their proper places. Then he read a bit more. They were ready to set sail.

Was that a baby crying? Donny lifted his head and listened for a moment. Yes, somewhere in the distance. In this bleak house. One of the carers had evidently got up to try and quiet it but the crying went on and on.

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“Poor baby,” thought Donny, as he and his crew slipped slowly out towards the mouth of the bay. Then they rounded the point and felt the steady light breeze behind them. Donny forgot the baby. He was asleep.

He’d like to have woken up in a boat. Or in a tent on an island. Or, best of all, back in the bungalow in Leeds with Skye and Granny and none of this happening at all.

But he didn’t. He was in the same hard bed in the same bare room and the male carer, Gerald, was banging on the door telling him he had to get up and get ready for school. He’d supplied thin grey trousers and a white shirt that had obviously come out of the same bin bag as the pyjamas. At least Donny got to wear his own shoes.

Then there’d been breakfast and Wendy had dropped him at the school bus stop. She was hassling to go to some meeting and had a temporary bus pass he could use. Gerald gave him an old rucksack and a re-filled water bottle and asked whether he’d like a re-cycled tissue from the Greenworld box by the door. Donny hadn’t bothered answering.

There’d been some other kids in the kitchen but they’d looked grumpy. Two boys, he thought, possibly a girl? That must have been the baby he’d heard in the night, sticky and a bit whiny in a plastic high chair.

There wasn’t time to get to know any of them even if he’d wanted to. And none of the school kids said hi when he climbed on board the battered single-decker. He didn’t care. Let them listen to their iPods or play games on their phones. He didn’t want to say hi to them either.

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It was actually a nice day – like it usually was when kids had to go back to school. These roads were quite narrow and the hedges were tall and leafy. Donny kept his face to the window as if he was doing a sponsored stare. There were trees and fields and not many houses. Not like home. It reminded him of all those little roads he and Skye had been driving down together.

Or the summer holidays that Granny used to take them on. The ones she said were adventures except he knew that she'd been planning them for weeks. Everything would be properly stowed and labelled and the van would be wax-polished and their tidy house left even tidier. And they'd be away to the hills or the moors or maybe a forest. She always hid the maps when they were travelling then brought them out once they'd arrived. It was a bit of a strange thing to do but he'd got used to it. It made a sort of space between their home life and the new world of their holiday.

Donny felt a sudden hotness around his eyes. He squeezed them tight shut for a moment and took deep breaths. Maybe he should have said yes to Gerald's tissue.

Nah. He could feel one corner of the *Swallows and Amazons* book in his rucksack digging into his back between his shirt and the seat. Granny's secret book. And he'd packed the crayons and pencil and the diagram he'd started, showing how the boat worked. They were his. They'd do.

