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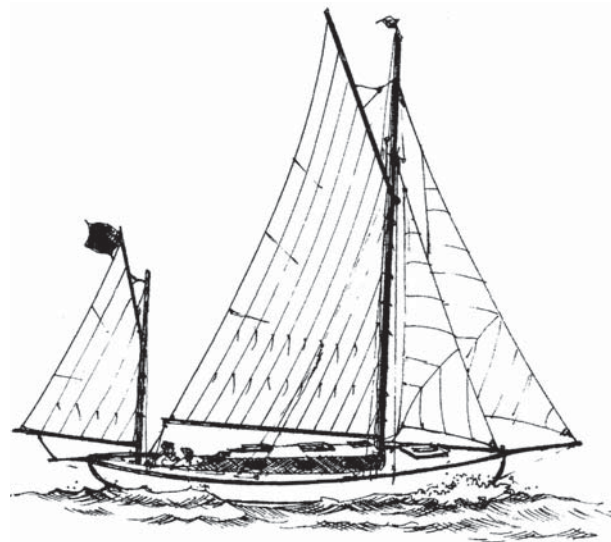
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Buttercup's Diary and other tales



A Ravelled Flag

Julia Jones

VOLUME TWO
OF THE *Strong Winds* TRILOGY



GOLDEN DUCK

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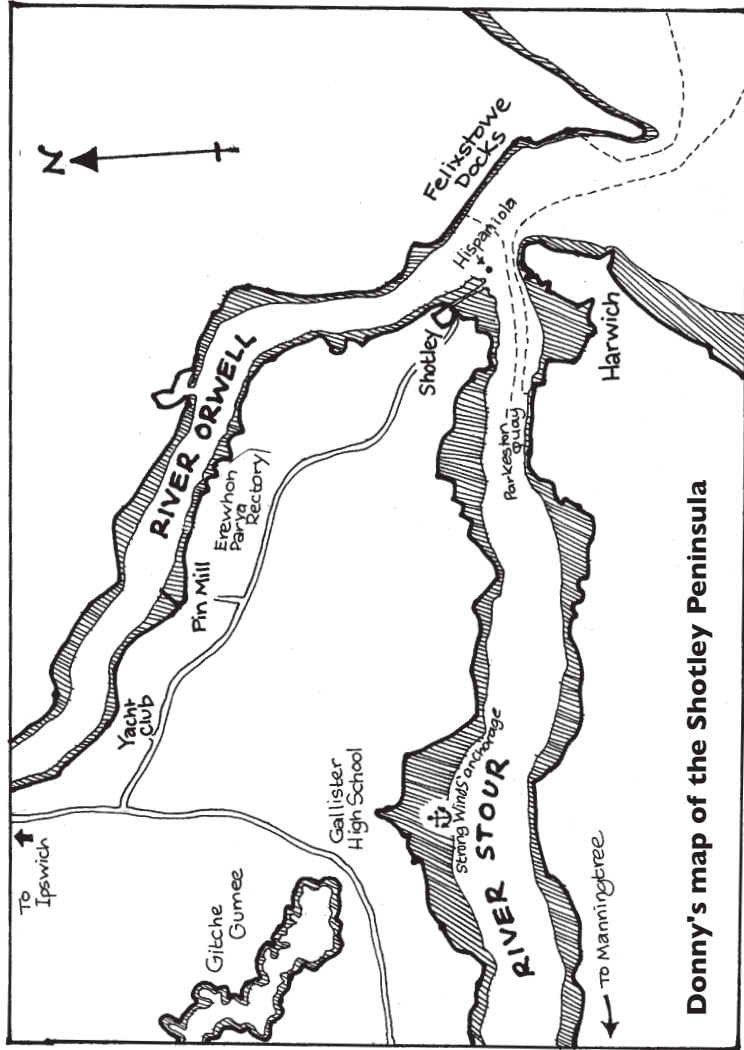


This book is dedicated to Francis and to Frank
with gratitude for all their good advice – whether I took it or not.

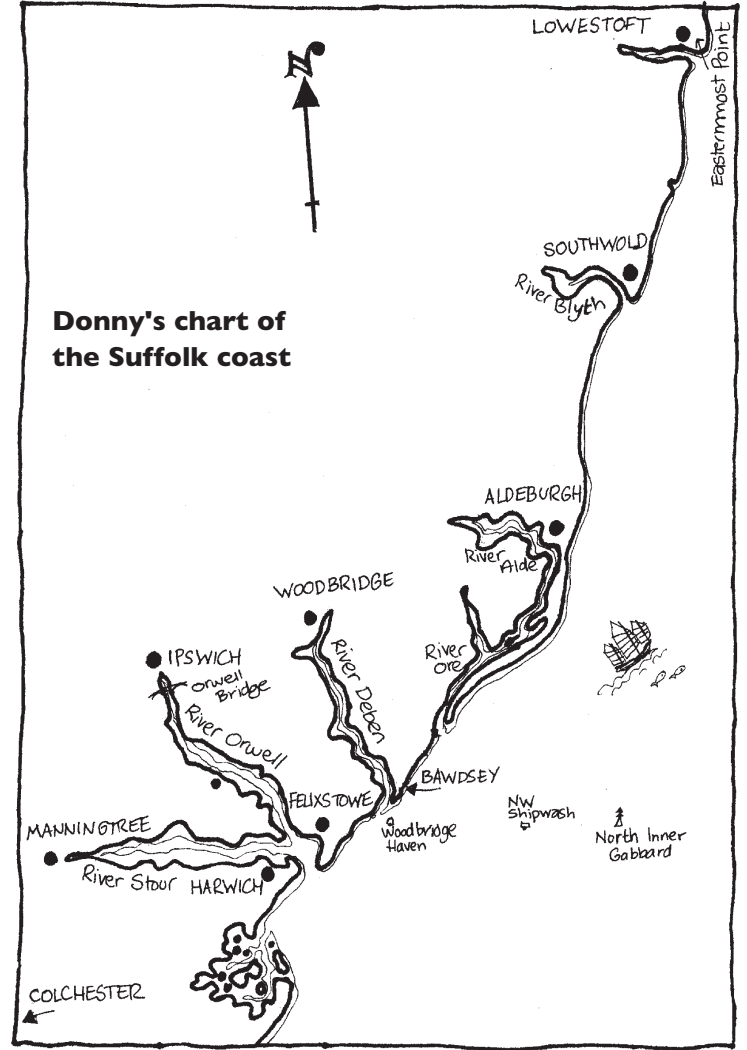
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Donny's map of the Shotley Peninsula



Donny's chart of the Suffolk coast

CHAPTER ONE

Ship Wreck

Tuesday 26 September 2006, morning

Donny woke slowly and luxuriously that first morning on board *Strong Winds*.

He felt the fragments of a dream evaporating from his head. He was waving from a boat to an island. And his friends were waving back. No, not waving. They had been signalling. With flags. Somewhere else in the dream he sensed two children, outcasts on a deserted shore, sharing their last few crumbs.

Donny shook the dream away. This was the first day of his new life. He didn't need distraction.

When he'd woken yesterday he'd found himself lying on the hard deck of a schooner, soaked by fog. It had been his fourteenth birthday but he'd been alone and frightened.

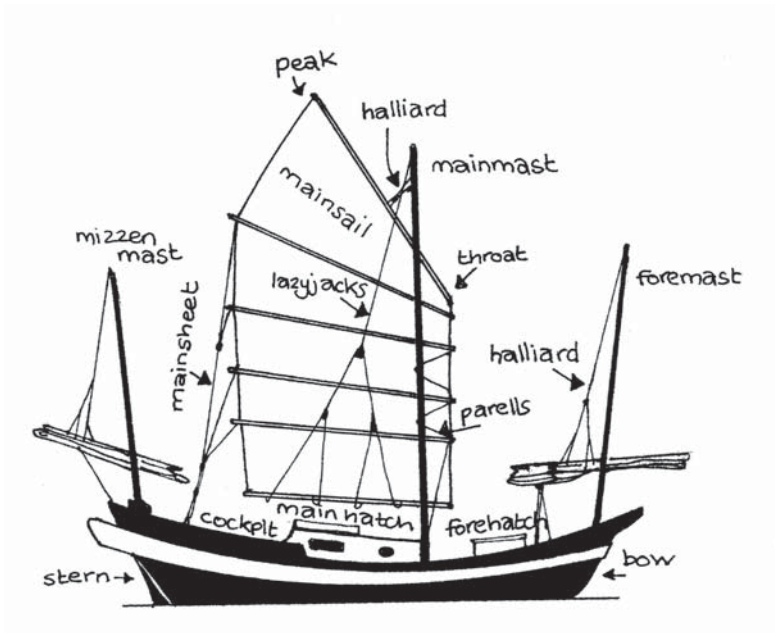
He shifted one shoulder experimentally against the softness of his bunk. Yes, it ached. And so did the other. The palms of both hands felt chafed but not blistered any more. The salty water was definitely toughening him up.

So good to be here. To be together again. To be safe.

He let himself re-live the moment – also yesterday – when he had first seen this boat, *Strong Winds*, scudding in from the open sea with the afternoon sun glowing golden in her sails. Bringing Great Aunt Ellen home.

It was his second best birthday present ever.

Getting his mum back had been the best.



***Strong Winds* – rigging diagram**

Donny rolled over, ignoring his aches, and peered across the cabin at Skye's sleeping heap. Her long dark hair was un-plaited and tangled across her face so he couldn't really see her properly. It looked dank and greasy as if it hadn't been washed all the time she'd been away. There were no bright ribbons twisted in its strands and the bits of her skin that he could see were as dull as unworked clay. Her mouth was open and she was snoring slightly.

She was there. The person who mattered most in the world.

Last time he'd seen her had been in the dim light of a hospital ward. She had been sedated. The time before that, she had been screaming.

It was over.

Push it deep down into the nightmare bag and pull the choke-strings shut.

Donny stretched his legs out with a sigh of pleasure and lay on his back watching the pale sun as it danced across the cabin roof. It was almost worth having a few aches and pains. They sort of spiced-up the comfort.

He hadn't felt anything so good for ... months? There was a fleecy blanket underneath him, so thick it must be doubled; an unzipped sleeping bag light and warm on top; and a blissfully soft cotton pillow smoothed beneath his head.

Skye had the same. Gold Dragon must have put them there. That's what she liked to be called, his new great-aunt.

She was a small woman, more than eighty years old, with a hook instead of one hand. She had spent yesterday and most of the day before sailing solo across the North Sea from Holland. And she was famous. Polly Lee, pioneer yachtswoman. There

had been a TV camera waiting by the lock gate when she and *Strong Winds* had arrived.

Donny wasn't sure where Gold Dragon slept or what time of the morning this was. He definitely didn't want to disturb her if she might still be asleep. So he carried on lying there, basking, as he watched the flickers of light chasing like minnows across the cabin roof. The air in the cabin felt clean and slightly chilly. There must be a breeze outside, a breeze fresh enough to ruffle even the sheltered waters of the marina.

Donny could hear halliards tapping against masts. He was surrounded by boats. Better than any dream. And the yacht that was moored closest was beautiful *Snow Goose*. His friends, Xanthe and Maggi, and their parents would be sleeping there.

If people were still asleep?

He didn't have a watch so he listened harder, hoping for clues. He caught the cry of a seagull, a passing engine and then, from across the harbour came the round-the-clock rattle of cranes loading and unloading container ships in the Port of Felixstowe.

Donny shifted less comfortably.

Cranes and halliards wouldn't waken Skye. When he'd been younger his granny, who was dead, had sometimes put her hands over his ears so he could feel what it might be like in his mother's silent world. But his head hadn't really been silent at all: it had rumbled and buzzed as if it was a machine on stand-by.

There'd been one bad shock among his birthday surprises, gate-crashing his happiness like a cackling black witch. He'd discovered that Granny hadn't been Skye's mother: that she wasn't, in fact, his granny.

They said that babies in the womb could hear their mother's

voice, muffled and far-away like whale music. Skye had been deaf ever since she'd been born but presumably unborn babies didn't hear in the same way. It was probably more like feeling sounds than hearing them. But if Skye had felt her mother's voice, it hadn't been Granny's.

Granny – Miss Edith Walker, who had looked after Skye and him for all their lives – had been an aunt, a senior aunt. Gold Dragon – Miss Ellen Walker – was the junior one. Skye's birth mother wasn't Edith or Ellen but a middle sister called Eirene. Someone who, until yesterday, no-one had ever mentioned.

Great Aunt Ellen had told him last night that Eirene had 'gone' soon after Skye was born. How could this Eirene have gone away and left her baby – a tiny, deaf, brain-damaged baby who wasn't expected to survive?

Donny looked fondly at his mum as her eyelids flickered in dream-sleep.

Eirene! What sort of a stupid name was that?

The cosy waking-up feeling had gone. Donny urgently needed a pee. There was a toilet block somewhere at the end of the pontoons and a keypad with a serial number that he hadn't managed to remember. He pushed his sleeping bag off and sat up. Glad he was still wearing socks. No time for shoes.

Skye moved restlessly as Donny hurried up the companionway. He couldn't wait. He could see Joshua Ribiero about to get into his car.

Donny ran along the pontoon to catch him. He didn't notice the limited edition electric-blue Mercedes parked strategically overlooking *Strong Winds*.

"Good morning, Donny. We thought that you would never

wake. June has taken the girls to school and your great-aunt has walked to buy groceries. We offered to help but ... she's a very independent lady."

"Yeah, right. Er, sorry, what's the code for the toilet block?"

"898132. You reverse the telephone number. And, Donny, please don't linger. It's best for your mother that she's not left alone until she has completely understood where she is. She has been given a large quantity of medication and it'll take some time for her body to readjust. We can expect physical symptoms as well as considerable disorientation. Possibly distress."

"Yeah, sure, I'll be really quick. Er, thanks a lot," said Donny and sped away. Eight nine eight, one three two, eight nine eight, one three two. That seemed about the most urgent information right now.

Joshua hesitated, then left. He had patients waiting.

A blond woman in a Gucci business suit swayed briskly towards *Strong Winds* in her Louboutin shoes. Making bad worse was her special gift. You could call it mal-fare.

Donny punched the numbers into the keypad and heard the automatic lock click free.

It wasn't so easy to exit. Someone else was fumbling with the lock, outside. Didn't seem to understand the combination, wouldn't listen when Donny tried to help. All he could do in the end was stand back and wait until the man, or whoever it was, got fed up trying and went away.

Donny didn't see anyone when he finally got out. He didn't really look because now he could hear shouting.

Something was happening on *Strong Winds*. The junk couldn't be ... moving?

Donny ran.

"Mum!" he yelled, as he hurtled down the access ramp.

That was a waste of breath.

Skye was standing on *Strong Winds*' foredeck in her old jersey and her long dark tie-dye skirt. She was pushing against the wooden staging with a boat hook. The junk's mainsail was half unfurled and the mooring lines were loose. There were trailing ropes everywhere.

She was looking towards the lock gates and the wide spaces of the harbour and sort of howling as she shoved the boat fiercely away from the pontoon. The fresh breeze was already catching the top section of the unfurled mainsail, threatening to make the heavy junk unmanageable in this confined space. The next row of expensive moored yachts was only metres distant. Donny knew he must do something quickly if he were to avert a massive collision.

But what?

Snow Goose, the Ribieros' pride and joy, was lying just ahead of *Strong Winds*. Both boats had been moored in the central area of the marina, where there was room to lie alongside instead of having to manoeuvre into narrower, car park-style spaces.

Donny ran to *Snow Goose* and vaulted on board. As he'd hoped, there was a spare coil of mooring line, neatly positioned on the yacht's aft deck, ready attached to her starboard samson post.

"MUM!" he shouted again. And hurled the line straight at her.

His aim was good. The rope snaked out and hit Skye hard on her shoulder and the side of her head. She stopped shoving and

looked to see where it had come from.

Then she saw Donny.

He could use sign language now. "Tie the rope onto something! Quick! Tie the rope on!"

The middle section of the mooring line had fallen in the water but Skye had caught its end. She dropped the boat hook and began to pull, hand over hand, heaving herself desperately back to her child as if this rope was some super-sized umbilical cord.

She was pulling much too strongly. The slack was lifting too quickly out of the water. This could be another disaster. *Strong Winds* hadn't stopped moving backwards. She'd never be able to take the strain once the full weight of the boat came onto the rope. It'd burn the skin off her hands, pull her overboard.

"Tie the rope on!" Donny kept signing. "Wrap it round something!"

He saw her look about, then bend forward and wind the rope round and round one of the solid wooden cleats, which were positioned inside the bulwarks on either side of the junk's high bow.

Not a moment too soon. The curve in the line was straightening. Could slender *Snow Goose* bear *Strong Winds*' full weight?

The rope twanged taut, shaking off drops of water in sparkling curves on either side. Donny felt *Snow Goose* shift under him as she took the strain. She pulled back hard on her own mooring lines. A moment of tension. Ropes and cleats creaked.

Everything held. It was going to be okay. *Strong Winds* stopped slipping backwards. She was several boat-lengths away from *Snow Goose*, momentarily at rest.

Another section of her big mainsail tumbled free.

Donny was trying to work out angles. Should he attempt to winch the junk back to her berth? Would she swing in against the pontoon? The space behind *Snow Goose* was empty and *Strong Winds* had plenty of fenders to minimise the impact. He could be there in seconds and get a rope to her stern. Skye would be there too. They could hold the junk steady; then sort out the mooring lines in safety.

Was that what was going to happen? For a moment Donny hesitated.

Skye was uncertain too. She looked at the rope, then looked at her child, still parted from her by a stretch of rippled water.

Skye wasn't used to water. This separation frightened her. The lies she'd been told were dripping poison through her head. She began again to heave on the rope that linked her boat to his.

"No, Mum, NO! Don't do that!" he signed.

Hurried footsteps on the staging behind him. "Here ... son ... you look as if you could do with a hand."

One of the men from the marina office had seen his plight and was running to help.

It was too late. At that moment an unlucky gust caught the top sections of *Strong Winds'* loosened mainsail and set her sailing. The tide-less water offered no resistance and she picked up momentum in a couple of metres. The high strong bow, which yesterday Donny had thought so beautiful, was coming at him like a battering ram.

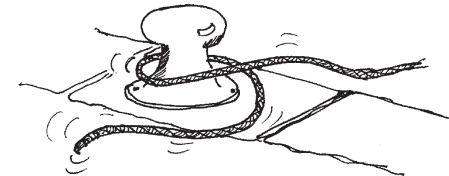
Straight towards the pointed stern and varnished spars of the elegant *Snow Goose*.

"Pairrfect," murmured the Mal-fairy, selecting one of the stored numbers in her BlackBerry. There had been all that unfortunate

publicity yesterday. This should put the record straight. Or skew it, naicely.

Donny was searching for something, anything, he could use to stave off the impact. He knew his own arms would be too short: his boy's strength not enough. Was there an oar, a boat hook even? He pulled at *Snow Goose's* tiller in the futile hope that it would come free and he could use it to avert disaster.

The tiller was fixed in its position. There was nothing he could do.



CHAPTER TWO

Striking the Colours

Tuesday 26 September continued

The impact was crushing. Instinctively Donny leapt backwards onto the pontoon in the last second before the heavy junk struck the aft end of the yacht. It was only later he realised that, if he'd stayed where he was, he'd probably have been seriously injured.

Strong Winds' bow was so much higher than *Snow Goose's* stern that it caught the yawl's mizzenmast first and forced it backwards with a rending crack. The mizzen boom was triced up close to the mast so both were caught between the flaring bulwarks on either side of *Strong Winds'* broad stem. The mizzen shrouds were wrenched out of their fastenings with an audible ping. Everything – mast, boom, shrouds, halliards and bundled sail – crashed to the deck in a tangled mess.

Even this didn't completely halt the on-coming junk. The impact shook out her entire mainsail so the wind drove her forward all the stronger. Once the mizzenmast had collapsed, the lower section of *Strong Winds'* bow was forced directly against *Snow Goose's* stern, shouldering it towards the pontoon.

The yacht tried to twist away but was held rigid by her own mooring ropes.

"Let go her bow-line!" Donny shouted to the man from the office.

Then he ran a few strides along the pontoon and leapt up again onto *Strong Winds*. The junk's deck was in chaos. Skye appeared

to have undone every rope she could see – and three-masted *Strong Winds* had plenty to undo. Halliards, sheets, parells, warps, lines, hawsers – ropes, thick and thin, trivial and essential, were trailing, snaking, tangling from all sides.

It was lucky that Donny had helped his great-aunt to stow the mainsail as they'd approached the marina yesterday evening.

In fact it was better than lucky. The man from the marina office might have thought that it was chance that had led the boy unerringly to find the main halliard amidst the chaos, but Donny sensed that there had been something guiding him. Something Ancestral?

A few hard pulls and the junk's mainsail meekly disappeared.

Donny fastened it firmly but didn't waste time coiling the halliard. He dashed to the stern ready to catch one of the mooring ropes. Two neat loops made a clove hitch knot over the samson post and *Strong Winds* was finally secured.

Slowly, silently and hopelessly, Donny and the man began their vain attempt to pull the junk back from the mass of wreckage that had been *Snow Goose's* stern.

That was when his new great-aunt returned from the village shop.

His social worker arrived as well. Her name was Sandra. She had come to tell the family that the Statutory Service Care Review & Assessment Meeting, which should have been taking place that afternoon, had been rearranged for Friday morning.

"We hoped that a later date would ... allow everyone time to ... re-assess," Sandra stuttered, her rosy face blanched by the sight before her. "I think I've come at a bad moment." She paused

again, gulping on her understatement. “Should I call ... medical help?”

Skye had collapsed. Her body sagged against the junk’s high side. Her brown eyes were open and appalled, gazing at the wounded yacht, beginning to comprehend the damage she had caused.

“Not unless you know a good boat surgeon,” said Great Aunt Ellen grimly, not averting her own eyes one second from the tangle of spars and rigging and splintered wood. She’d seen water hosing from an outlet in *Snow Goose’s* white hull. Donny could hear a faint whirring that he guessed was some kind of automatic pumping system.

What would she think of them now? On their first morning!

Then June Ribiero came hurrying down the pontoon. She’d taken Xanthe and Maggi to school. She bent forward towards *Snow Goose* and stretched out one arm as if to ask ... but words failed her.

“Uh, I’ll be off then,” said Sandra. “If there’s nothing I can do. Donny, there’s a bus that you can catch from outside the Shotleygate Stores tomorrow morning. It leaves at about quarter to eight. I’ve got you a temporary pass.”

Donny took the pass and put it in his back pocket. Gallister High School seemed worlds away. “Goodbye,” he said.

June stepped neatly on board. “I’ll check her bilges. There may be damage below the waterline.”

“I’ll begin cutting her free.” Gold Dragon’s good hand was reaching for the wire cutters that she kept in the rigging pouch permanently strapped to her side; her hook was teasing out the first of the shrouds that would need to be severed. “There’s

a yard here, isn’t there?” she asked the man from the office. “That water’s coming in fast.” She pointed to the continuous arc pouring from *Snow Goose*. “She needs hauling out PDQ. Get them to send a launch.”

He nodded and spoke urgently into his hand-held radio.

June reappeared. “She’s filling. There’s a plank sprung. Maybe two or three. We need to get her out. The automatic pump’s not coping.”

“Message sent.”

Great Aunt Ellen was back to Polly Lee now, Donny thought. She wasn’t bothered about him and his mum. You could see that she was a round-the-world sailor who’d got used to coping with things. Like sinking ships were her daily bread.

She’d found an extra-thick, tarry rope, which she and the marina man were fixing under *Snow Goose*. It worked like a sling: one end fastened to the mooring stage, the other to *Strong Winds*. It kept the yacht supported either side, though Donny didn’t reckon it would last for long if *Snow Goose* was really going to sink.

The eighty-year-old was moving fast. Now she was cutting away more of the wreckage that snarled the two boats together, then she looped a thin, strong, length of line around the tangle of mast and rigging, so it could be hauled back on board for repair later. She got the marina man to help with that.

“Okay,” she said, allocating jobs to a couple of other boat owners who’d come along to stare. “You take the forrard mooring line and you stand by aft. Then I could do with a hand amidships...”

She looked at Skye. Shook her head, irritably. No room for land-lubbers. That was what she’d said.

“Sinbad. Hand-pump and bucket in the port cockpit-locker.

Get aboard with Mrs Ribiero and get pumping.”

There was already water spilling over the cabin floor and rising up the sides of the berths when Donny joined June on board the stricken yacht.

“I’m ... sorry.”

She was putting all her energy into pulling up and down on the manual bilge pump. Her tailored trousers were rolled clumsily up to her knees; there was a sheen of sweat on her dark face.

“I’ve brought another pump. Where would you like me to go?”

To hell, perhaps? The Ribieros had been so unbelievably kind and now he and his mum had wrecked their beautiful boat. He wanted to cry but he hadn’t got time.

“That depends on its hose. A long one? Good. It’ll reach right over her side. Take my place while I lash it in position.”

No shouting or recrimination – yet – just focused and practical, determined to save *Snow Goose*.

Donny put all his feelings into his pumping. Up and down until his lungs were heaving and his shoulders howled. Up and down. His stomach hurt; his breath was roaring in his ears. If he died doing this he wouldn’t care.

They got the water level back below the cabin sole and managed, desperately, to keep it there. Then June went on deck and Polly Lee press-ganged another spectator to replace her at the second pump.

Donny pumped on. It was all he could do. His chafed hands burned.

He heard the launch arrive and then *Strong Winds*’ engine started. He felt *Snow Goose* begin to move as she was half towed, half lifted to safety.

He and the other man didn’t speak. There wasn’t much Donny wanted to say.

Only Skye was out of place when Donny eventually left *Snow Goose* and came back on board his new home. *Strong Winds*’ decks were clear, her boat hook had been re-stowed, ropes fastened and coiled, fenders positioned for use.

His mum, however, was lying on the foredeck. Her knees were pulled up to her chin, her arms clasped over the back of her head. Her hair covered her face, her eyes were hidden. They would be shut.

This was Skye’s terrified shape. Donny wished that he could curl up next to her. What was Great Aunt Ellen going to say now she had time? How could he face his friends?

He knelt down awkwardly. He guessed from the damp patch on her skirt that she had wet herself. This must be what Joshua had meant when he said ‘physical symptoms’. What a start to their new life!

“I’ve never been good with people.” Gold Dragon had come up behind him. She was carrying one of the blankets from the cabin and a large bar of milk chocolate. “Unlike Edith. She’d have produced hot tea for all and sets of dry clothes half an hour back.”

She dropped the chocolate abruptly in his lap and let the blanket cover Skye. Then she began making violent shooing gestures. “They’re cacking themselves watching. Human shite-hawks! Can’t you get your mother below?”

She was right. There were knots of people standing on the pontoons and along the seawall. Some were straightforwardly staring; others chatting and glancing furtively in their direction

or happening to pass by, carrying their water cans or refuse bags. Some of them had cameras. One looked really professional.

“I’ll try. Honestly she’s not always like this.”

His great-aunt stopped shooing. She looked old.

“I didn’t know how to begin. I could see I was scaring her worse. So I left her. I had to think of the ship. That’s my responsibility.” That faint Australian lilt at the end of her sentences made it sound as if she was asking him for understanding.

“I know,” he said. “I really do.” A captain’s duty was to his ship. That was something he’d accepted years and years before he was born. “I bet your brother Greg never wrecked any of his boats though.”

She laughed then. “He most certainly did. I wasn’t there but I heard all about it. Now eat some chocolate yourself and do what you can for your mother.” And off she went, over *Strong Winds*’ side and down onto the pontoon.

The spectators shifted out of her way. The people with cameras mostly hid them behind their backs. Just one person pushed a microphone in her face and asked whether she had anything to say.

She didn’t even glance at him. Donny watched her striding resolutely to the boatyard: a small, determined figure, facing another unpleasant task.

It didn’t get much more pleasant when Xanthe and Maggi came back from school that afternoon and Joshua from the hospital.

“You’re saying that your mum untied everything and started trying to go somewhere – in *Strong Winds*?” Xanthe was trying to understand. She wasn’t making much headway.

“Yup,” said Donny.

“She untied ... like *everything*? Whether she knew what it did or not?”

“Yup.”

“She’s never been on board a boat ... not before last night?” said Maggi.

“Nope.”

The sisters fell silent, frowning furiously with the effort of not being angry. They were both skilled sailors. They couldn’t imagine why anyone would so randomly unfasten a deck’s worth of ropes. They’d looked without speaking at their own lovely yacht, high out of the water, with two planks sprung from her stern and the mizzenmast snapped jaggedly away at the base.

Donny looked at his feet to avoid looking at his friends. Their mother had gone home without speaking to him and he’d thought he was going to puke when he’d stood there watching their father’s clever fingers feeling round the ugly slit where the planks had burst away.

“It is possible that there was already a weakness. Perhaps the fastenings should have been replaced before now.”

“There was nothing wrong with her mizzenmast.” Xanthe couldn’t stop herself.

“Accidents happen, Xanthe, you know that. Sometimes we can learn from them and sometimes we can only accept.”

The accepting bit wasn’t going so well.

Xanthe and Maggi had known that Donny’s mum was different. They didn’t have any problem with the idea of disability or mental illness. It was the reality that was hard to deal with.

“Is this what she’s like?” asked Xanthe. “Your mum. Twenty-four seven?”

“No! No way. Not hardly ever. She’s ... beautiful. Okay, so she very occasionally gets panic attacks. Who wouldn’t?”

“Do you think she was trying to escape?” asked Maggi, frowning harder. “Take *Strong Winds* and just go? I mean, she’s been in ... a mental ward. If that was me, I might ...”

“Maybe,” said Donny. “No, I don’t know what started her off. I’ll try and ask her when she’s better. Probably she’d woken up and I wasn’t there and she didn’t know where I was ... and then she saw all those ropes tying things down. Like she’d been tied down. So she started setting some of them free. Your dad said I shouldn’t leave her. It’s totally my fault.”

“You only went to have a pee. You weren’t exactly sightseeing.”

“I did notice she moved when I was leaving. I could have found a bucket. Then I was slow getting out. There was some bloke in a muddle with the numbers. I couldn’t explain to him.”

“Donny-man, I know she’s your mum but you’re gonna have to stop beating yourself up. It was that loose mainsail that really caused the damage. And the wind, catching it.”

He wished they’d chuck him into a piranha tank.

“You weren’t there, Xanth, you didn’t see. I want you to take *Lively Lady* back before I wreck her too.”

Xanthe shook her head. She looked cross and tired and his good friend all at once. “We’re Allies, right? We want you to have the dinghy. You can’t know what’s going to happen next.”

“Anyway,” Maggi added, “the man from the office told Dad you’d acted like you were twice your age. Dad’s a doctor, remember; he understands about sick people. Him and Mum, they’re kinda reliable ...”

“Yeah,” agreed Xanthe. “Mum can be stressy but she gets over

it. Look, Donny-man, we need to get home and do stuff. You know – homework and music practice and supper. Go easy on yourself. Okay?”

As he watched his friends go loping off towards their father’s car, Donny wondered, for a moment, what it would feel like to have parents who were ‘kinda reliable’?

Skye was sitting in a sleeping bag when Donny returned to *Strong Winds*. Her wet skirt was swirling around the marina laundrette and she hadn’t anything else to wear.

“A crooked tongue told me you were gone. I sought to follow.” She must have been having a bad dream.

“It’s okay, Mum. We’re going to be okay. Be a family again.”

“We’ll get your camper-van back,” said Great Aunt Ellen. “Then you can decide what you’re bringing on board.” She didn’t understand signing. “Your foster-carer dropped by with your school clothes, Sinbad. I told him today wouldn’t be such a good day for those other children to visit.” She gave a wrinkly grin. “He wasn’t shedding any tears. Said he’d have to fit them all with safety harnesses first. Name’s Gerald. Bit of a dry bob is he?”

“Um ... probably.”

He’d no idea what a dry bob was but it seemed unlikely that Gerald, the health and safety fanatic, and Gold Dragon, the nautical adventurer, would ever view the world through the same pair of binoculars.

He remembered Gerald’s bleached clean kitchen at Erewhon Parva vicarage. Then he looked at *Strong Winds*’ glowing varnish work, her oil lamps, books, the gleaming barometer and alluring compass.

If only she'd allow them to stay. If only they didn't mess up again.

He'd like to have seen the others – Luke and Liam and baby Vicky – and he *had* to see Anna. He'd got his mother back: she needed to find hers.

His great-aunt was looking at him. Her eyes were bright and hard. He'd better offer to do something helpful. Didn't know what. Peel potatoes or something? Wash up?

"You look land-sick, Sinbad. Go for a sail, why don't you? I'll stand the watch with Nimblefingers. We'll eat later. If we can't wait, we'll probably save you some. Or we might not. Then you'll have to make do with weevils and hard tack."

"Could I really? Go for a sail?"

Donny knew that Gold Dragon would be proud and fierce and not a bit like Granny Edith. He was learning that she was also trustworthy and kind. So you could see that they were sisters.

He explained to Skye what he wanted to do and took her on deck, still wrapped in her sleeping bag, to show her *Lively Lady*. He absolutely promised he wouldn't be away for long. She even sort of smiled when he told her that, in this new place, her name was Nimblefingers.

Then he scrambled into the dinghy and rowed out through the lock behind a small motorboat setting off for an evening's fishing. The cross-harbour ferry was tying up for the night. The river lay before him, wide and quiet.

He set his sails and headed for the old red and white schooner, the one they'd nick-named the *Hispaniola*.

When he and the Allies hadn't met Great Aunt Ellen, they had used one of the schooner's three tall masts to run up a warning

message for her, in flags. They wanted to put her on her guard against Inspector Jake Flint, the gross policeman, and his devious accomplice, Denise 'Toxic' Tune. The gruesome twosome had been out to get Gold Dragon – Donny didn't know why.

The flags had been Anna's idea: a red and gold one for China because that was where Great Aunt Ellen had been living and a red and white quartered 'U' flag. In the international code of the sea that meant 'you are standing into danger'. Best of all was a double-headed dragon ramping across a black silk background. She'd found it on the Internet when she'd googled *Strong Winds*. It even had the right number of toes.

The evening breeze was warm and steady. *Lively Lady* was pulling forward and heeling slightly. She tempted him to hold his course – across the harbour and out to sea. When Flint had come at him – was it still only yesterday? – Gold Dragon had stopped his powerboat as neatly as if she'd been lassooing a galloping bullock.

He could see that the flags weren't flying any more. The *Hispaniola's* signal halliards had been dirty grey with age. They must have frayed. He ought to climb aboard and collect them. Otherwise it was like forgetting about your balloons when the party day was gone. And anyway, he'd promised Skye ...

The signal halliards hadn't frayed: they'd been cut.

Someone had severed the cod-line and the entire hoist had tumbled down. Two of the flags – the stars of China, and the 'U' flag that spelled danger – were lying neatly on the deck. A piece of planking had been placed over them. It had a message in fresh black paint:

SHIP PRIVAT.
KEEP OFF.
GO HOME LÓNG.

The third flag – Anna’s resplendent dragon on its rippling black background – had been slashed into tatters. Not torn or cut but ripped, again and again, with an extremely sharp knife.

Donny stood still a few moments. Shocked. Then he bent down and began to pick up the small pile of jagged strips that had been blowing out so bravely only twenty-four hours before. There was no fragment left more than a centimetre wide. No-one, apart from him and his Allies could have identified these remains as Great Aunt Ellen’s ‘house’ flag.

Xanthe and Maggi had told him that the dragon flag had been copied from a famous pirate called Miss Lee. They assumed it was a sort of tribute.

He hadn’t asked Great Aunt Ellen yet if that was right. Hadn’t had time. Only met her yesterday. Didn’t properly know anything about her. She was his family. He felt that she was kind. But why copy a flag from a pirate?

And what did pirates do anyway? In real life and the twenty-first century?

As he began, reluctantly, to pick up the bits of flag, Donny struggled not to blame his granny (Edith, not that cheat Eirene) for not telling him more about her youngest sister. He knew that Edith and Ellen had quarrelled over baby Skye. Edith had won: Ellen had left.

All those people cheering when *Strong Winds* arrived at the lock gates last night – they’d known about her. Perhaps the person

who’d done this was jealous? People who were famous did have to deal with freaks sometimes. Or maybe this nutter simply didn’t like dragons?

Donny shivered and his hands felt clammy.
Be honest. He was scared.

GO HOME LÓNG

He didn’t totally understand the words but he definitely got the message.

Donny didn’t want to think what a knife like that would do to human skin.



CHAPTER THREE

Who's There?

Wednesday 27 September

"You're telling me it's not over? You're saying that there's still someone out there who's trying to get at you or your great-aunt?"

"At her ... I'm sure. There must be something I don't know that's in her past. And as I don't know anything ..."

He'd been waiting all morning to get Anna's brain focussed on his problems. She was in Year Nine, the same as him, but Gallister High was a big school and their timetables were completely different. She and Maggi were in most of the same top sets and Xanthe was two years above. Donny was sort of middling academically and he hadn't been there very long.

He hadn't seen either of the sisters today. He didn't mind too much. Obviously he still felt terrible about *Snow Goose* but he didn't want to talk about her any more. He wanted to talk to Anna about the *Hispaniola* and the flags.

At lunchtime he grabbed his chance: used his plastic meal card to buy a sandwich and a drink from one of the vending machines and headed upstairs to the library. Anna was in her usual corner, skipping food to get maximum time on the Internet – or as much of it as the school's system would allow her to access. She didn't look entirely pleased to be interrupted but Donny wasn't taking any notice. He needed her to help him understand what had happened.

"It was her flag that they attacked. She copied it from some

Chinese pirate – you know that, it was you who designed it. And if it is me they're getting at then it works the same. Threaten someone I care about, it scares me off, doesn't it?"

"Do you care?" Anna hadn't yet bothered to look away from her screen.

"Of course I do! She's my family."

"Yes ... but you didn't even know she existed until your granny died. And you've only actually been living with her for two days. Plus she looked to me like someone who was pretty capable of taking care of herself."

How to put this? Donny floundered on. "Gold Dragon's really tough and all that. She was excellent when we thought *Snow Goose* was going down. I wish you'd seen her ... except, of course I don't wish that, because I wish the whole thing never happened. But it's not totally one way. She doesn't have a clue how to talk to Mum for a start and I can't think how she's going to learn. You really need two hands to sign. Not one and a hook."

Anna carried on working.

"She's come here because of us and so far all we've done is give her grief. So I sort of feel responsible. It might be to do with what happened before – you know, when they were children and all going off sailing and that. Great Uncle Greg and Granny were like the grown-ups and she was the baby. They were always leaving her behind."

"I don't get all that playing at *Swallows and Amazons* stuff. Or your weird dreams. The point is what happened on that boat yesterday, not what was in some book a couple of lifetimes ago." She looked at her screen again and scrolled impatiently through a couple more pages. "Are you saying that you haven't even told

her what happened to her flag? Your great-aunt is a round-the-world sailor, for godssake – not some ship’s baby!”

“I couldn’t even decide whether to take the scraps away. If I did, it would show that I’d been there again. If I didn’t ... well, then I realised I didn’t want to leave them behind. The *Hispaniola* didn’t feel like a safe place any more.”

“So? You didn’t exactly make it safer by taking a few bits of flag away.”

“I suppose not.”

His explanation wasn’t going very well. Maybe it wasn’t a very good one. Donny couldn’t always understand the way that boats made him feel. Yesterday the *Hispaniola* had felt sad and wrong and cruel. He wasn’t sure he’d reacted all that sensibly.

After he’d found the tattered flag and read the KEEP OFF notice, he’d forced himself to walk all the way round her deck. He’d slept there once but it had been dark and he’d been exhausted. He hadn’t looked at it, not properly.

The deck was metal, riveted together, he guessed, and with ridges to stop you slipping over maybe – if you were running to action stations in your regulation rubber-soled shoes, crouched beneath the gunwales and with the decks awash.

Why did she make him think like this?

It must be the paint. From the outside the *Hispaniola* was a dull crimson and white. The red was almost the same colour as the redundant light vessels scattered around the harbour. Her upper works were white too, the bits that people passing by would see. She was eye-catching, if a bit eccentric.

But the deck paint told a different story. It was a very particular shade of grey, blue-grey, battleship grey – the colour his

great-uncles Greg and Ned would have lived with all the years they served in the Royal Navy. Before they had both died. It looked as though the person who had re-painted the outside of the schooner to look like something out of a fantasy film hadn’t bothered with the decks – or had been working from an alternative script.

The more he looked, the more puzzling the *Hispaniola* felt. Everything was metal. A bit rusted in places, where the rivets had wept, but tough as armour. Almost war-like. Except that you surely couldn’t go into battle with those three telegraph-pole-style masts? He couldn’t even see how the sails were meant to work.

Then Donny had thought he heard ... fluttering?

Trapped wings, frantic, beating against cage bars. Prisoners from far away, terrified and desperate in the cold dark.

But when he’d stopped and looked around there was nothing.

Not even a few late swallows gathering along the crosstrees to begin their long flight south. You could think of birds like spirits. He and Granny and Skye had always especially looked out for swallows but this year the birds had gone without him noticing them at all.

He tried peering inside the *Hispaniola* through her deck-lights and cabin portholes. But all the glass had been painted over with thick black paint, including the wheelhouse. That didn’t seem quite normal, even for a boat that wasn’t being used any more. There were padlocks on the forehatch and the cabin door, metal bars as well. More notices in black paint. They looked fresh.

TRESPERCUTERS WILL BE PROSACUTED
TRESPARSERS WILL BE PROSERCUTERS

Donny began to ask himself why all this was necessary? Okay, so he'd kipped on board two nights ago and here he was again. But he was only calling to collect his flags: he hadn't been planning to move in. All these padlocks and notices – talk about overkill!

Maybe it was the dodgy spelling, maybe it was his feeling that this was all way over the top, maybe he'd simply run out of energy for being scared. Whatever reason, Donny had stopped being frightened and turned awkward.

He didn't try explaining to Anna why he'd done what he did next.

He went back to the base of the mainmast, where the flags had fallen, and picked up the KEEP OFF plank. He turned it over and pulled Xanthe's rigging knife out of his jeans pocket. She'd sort of said he could keep it and it had a marlinspike that he could use to scratch a message of his own.

"Croeso," he wrote. "Wilkommen, bienvenue, fáilte, ola!" – as many words of greeting as he could remember from the multicultural welcome poster that had been on the doors of his primary school in Leeds. He couldn't properly remember the Urdu or the Arabic but he was sure he'd got the Chinese welcome right. He liked character writing so he made it his main feature: spent extra time gouging out the graceful lines and curves with the rigging knife's flat blade.

Then he had spread out the red and gold national flag like a mat in front of the main cabin door and put the plank on top of it – *his* side up.

He stepped back and looked at his installation. Okay, it definitely wasn't as funny as when Maggi had painted jaws on Flint's shark-boat but it was the best he could do for now. Whoever'd cut the signal halliards, put all these padlocks on the doors and daubed the threatening notices needed to lighten up a bit. Get more fun out of life. Make a few friends.

Then he'd picked up the 'U' flag and the shredded gold dragon and scrambled down into *Lively Lady*. Shoved the flags into his bosun's bag, hoisted the dinghy's jib and let the flood tide and the evening breeze waft him easily back to the lock. The gates were standing open and the man in the office waved at him as he rowed through. The marina was beginning to feel positively home-like.

Or it would have done, if he hadn't happened to glimpse *Snow Goose* high out of the water like a tall, white, wounded bird.

"Has Gold Dragon said where you're all going to live?" asked Anna, bringing him back to the present with a jolt.

He knew that the only reason she wanted to know about Great Aunt Ellen's plans was because she needed somewhere she could come and use her computer. Even before he'd met her she'd been searching missing persons' websites and asking careful questions hoping to find some information about her mother. She'd assembled her own computer in school DT club, but at the moment she couldn't use it. Her carers, Gerald and Rev. Wendy, had found it and there'd been a big, totally unnecessary, row. They still didn't know that she'd been using it to surf the internet.

Anna had asked Mr McMullen, the DT teacher, to store her computer in his department. She was terrified of anyone

checking its memory and discovering which sites she'd been visiting. The machine was incredibly slow and she'd only used dial-up but "Some of the best sites are a bit 18-plussy," she'd told Donny. "I couldn't encrypt. Didn't have the memory. If someone like Flint or Toxic found out where I'd been searching ..."

"Well, has she?" Anna asked again. "Is she going to rent somewhere? Or can she buy?" She just about managed to look at him this time. Then she pressed 'save' and wrote something on her scribble pad.

Donny glanced over. Another web address. Gold Dragon hadn't said anything about houses. But he hadn't asked her. To be honest he hadn't even thought about it.

What to say?

"Maybe she thinks she ought to wait until after the SS meeting. I'm still officially in Wendy and Gerald's care, remember, and they only got Mum out of that hospital by pretending she'd be living hygienically at the vicarage as well as me."

Anna smiled. (First time that lunch-break.) "It was such a great moment! When Rev. Wendy told us that she'd told the SS that humungous lie."

"You could have sunk me in a baling pan, as Xanth might say I'm feeling really bad about the Ribieros. Did ... did Xanth or Maggi say anything on the bus this morning? About ... *Snow Goose?*"

Anna stared back at her screen again. Pressed her lips together as if she was trying to keep something trapped inside. "Not really. They told me what had happened. Um, how is your mum?" It sounded like a polite enquiry. Not as if she cared.

"Dunno. Bit obsessive-compulsive. She keeps on trying to

undo things. I only just stopped her pushing us off again this morning. I think Maggi was right. She's sort of fixated on escape. She wants us all to leave. Says we're surrounded by snatchers and crooked tongues."

"Do you think she should have stayed in the hospital?"

"Course not! It's the hospital that's made her like this. All I need to figure out is how to help her stop. She could get us into so much trouble. Especially if she starts casting off anyone else's boat. Gold Dragon's going to have to watch her all day while I'm here. There are some really expensive yachts in that marina, you know."

"Boats, boats, boats!" said Anna, standing up suddenly. "That's all any of you ever talk about. Don't you realise that I've used practically the whole of this lunch-break listening to you talk about you and your family and *boats*? This is the only chance all day I have to get on the Internet and you've ... stolen it!" There were red splodges on her cheeks and the words came bursting out. "I *wasn't* talking about boats when we were on the bus this morning – or I was trying not to! I was asking Maggi if I could maybe go round hers this weekend and use their computer. I wouldn't have gone on any of the dodgy sites. But no, they're going sailing all weekend. Sailing! There's some dinghy racing championship and that's going to take them all their time. Both days! Even though Xanth's got GCSE coursework." Her fingers were shaking as she logged herself off. "I hate boats! I hate sailing! I need to get *my* mother back. Just as much as you needed to get yours. More, in fact. There's the kids as well as me. Luke and Liam and Vicky – remember? You might *try* to give them a thought, if you've any water-free space in your head. Which I doubt. I know

I was getting closer. I know I was. So what if Flint ripped up that silly dragon flag? I wish I'd never wasted my time making it."

The librarian had got up from her desk and was coming over to tell them to be quiet but Anna had closed down and was walking to the bag-park.

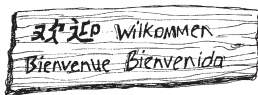
Donny hurried after her. Her head was turned away from him and she missed the first time she tried to swipe her card through the monitoring system.

He guessed she might cry but he didn't care. As soon as they reached the corridor he grabbed her arm and made her stop. "What do you mean, getting closer? Have you made contact with your mum?"

She took a deep breath, dashed a fist across her eyes and seemed to will herself to calm down. "No. I haven't." Every word was crisp and vehement. "I would have told you that. Even when you were going on and on about your bloody sailing. But I've discovered there's someone else who's looking for her too."

"How? Who?"

"I don't know. I met him in one of the places that I shouldn't visit. I'm sure he's a man and I think he's seriously old. He was asking for 'Lottie' – that's her real name! So I have to find out more about him, without him finding out anything at all about me. It's not particularly easy. Especially when I only have forty minutes a day in a firewalled secondary school library. And then you come along and waste it talking about BOATS!"



CHAPTER FOUR

Just Formalities

Friday 29 September, morning

Anna certainly knew how to get her point across. After she'd finished chewing him up in the corridor that day, she'd spat him out with an ultimatum:

"If you get me un-supervised, un-filtered Internet access, I'll tell you about this man – if there's anything to tell. I might even tell you a bit about my mum. Until then it'd be a waste of my time. And you'd be another person who might leak."

She hadn't spoken to him since.

Donny was thinking about Anna as he sat in the back of Sandra's car being driven to the SS meeting. It was in Colchester, maybe about forty minutes from Shotley. Great Aunt Ellen was in the front and Sandra was doing her kindly best to make the journey interesting for someone who hadn't been in England for the last fifty years. Skye was in the back with Donny. She couldn't hear and he wasn't listening.

He still hadn't any idea where Gold Dragon was planning for them to live and nothing she'd said had given him any clues. Until then he didn't see what he could do to help. They didn't have Internet on *Strong Winds*. If nothing was said in the meeting about houses, then he'd have to ask straight out on the journey back.

Sandra kept insisting that this meeting was purely a formality.

She told him that he didn't have to come but Donny wasn't taking any chances. If this was such a formality why did anyone have to go? Why were they bothering to have a meeting at all? There must be other things they could be doing.

His tutor, Mr McMullen, had said that he should insist on his right to be present at meetings but it wasn't always that easy. Anna had been in the system longer. She knew that they didn't even invite you if they thought you had an 'attitude problem' or their decisions might 'upset' you. Then it was Professionals only.

Statutory Services Care Assessment Meetings, Anna had said they were called. SSCAMs – scams! They'd had a bit of a laugh checking out the different acronyms: Statutory Services Care Review and Assessment for Professionals – SSCRAP or without the SS it just spelled CRAP. He couldn't remember what this one was called. There was Review in it somewhere, he thought.

He'd got to find some way of fixing up their friendship again. Okay so he had an attitude problem but, well, so did she.

Donny squeezed his mother's hand. If anyone should have been allowed to stay behind it should have been her. But they couldn't have left her on *Strong Winds* on her own and Sandra had said that the whole point of the meeting was to recognise officially that Donny's situation had changed: his great-aunt had arrived, his mother was out of hospital. He wasn't on his own any more so he could come off the SS register. That would be a result!

This looked like a town. Time he tuned back into Sandra.

"There'll be a chairperson who'll explain everything and make sure you're comfortable with the procedures. They'll try to make

everything as informal as possible. I'm not entirely sure who else will be there. Your tutor said he'd be teaching so he didn't want to come unless it was urgent. I told him it was okay because we're just signing you off. Mr Ribiero had a theatre list that he couldn't reschedule but Mrs Ribiero said she'd be attending as your supporter."

"Maybe Flint won't bother coming either," thought Donny, with a sudden surge of optimism.

But the first people they saw as they arrived at the big, slab-sided SS building were the Gruesome Twosome, Flint and Toxic. It wasn't surprising that they enjoyed each other's company. He was a massive bully: she was twisted and clever and liked watching children get hurt. Donny and Anna were certain that they had something sinister going on behind their official disguises. Something that allowed him to own his million pound shark-boat stuffed with state-of-the-art equipment and her to indulge her taste for designer outfits and multiple pairs of seriously expensive shoes.

What was worrying was that the man walking in between them turned out to be the Committee Chairperson. They were coming out of the 'No Admittance to the Public' area and all three were smiling broadly as if they'd had a jolly good chat and were absolutely the best of friends.

Donny's heart sank.

Then Great Aunt Ellen set off the metal-detector alarm.

Sandra had led them to the reception desk where some woman was distributing visitor badges from behind floor-to-ceiling toughened glass. As soon as Gold Dragon stepped forward, a

siren sounded and red lights began to flash.

Everyone turned to stare at her. Flint took several giant strides forward and positioned himself dramatically between the octogenarian and the receptionist – legs apart and arms wide – as if to shield the latter from violent attack.

Great Aunt Ellen looked puzzled for a moment. Then she half smiled and raised her hook. “Is this the problem?”

“No, madam,” Flint lunged towards her. “This is.”

Gold Dragon was wearing her shore-going togs: navy-blue jacket and trousers with a politely formal cream silk shirt. She’d even twisted her long straight plait into a bun. Unfortunately she’d forgotten to leave off her sailor’s leather pouch, with a set of tools for emergency repairs. He’d watched her using them that day on *Snow Goose*.

Flint pulled out her broad-bladed knife, leapt back and held it up for all to see.

Denise Tune gasped in well-faked shock. A *knife!*

“Oh, you don’t have to worry about that,” Great Aunt Ellen explained. “It’s old. The whole set’s old. I wear it all the time. Sleep with it sometimes. I’d have left it on board if I’d thought.” She unbuckled the belt and pouch and stepped around Flint towards the sealed-off desk. “Why don’t you take care of my tools while we’re here?” she asked the receptionist. “I didn’t realise you people were so jumpy. I’m a sailor, not an international terrorist, you know!”

If she was trying to help everyone relax it didn’t work.

The siren and the flashing light were switched off. Then a man in security guard’s uniform came unsmilingly out from behind the reception area with a clear plastic bag. He took the equipment

without a word and placed it in the bag as if ready to be used in evidence.

Flint did not hand over the knife. Instead he reached into his black briefcase and extracted a padded zip-lock into which he sealed it with exaggerated care. Then he brought out a triplicate pad, wrote Confiscation of Offensive Weapon, filled in the date and place and passed it to Great Aunt Ellen for signature.

“This item will be available for reclaim at your local police station after not less than three working days, to allow for processing,” Flint intoned. “It may be returned to you on presentation of a certificate of occupational need signed by your employer or other suitably qualified professional person.”

Gold Dragon stared at him as if he were a Wellington boot dragged out on the end of a salmon line. Then she extended her hook and scratched a mark that crumpled and tore the top leaves of Flint’s pad.

“Sorry,” she said, unconvincingly. “I’ve never quite managed to get the hang of writing no-handed.”

The fat policemen flushed crimson around his stubbly jowls but Donny noticed the brief and satisfied nod that he directed at Toxic Tune over the head of the Chairperson. He didn’t like the look of it.

Skye was also watching this strange scene. “These are crooked tongues,” she signed. Then she put her arm around Donny’s shoulders to give him a quick hug. It was strange. They’d only been separated for a few weeks but her arm seemed to reach him at a slightly different angle. He’d grown taller since he’d been down here.

This was good but kind of awkward. Great Aunt Ellen hadn’t

been able to persuade the people at the car pound to let them take the camper-van away and get all their stuff out. Apparently there were still problems about the insurance and the MOT and finding Skye's driving licence. Plus a fine and something called an impoundment fee. So Sandra had gone there for them and picked up a couple of bags of clothes. That morning Donny had climbed grumpily into his old best jeans – only to find that they were now half way up his ankles and decidedly tight around the waistband. Considering how many meals he'd missed recently, that didn't seem fair.

He felt even more irritated when Sandra said that the SS would be wanting him to have another height and weight check before they signed him off. He didn't see why they should take any credit for him having a growth spurt over the time he'd been on their register.

Skye had also got fresh clothes from the van and Donny had persuaded her to wear a plain dark shawl over her long dress instead of one of Granny's man-size home-knitted sweaters. She'd washed her hair and allowed Donny to braid it but she hadn't wanted him to twist in any of the coloured ribbons that she'd used to love.

Donny could feel his mum trembling slightly as she held him close. This seemed to go on all the time now. She was taking about six pills a day because the new doctor said it would be dangerous to come off medication all at once. They were anti-depressants but the doctor kept calling them her 'happy pills'. Donny thought he was a complete idiot.

After Flint had shut the knife into his case, and done something ostentatiously complex with the combination locks, Toxic glared at

the Chairperson. He cleared his throat and looked a bit shifty; then said that everyone needed to come straight to Room M1. He said there were some matters of procedure he needed to run past them.

Run straight over them more like. Leaving Donny, Skye and Gold Dragon spluttering and splintered in his wake.

Room M1 was a large room with a huge table. They found themselves at one end of it, sitting opposite the line of the Professionals like prisoners in the dock. Sandra changed places to be near them. Someone, who she introduced as the Gallister High School nurse, moved with her. The rest stayed solidly where they were. Flint and Toxic plonked themselves either side of the Chairperson as if they were his minders.

There was a secretary taking notes and a small Asian-looking man in a suit and two other women who were not introduced and who never spoke. Their function seemed to be to nod at everything the Chairperson said and to glare disapprovingly at the misfits opposite. There was no Mr McMullen, no June Ribiero, no Rev. Wendy even.

First the Chairperson thanked everyone for coming – his cheesy grin flashed from side to side at Flint and Toxic and the support team and somehow fizzled out when it reached Skye, Donny and Great Aunt Ellen. Then he got his mouth full of words and announced that this inter-agency meeting had originally been convened to enable the Statutory Services to be discharged of the responsibility of accommodating John Walker, aged thirteen, a young person discovered homeless.

'Originally convened?' thought Donny. What does he mean by 'originally'?

The Chairperson gave Donny a patronising smile to show what a nice kinda guy he was. “Hi John, I’m Tony, by the way. I’m called a Service Manager but you don’t need to worry about that. Good to meet you, John.”

“Thanks. Actually I’m called Donny, not John. I’m fourteen now not thirteen and I wouldn’t have been homeless if the police hadn’t grabbed my mum and taken our van away.”

“Happy birthday to you then ... But you know, er, Donny, in this part of the world we think our young people should be looking to live in something, you know, a bit better than a van. We’re signed up to delivering a society where Every Child can have high material expectations.”

Tony tried another grin but it was Denise Tune’s lip-sticked leer that bothered Donny. Maybe he’d best shut up.

Tony carried on. “As most of you know there was a certain amount of orchestrated media attention when Miss Walker – hello Miss Walker!” He gave Gold Dragon a flirtatious little wave.

(Don’t wait for her to wave back because she isn’t going to, thought Donny.)

“When Miss Walker arrived in our country publicly announcing that she was going to take charge of the boy.” Tony’s voice grew stern. “Miss Walker has, I understand, enjoyed a certain measure of celebrity in the past and perhaps she assumed that this would be sufficient to smooth her through the safeguards of our Caring System ...”

“I didn’t give it a thought. Your system, I mean. I’m Donny’s great-aunt. My sister died so I came to take her place. They’re my family: where’s your problem?” She gave her sudden, rippled smile to Skye and Donny. “Besides, I’ve seen a bit of weather now.

I reckoned it was about time I found someone to raft up with.”

It was obvious to Donny that she was trying not to sound as if she was taking them out of duty, but she’d said the wrong thing as far as Tony was concerned. His cheesiness turned positively rancid.

“Ah, that delicate matter of a lady’s age ... So you’re intending to take up residence here? Make use of our Health Service, perhaps? But Miss Walker – or may I call you Ellen? – I don’t believe you hold a current British passport?”

“No, no and no! From what I’ve seen of your health service so far I wouldn’t touch it with a full-length quant.” She glanced at Donny to make sure he was signing for Skye. “No, I’m not sure exactly where we’re going to fetch up. I think my niece needs to take some time to get to know me first. And no, I don’t have a British passport. Handed it back years ago. I’m an Australian citizen. My mother was Australian ... though she raised five children here.” She paused for a moment, then she fixed Tony hard with her bright blue eyes. “One final negative – I certainly do not give permission for you to call me Ellen!”

“Thanks for the family history, Miss Walker,” Tony wasn’t trying to sound nice any more. “Though I’m afraid it’s irrelevant. My point is that we have Procedures for Inter-country Adoption and we can’t simply set those aside when someone arrives at our shores with the TV cameras running. You’ll need to return to Australia and make your initial application there. And, you know, Miss Walker, I fear you’ll find that your age is against you. In our country we ask that our prospective parents should not have reached retirement age before the young person ceases full-time education. It can be a tiring business raising a youngster.”

Gold Dragon looked surprised. “Eh? You can’t have been listening, Mr Chairman. I’m not planning to adopt Donny. He has a mother. She’s here. Look.”

“Ah, yes.” There were no fake grins for Skye. “Ms Skye Walker ... who can give the support agencies no information about the father of her child. Ms Skye Walker ... who has herself required intensive support from the day she was born and whose most recent release from hospital was not conducted precisely according to the provisions of the Mental Health Act. You know, Miss Walker, it should have been you who signed those discharge forms. Not some misguided foster-carer.”

So Rev. Wendy was in trouble. Maybe that was why she wasn’t here?

Gold Dragon shrugged. “I wasn’t asked to sign any forms. I’d have gone over as soon as I found where she was. I guess I’d have managed to use my good hand if I were signing for my niece.”

There wasn’t a cat’s-paw of amusement.

Tony carried on as if he was a prosecuting lawyer on prime-time TV. “But Miss Walker, events that next day surely confirm that your niece would have been better staying where she was? In Hospital where she was being Professionally treated and was prevented from endangering herself, or the public, or other people’s property.”

Donny saw that there were newspapers at Tony’s end of the long table. A local evening paper with photos of the wrecked *Snow Goose* and Great Aunt Ellen looking old and inadequate. That must have been when she was saying that she wasn’t as quick as Edith when it came to dishing out dry clothes. There weren’t any photos of him but there were plenty of Skye. Not

Skye looking terrified and panicking but Skye looking deranged and ... dangerous.

The secretary handed them out like they were class worksheets. Toxic tutted. Flint hrrmphed. Tony looked smug.

Gold Dragon got angry. “Listen here, hobo, I don’t see you as a marine insurance assessor, I don’t see you as a doctor. I’m having some trouble even seeing you as a human being. You say you have a responsibility for accommodating Donny? Good. Now get this into your log book: I intend to share my home with my family for as long as they want to share it with me. Sleep easy, Mr Chairman, your problem’s solved.”

“Not quite ...” Toxic cut in as if she’d been waiting for this moment. “Denise Tune, Educational Welfare in a Multi-Agency Context, Every Child Matters, Lead Worker.”

Donny’s hands froze. He couldn’t sign that lot to Skye. Couldn’t even make jokes from it. He’d forgotten how sick Toxic’s sugar-coated voice made him feel.

“Aim tasked with assessment of Appropriateness and Risk Factors. Tell me, Miss Walker, where exactly are you living?”

“On board my boat, *Strong Winds*.”

“And is ... *Strong Wains* ... a British boat?”

“No, she was built in ... Southern China and flies the Australian flag.”

Did Great Aunt Ellen hesitate? Maybe she was surprised to find someone like Toxic taking an interest in her boat.

The small man raised a finger as if he had a question to ask. Toxic tipped her head to one side. Her caring side.

“You’ve had quite a long day, Miss Walker. Research suggests that, in the older person, even mild fatigue may exert a negative

influence on the ability to retrieve fact. Especially in a context of personal disorientation. Ai don't expect you're able to recall more precisely where your vessel originated?"

"I'm not ga-ga yet, Ms ... er. *Strong Winds* was built in Bias Bay."

That meant something to the small man. Looking at him, he was probably Chinese so maybe this Bias Bay was his hometown.

Toxic carried on working through her phoney check-list.

"Has *Strong Winds* a permanent postal address?"

"Yes. When we're in Shanghai."

"Ai see ... And what steps have you taken towards purchasing some suitable Property in our area?"

"Property? You mean ... a house?"

Toxic tilted her head the other way. She looked pitying this time.

"Yes, Miss Walker, a house. A place where people live. Normal people, that is. Not *un-invited* travellers causing a public nuisance in their *un-insured* vains. Or bringing in their Chinese junks, which run amok and wreak devastation to an English Yacht."

She gestured towards her own copy of the newspaper. Picked it up in her long-taloned fingers, smiled without cracking her make-up.

Great Aunt Ellen ignored the taunts. She was still playing it straight: still trying to explain her perfectly reasonable intentions to these strangely hostile people. Donny remembered how he had felt when he first hit the System. He felt sorry for her. But he wanted her to give an answer to this question – even more than Toxic did.

"I haven't any plans at all to buy a house. I've not owned a house in my entire life. I'm a sailor. But I'm ready to drop anchor for a while, see how we rub along. If Donny's happy with this school he's at, I thought maybe we might make Harwich our home port."

"Ai see," Toxic repeated. "Ai see that you have no intention of buying a Property. You intend to remain an itinerant traipsing around in your Chinese boat ... sorry, your Chinese *junk*. And you're seriously proposing this *junk* as suitable accommodation for a family! Has it been ... quarantined?"

Gold Dragon's eyes grew hard. Her voice was steely. "Doesn't need it. Paperwork sorted in Rotterdam. EU country. *Strong Winds* is my *home*, Ms ... er. The place where I've lived the last fifty years. She's sound and she's seaworthy. She'll last my niece and great-nephew another half century if they find they like the life."

Of course, thought Donny. Of course Gold Dragon hadn't been planning to buy a house! How could he have thought it? The moment he seriously tried imagining her piratical figure walking sedately up a garden path to go ping-pong on a front-door bell, he knew he'd been living in Neverland.

He didn't mind – a home on board *Strong Winds* sounded great to him. Could be a bit tricky till Skye learned the ropes – at least how not to *untie* them all of the time. But Internet access, telephone lines ... how was he going to break this to Anna? He'd promised to help her in her quest: Anna never forgot promises.

"John may consider your old junk an improvement on his mother's van," Toxic sneered. "But I doubt anyone else will share his view."

“Personally I think living on a boat sounds rather romantic,” said Sandra.

Tony turned on her like a spitting cobra. “As your manager, Sandra, I have to remind you that this is a Professionals’ meeting. We don’t speak *personally* here.”

Sandra shut up.

Tony carried on. He was looking mainly at his secretary who was taking the minutes. “Clearly we need to Professionally assess whether the proposed accommodation meets our minimum standards criteria. Separate bathroom facilities, his own bedroom, study and recreation areas – the things we caring parents Want for our children. But, you know, what we all have to think about first is the Risk to John.”

“Risk, what risk? *Strong Winds* is in Shotley marina, not the South Atlantic!”

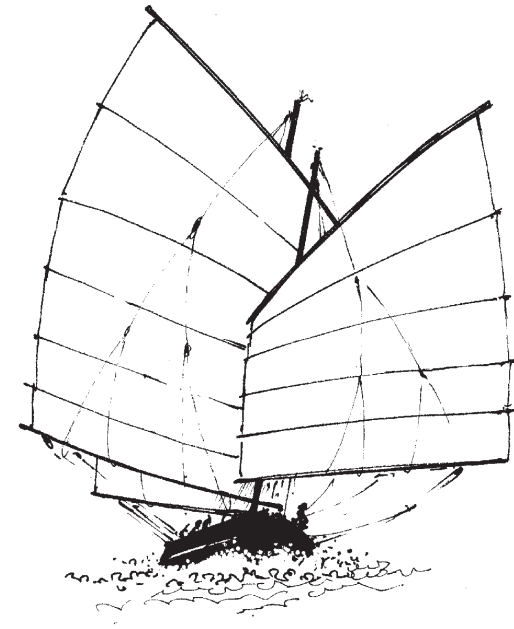
“The risk, Miss Walker, of Significant Harm. I do not believe that your niece is a fit person to be entrusted with parental responsibility for this troubled young person. You have ruled yourself out as a potential adopter and have failed to put forward any credible alternative. I therefore declare this Statutory Services Care Review & Assessment Meeting closed.”

Donny was too shocked to work it out and Tony carried right on. “I am convening an immediate Child Protection Conference and I move that John be accommodated in one of our secure Units. As previously arranged.”

One of the silent women removed the cling-film from a plate of home-baked cookies and placed it before Tony like a votive offering: the other draped a napkin over her arm and fetched the

cafetière. Then she looked around the table and selected seven bone china cups.

Donny did a count-up: none for him and Skye and Great Aunt Ellen, obviously. None for Sandra and the school nurse either, he guessed.



CHAPTER FIVE

S.S.C.R.A.M.

Friday 29 September, afternoon

Tony's Conference didn't last long. It was almost funny when Donny looked back. Except it wasn't funny in the least. It was about as hilarious as running your dinghy onto a submerged rock on the first day of a holiday.

Tony started out by reminding them all that the rules for the Conference allowed any participant who felt intimidated by anyone else in the room to ask for that person to be removed.

Gold Dragon had got herself together now. "That's okay, Bunter," she said to Flint. "You're not bothering us. But you can take yourself off if you like."

"No," said Tony smoothly. "You misunderstand. Inspector Flint has already advised me that he is not comfortable with you remaining in here, Miss Walker. Possession of an Offensive Weapon. I have to ask you to leave. There's a chair outside."

Gold Dragon didn't move.

"Aim additionally suggesting that John's presence is no longer Appropriate," smiled Toxic. "Research suggests that young males in his situation lack the emotional maturity to accept the judgement of Professionals."

"We get stroppy when we're pushed about, you mean?"

Her smile became even wider and more wolfish but Tony wasn't going to use up any more charm from his limited supplies. "Get up and get your great-aunt out, John. There may

be a chair in the foyer for you as well."

"Leave my mum on her own with you lot? I don't *think* so."

Donny knew that Skye would be picking up fast on the body language. Sometimes she was so quick that he hardly had to bother signing but she wasn't well now and he remembered what Joshua had said about disorientation. He leaned close to her and began explaining in a way she'd understand.

"You were right, Mum. They're all of them crooked tongues. And snatchers. We're in enemy territory and it isn't looking good. We three have to stick together if we're going to get out of here alive."

He had no actual idea what they were going to do. Gold Dragon had hooked herself to the back of her chair, daring them to force her out. Donny wondered whether he should hang onto the table leg or punch someone. The problem with the second option was being spoilt for choice.

Skye stood up, tall and stately. Then she made her sign of peace to everyone around the table. It was a bit like a bishop's blessing. Hand held high, she backed carefully out of the double doors.

Donny and Great Aunt Ellen followed.

Gold Dragon scowled; Donny managed a quick thumbs-up all round. As he passed the secretary's seat he caught sight of her agenda paper – Statutory Services Care Review & Assessment Meeting. S.S.C.R.A.M – scam! Too right, they were out of here!

Skye turned away and walked through the foyer, out into the street. Gold Dragon used her hook to push the visitor's badge under the screen to the receptionist.

"I'll have my belt and pouch now," she said, in the sort of voice that you didn't argue with.

Donny, meanwhile, had an irresistible, straight-to-video idea.

He saw that there were indeed two solid, high-backed chairs positioned outside the meeting room. Perhaps people were always being chucked out of Tony's Conferences and had to wait there in disgrace while the Professionals rearranged their lives.

The double doors of M1 opened outwards. Donny was the last of his family to leave so he shut the doors behind him, grabbed the nearest chair and stuck it neatly under both handles.

It might have been made for the job.

The receptionist yelled at him but she was trapped behind her security screen. Donny gave her a smile that he tried hard to make as cheesy as Tony's. Then he was out of there and legging it along the pavement to catch up with the others.

The street curved sharply away and led them into a shopping area. Skye took them down a side lane; through an arcade and back to the bookshop that she and Donny had visited when they had first arrived in Essex.

The Goth with black clothes, purple hair and a nose stud recognised them at once. She asked Donny whether his mum had enjoyed *Swallows and Amazons*.

"Oh, er, she was buying it for me." Donny didn't usually tell people that his mum couldn't read words.

"So what did you think of it?"

"Yeah. It was cool." Maybe this wasn't the way to describe a book that had helped to change his life but ... where to start?

Great Aunt Ellen asked whether the shop stocked any of the other volumes in the series. She bought *Swallowdale*, *Winter Holiday* and *Missee Lee*.

"These are the ones that happened next in time," she said,

showing Donny the first two, "but *Missee Lee's* always been my favourite. I thought of her as my pirate godmother. She had three islands and a patch of sea. If you decide to live full time on *Strong Winds*, you ought to read her story."

"I don't ever plan to live anywhere else," he said fervently. Then he remembered *Sailing*, the book that had been her brother Greg's most treasured possession. He'd written a list in the front of all the boats he'd ever captained. "At least, I plan to live on *Strong Winds* and sail *Lively Lady* until I'm old enough to have a ship of my own," he amended.

Gold Dragon added a local bus timetable to her pile of purchases and they left the bookshop. There was enough money left for some filled baguettes, which they ate on their slow bus journey back to Shotley.

The small man did not stay for the talking that followed the family's escape. It was time he returned to his base. They would need him now to keep lookout on the harbour. They could not have Hai Lóng staying here.

When the small man discovered the welcome mat he was very angry. This was defiance. Someone would suffer. He kicked the plank aside and went below.

"There's sure to be someone waiting," said Donny, as they walked down the steep hill towards the River Stour. He remembered, only too well, how Flint liked to hunker down in his police car until his victim came strolling innocently within range. Then he'd be out and snatching his prey, ruthless as a conger eel in a rock pool.

Donny was right: there was someone. But it wasn't the person he'd expected.

Rev. Wendy was sitting in *Strong Winds'* cockpit. She had a slim black laptop perched on the downhill slope of her knees and was holding it rather awkwardly with one hand while she tried to make notes with the other.

"For Sunday's sermon," she explained, closing the machine with obvious relief. "I often need to make changes. It's having so many different parishes. What suits one is almost certain to upset the rest."

None of them knew what to say to that. Skye was looking speculatively at the aft mooring line. She scooped her long skirt into one hand and climbed aboard, stationing herself strategically close to the samson post where the end of the warp was knotted. Donny stayed on the pontoon. He didn't know whom he trusted least: his mother or his former foster-carer.

Rev. Wendy slipped the laptop into its case and came ashore to join him.

"Beg Nimblefingers to hold off for few moments," Gold Dragon said to Donny. "She'll get her chance soon enough but I need to pay our harbour dues. We can't afford to stay here any longer – even if we wanted to." She nodded to Wendy and set off to the watchtower beside the lock.

"Um, hello," said Donny, after an awkward pause. "Why are you here?"

"To offer my assistance ..."

He didn't give her a chance. "Thanks but no thanks," he said. "I've had your assistance before, remember. You do what Toxic Tune tells you. That's probably why you didn't bother turning

up at the meeting." He was surprised how much he'd minded about that: not one of their so-called friends showing up. Typical adults! His friends would have come – if they weren't all locked away in school. "You knew you'd get your orders afterwards. I expect you've come to drive me off to some SS boot camp. Well, I'm not going."

Rev. Wendy sighed. "I understand your anger," she said. "I want you to know that I did attend the meeting. So did Mrs Ribiero. But we both attended in the wrong town. We went to Ipswich, not Colchester. Unfortunately there'd been some mistake in both our letters."

"Everyone else got there," said Donny. "Flint and Toxic and a bloke called Tony, who looked like a lawyer, and his posse of hags and enforcers. We all got there. Wish we hadn't."

"Yes. The mistake was only in our letters. They were sent from Denise Tune's personal office. No-one could quite explain it."

"You missed a treat. All the sort of stuff you really like – talking in gobbledygook; risk-assessing anything fun; slagging-off Skye 'cos she can't answer back; forgetting that the only thing that matters is people loving each other. Not whether they have the right size bathroom and five portions of veg for breakfast."

Donny'd been boiling up to let rip at someone. In the absence of the real villains Rev. Wendy was the perfect target. She just stood there in her drab clothes and dog collar taking it. Her cheeks got a bit blotchy in the wind and she held her laptop closer to her thin chest.

Donny found quite a few more things that he wanted to say. He forgot he should have been keeping watch on Skye and he didn't notice that his great-aunt was back already from the marina