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Opening extract from  
**Ghosting Home**

Written by  
**Julia Jones**

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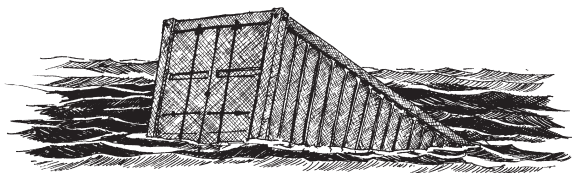


# Ghosting Home

Julia Jones

VOLUME THREE  
OF THE *Strong Winds* TRILOGY

Illustrated by Claudia Myatt



**GOLDEN DUCK**

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# People you may have met already...

## From *The Salt-Stained Book*

|   |   |
|---|---|
| <i>Greg and Ned Palmer</i>                    | two brothers who have died during WWII.   |
| <i>Donny Walker</i>                           | christened John by his Granny, nicknamed Sinbad by his great-aunt.                                    |
| <i>Skye Walker</i>                            | Donny's mother, nicknamed Nimblefingers.  |
| <i>Edith Walker</i>                           | (formerly Palmer) Donny's assumed Granny, aka Old Nokomis.  |
| <i>Ellen Walker</i>                           | (formerly Palmer) Donny's great-aunt, aka Gold Dragon or Polly Lee.                                   |
| <i>Inspector Jake Flint</i>                   | the fat policeman. Not a nice person.   |
| <i>Denise 'Toxic' Tune</i>                    | supposed to do Welfare, actually it's Mal-fare. She makes bad worse.                                  |
| <i>Rev Wendy</i>                              | vicar of six parishes, foster-carer.  |
| <i>Gerald</i>                                 | Rev Wendy's husband, foster-carer.  |
| <i>Anna Livesey</i>                           | being looked after by Wendy and Gerald at Erewhon Parva vicarage. In year 9 at Gallister High School. |
| <i>Luke and Liam Whiting</i>                  | Anna's stepbrothers, being looked after by Wendy and Gerald at Erewhon Parva vicarage.                |
| <i>Vicky Whiting</i>                          | child of Anna's mother and Luke and Liam's father, being looked after by Wendy and Gerald.            |
| <i>Mr McMullen</i>                            | Design Technology teacher at Gallister High School and Donny's form tutor                             |
| <i>Joshua, June, Xanthe and Maggi Ribiero</i> | a neurosurgeon, a magistrate and their two daughters. Both at Gallister High School.                  |
| <i>Sandra</i>                                 | a social worker.  |
| <i>Mrs Everson</i>                            | lives in Swallow's End, a cottage down river from Pin Mill.   |
| <i>Mrs Everson's daughter</i>                 | owns a rowing dinghy called the <i>Margery</i> .  |

### **From A Ravelled Flag**

All the characters from *The Salt-Stained Book* plus:

|                              |   |
|------------------------------|---|
| <i>The Tiger</i>             | a mysterious and violent character, frequently disguised.   |
| <i>Creepy Tony</i>           | a Social Services line-manager.   |
| <i>Hawkins</i>               | a canary.   |
| <i>Ai Qin</i>                | owner of a Chinese restaurant in Lowestoft, the Floating Lotus.   |
| <i>Hoi Fung</i>              | chef at the Floating Lotus.   |
| <i>Eirene Walker</i>         | (formerly Palmer) Skye's mother, aka beautiful Wenonah. Sister of Edith and Ellen, Greg and Ned.  |
| <i>Henry Wadsworth</i>       | an Ojibwa <i>sachem</i> (leader), aka Mudjekewis. Served with Canadian forces in World War II, married to Eirene, father of Skye.             |
| <i>Seraphina Spinks</i>      | deputy head teacher at Gallister High School.   |
| <i>A Chinese Cleaner</i>     |   |
| <i>Professor Callum Reif</i> | aka Oboe. Distinguished wartime scientist and inventor. Anna's great-uncle. Childhood friends with the Palmer family. Could have loved Ellen. |
| <i>Theodora Thorrington</i>  | Cal Reif's sister. A successful novelist. Died rich.  |
| <i>Bill Whiting</i>          | father of Luke, Liam and Vicky. Currently in prison.  |
| <i>Edward</i>                | a lawyer from Cambridge.  |
| <i>Ben Gunn</i>              | a crazy black terrier.  |
| <i>Lottie Livesey</i>        | Anna and Vicky's mother.  |

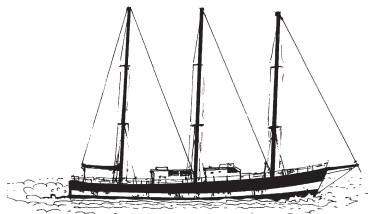
# Boats you may have met already...

*Lively Lady*  
Mirror dinghy loaned to Donny by  
the Ribiero family.



The shark-boat  
Inspector Flint's expensive  
power-boat. As much a bully as he is.

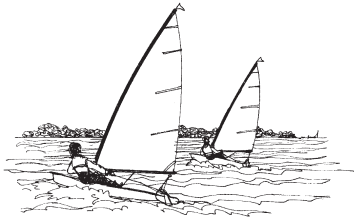
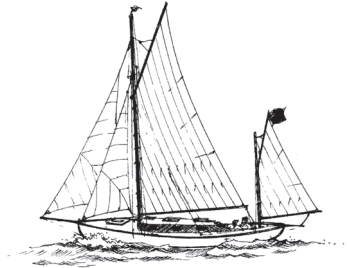
*Margery*  
Sturdily built wooden rowing dinghy  
owned by Mrs Everson's daughter.



The 'Hispaniola'  
Not her real name. Inhabited by the Tiger.

*Snow Goose*

Classic 1920s yawl belonging to the Ribiero family. Described by Joshua Ribiero as 'designed by the hand of God'.



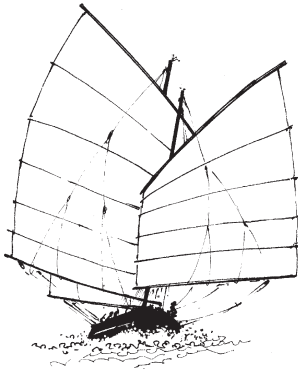
*Spray and Kingfisher*

Two laser dinghies belonging to Xanthe and Maggi Ribiero and named after yachts sailed round the world by Joshua Slocum and Ellen MacArthur.



*The Houdalinqua*

Sea-going canoe built by Henry Wadsworth, Donny's unknown grandfather. Her name means rushing water.

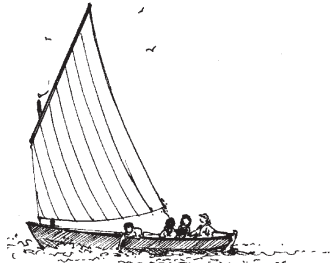


*Vexilla*

A 16' day boat bought by Great Aunt Ellen. Her name means flag or standard.

*Strong Winds*

Built for Gold Dragon in Bias Bay, China.





Rural China, January 2007

*My father left when I was a baby. He went to the city to work for us and my mother stayed to care for me and work with my grandparents in the fields. We are rural people; we have no rights in cities. It is the classification system, the hukou.*

*When I was born my father wanted the best for me. I am the only child. If he went away and worked in the new factories and lived in one room and saved all that he earned, then there would be better food for all of us and extra lessons for me. English lessons. Then one day I could take the gaokao and go to university, if I passed. Then my hukou would change and all my family would have a better life.*

*My father died when I was three years old. My grandfather and my mother went to the city to find out what had happened but no-one was able to explain. He was just another rural worker. He had been strong and healthy when he left this village but he had collapsed. A heart attack, they thought. He didn't have rights to a pension so they didn't give my mother anything, except his ashes to bring home. The factory owner offered my mother a job but she said no. She would stay in the village and help my grandparents and when I was older I would help them too. It had been a mistake to try to change our lives, she thought then.*

*There were no men in our village when I was growing up. There were the old, the young and the women. That's how it got its nickname – the Village of Living Widows.*

*Then the women began to go.*

*Families are very important in China. My mother was unhappy that she could not do more for my grandparents and for me. She worked so hard but farming was changing. My mother and my grandfather began to think that my father had been right. If there was a chance for me to make a good*

life in this new world she would have to go away. She would earn more and it would help us all.

She went when I was seven. But she didn't go to the city, she went across the sea to England, where the ghosts, the gweilao, live. My grandfather gave her all his savings and they borrowed the rest from a moneylender. Then they paid a she-tou, a snakehead, for her journey. It was a long way and very expensive but the she-tou said she would do well in England. Other women had gone. As soon as they'd paid the travel debt they were sending money home to their families. He told her that she'd made a good decision.

It was early in the morning when she left. My grandmother marinated eggs in tea for her to eat on the journey. She packed some rice balls too and small sweet biscuits. No-one said much when she'd gone. My grandparents went to work as usual and I went to school. I promised I would study hard to be ready for our new good life.

I am fourteen now. My mother doesn't ring us any more. I know that she's still in England but she says that phoning will put us at risk. She has had to borrow more money. There is a new gong-tou, a gang-master. I think she's frightened.

My grandfather is dead and my grandmother will live with her cousin. I have made up my mind. I am leaving the Village of Living Widows and I am going to find my mother in the Country of the Ghosts.



## CHAPTER ONE

# Homework

*River Stour, Suffolk, Friday 13 April 2007*

“Your homework this week ...is to draw your dad.” The art teacher at Gallister High School looked round encouragingly at her Year 9 group. “Try and catch him when he’s quite relaxed, maybe watching TV or something. You’ll need a selection of your softer pencils or you could even use charcoal. Men’s faces can display a fascinating range of textures. Sweaty if he’s been working out or jogging. Stubbly at the end of the day or maybe bags under his eyes from a heavy night.”

She paused. Perhaps she noticed how many of the class had shoved their planners back into their bags unopened.

“Oh,” she said. “Maybe not everyone’s dad is there for them right now. Step-dads are fine, uncles, granddads, older brothers. Everyone’s got someone, surely?”

People stood up, put their folders away in the wide, flat drawers, pushed their chairs under the high benches or left them as they were. They shrugged their bags onto their shoulders and turned to leave. She knew she’d made a mistake.

“Look,” she tried again, “If you’re really stuck, find me and we’ll talk it through. I might rent out one of my colleagues – the department could use some extra funding!”

The bell had gone. They ignored her and left.

“And if anyone doesn’t hand it in on time – anyone

at all – I’m setting detentions!” she screeched.

Donny Walker was out of his seat and heading for the door with the rest. Donny liked art. He’d put it on his list for GCSE options. But this was one homework he wouldn’t be doing. Stuff detentions.

“Everyone’s got someone, sure-ly?” That’s what the teacher had said. Tum-ti, tum-ti tum tum, ta ta. Yup, he was a lucky one. He had his family and he had his friends. It was just that none of them happened to be male.

Donny had to work to a Care Plan. It said he must never miss a day of school, must never be late, must always hand his homework in on time and must achieve ‘challenging’ academic targets. Or he risked being taken away from his home.

All the same, as of today, stuff detentions!

This was Friday afternoon. The art department was on the top floor of one of the school’s collection of greyish flat-roofed blocks and, as Donny started down the first of the concrete stairways, he was soon caught up in a stream of chattering, barging students heading out for the weekend.

Donny’s home was *Strong Winds*, a Chinese junk anchored on the Suffolk side of the River Stour. The River Stour was completely beautiful but it did present problems for a boy who absolutely had to arrive for registration at the same time as everyone else – when a west or south-westerly gale was ripping down it, for instance, or when the tide was out, emptying the creeks and leaving flat gleaming expanses of soft mud on either side.

There was no way Donny could explain the school to the river or the river to the school. So he kept an alternative

timetable – the one with tide times and weather conditions – running on auto in his head and sorted his own complex arrangements for fitting it to school time.

If he hadn't got so irritated with that art teacher he wouldn't be rushing now. The tide had been kind to him that morning. It had been a nine am high water so he and *Lively Lady* had come flooding into Gallister Creek at eight with plenty of depth and plenty of time to step ashore, collect his bike, and arrive clean and correct with the rest of his tutor group.

Getting home wasn't going to be so easy. A three pm low water would by now have emptied the twisting channel. Donny could either hang around for a couple of hours until the water returned or he could push the dinghy across the metres of mud that separated him from his floating home, sticking and squelching. He'd get yelled at by Gold Dragon if he brought any of the gluey gunk onto her immaculately clean ship. Maybe he'd alter course and head for the DT block where his tutor, Mr McMullen, would be ending the week in a more leisurely style.

Mr Mac had a snowy beard and beetling white eyebrows. No shortage of texture, Donny thought. Okay, so he wasn't a relation, or exactly a friend but ... he was his tutor, the one adult in this school that Donny trusted. He wouldn't use charcoal; maybe crayon on a tinted paper? He could do a sketch in a DT open department evening. Especially when afternoon tides were getting later ...

“Donald!”

They'd reached the ground floor. Donny took no notice. He put his head down and got ready for the final crush as the stu-

dents surged through the exit doors to freedom.

“Donald! Donald Walker, over here please!”

Donny cursed. He knew that voice. Ms Spinks, one of the school deputy heads, could never be bothered to get his name right. His given name was John, not Donald. It was to do with his great-uncle Gregory who’d wanted to be a character from *Swallows and Amazons*. Donny had never known either of his great-uncles. They’d died in the war. He’d read some of the books though. He had one in his backpack now, *We Didn’t Mean to Go To Sea*. He thought it was probably his favourite.

“Donald! Oh, all right, Donny then, Donny Walker. I can see you perfectly well and you’re to come here at once. Or it’s detention on Monday. And a letter home.”

“Ai’m afraid that doesn’t hold quaithe the terrors that it ought,” cooed a sugar-substitute voice that bought shame on little white pills. “Literacy isn’t a strong feature of John’s family background, is it, de-ah?”

Denise ‘Toxic’ Tune, the person Donny hated most in the entire world (except for her colleague, the fat policeman, Inspector Jake Flint) was grinning with her tombstone teeth and dripping pink gums. She never missed a chance to have a go at his family, usually at his mother, Skye.

Donny’s mum was deaf. Her mum had had rubella when she was just a few weeks pregnant and the baby had suffered brain damage. The birth had been bad too. Skye couldn’t read printed books or speak with her mouth like most people. Instead she spoke with her hands. Donny thought she was poetic but other people didn’t see it.

“Severe Learning Difficulties on the mother’s saide and the

Capacity Challenges of Extreme Old Age,” Toxic smiled at Ms Spinks. “Ai’ve been Monitoring, of course, in my Professional capacity. Assessing, but there’s no co-operation. No Recognition of the Need for Change.”

So she was getting at Gold Dragon too. Donny’s Great Aunt Ellen was over eighty and had a hook instead of one hand but no-one who’d ever seen her at the helm of her beloved *Strong Winds* would dare to speak about Capacity Challenges..

“Donny’s bi-lingual at home. He speaks BSL as well as English. Aren’t we meant to be celebrating that sort of thing? Donny’s tutor says it’s all part of diversity. I think it’s brilliant.”

Anna Livesey had elbowed her way out of the crowd. When Donny had first met Anna, she’d spent most of her time merging into it, risking nothing that might get her noticed. That had all changed now her mum was back.

“And who is this tutor, de-ah?” asked Toxic.

“Mr McMullen. He’s one of the senior teachers – the ones people really listen to,” said Anna, dimpling innocently at Ms Spinks.

Donny didn’t know whether to chuckle or puke. He knew Anna totally despised the deputy head. Not only because she was a slippery liar but because Anna had once heard her say that she didn’t think dates were all that important to the study of history!

“It was during citizenship week. We were being helped to re-think the concept of disability. Wasn’t it something to do with the Government?”

Ms Spinks was looking uncertain but Toxic’s expensively reconstructed smile glared on.

“Mr Mac ...whatsit,” she said, as if she’d got mouthwash under her tongue. “So you expect he’ll be missed when he’s gone? How quaint! Adolescent Insecurity, of course. Ai’m always remaining mai team to Be Aware.”

“What do you mean, gone?”

Apart from Anna and his Allies – Maggi and Xanthe Ribiero – Mr McMullen was the mainstay of Donny’s life at Gallister High.

“Oh de-ah! You didn’t know? Well, if your tutor hasn’t bothered to mention it, Ai mustn’t say another word! Now, if you’ll excuse us, Seraphina, Ai need some S & M with this young man.”

Toxic shoved Donny into a nearby classroom, smirked at Ms Spinks and blanked Anna. He was doomed.

“Support and Monitoring, Friday April 13th 2007, Denise Tune, Statutory Services, Chief Welfare Executive, Entire Area, with John Walker, age 12, no fixed abode.”

Toxic had got her digital recorder out. He knew she could edit whatever he said.

“I’m fourteen, not twelve, and I live on *Strong Winds*.” He said it anyway.

“But Auntie’s boat isn’t a fixed abode is it, de-ah? Which reminds me ... time to give the old junk a Health and Safety check. Tell Auntie Ai’ll be sending some of mai team round tomorrow. They’ll arrive whenever it’s convenient. To them. Ai don’t suppose Auntie’s going anywhere.”

“She often does. She and Mum go sailing in *Vexilla*. You can’t stop them. Anyway, I thought you were meant to contact



Edward, her lawyer, if you wanted permission to come on board.”

Toxic was perched on the edge of a table. Her skirt was hitched up and one leg was sort of waving out in front of her.

She hadn't asked Donny to sit down. He was standing between her and the door with this leg in its shiny flesh-coloured stocking poking towards him like a proboscis.

She gazed at her own ankle, admiringly. Tipped her head on one side. Twiddled her pointed foot and smirked. Her shoe was bizarre. He supposed that meant it was expensive.

“Such a shaimie – Auntie’s lawyer-friend’s away. Fishing. Always does, this taimie of ye-ah. Baltic, somewhere. Northern paike. Impossible to contact and no-one else in his office wants to bother. Ai’ll remaind mai team to fumigate. The old junk’s sure to be mouldy.”

Donny began counting to ten. Couldn't get past two. Had to keep his temper somehow. Tried breathing deeply but got a nose-full of her perfume.

“Now,” said Toxic, pulling out a clipboard and ticking boxes. “How about you? Saime as usual, Ai expect. Unstable background. Lack of Boundaries. No age-appropriate socio-gendered networking – you haven't made friends with any of the boys here, have you? No, Ai thought not.”

Donny planned to go camping with Anna’s young brothers this weekend. He wasn't going to tell her that.

“Laife-taimie absence of male role model.” She completed her form, signed it and made Donny sign too. He'd do anything to get away.

“Oh, good news – er, John.” Her long fingers were busy smoothing the creases from her skin-tight outfit as she teetered

to her feet. “Inspector Flint’s offering a New Initiative for the Fatherless. It’s a boxing club. Ai’m sending some of mai special lads along. Ai’ll tell him you’ve saigned up.”

“But I haven’t,” said Donny. He knew her ‘special lads’. They’d cornered him in school often enough. He wouldn’t mind learning some basic self-defence but he wasn’t going to set himself up as fat Flint’s punch-bag every week.

“You just did!” smirked the Welfare Office. She pushed the signed paper and digi-corder into her alligator-skin briefcase and shut it with a happy snap. “Our Initiative starts Monday. Your attendance is compulsory. Ai’ve made it an additional part of your Care Plan – which you’ve saigned. Unless you’ve some suitable alternative? No, I thought not. Research agrees: young boys need Father Figures and mai colleague’s delighted to be on your case!”

Then she was gone, leaving her sick smell behind.

Anna would have left by now. She still caught the school bus to Erewhon Parva vicarage, though she wouldn’t for much longer. As soon as she’d inherited all that money from her grandmother, she’d announced that she was going to take some scary scholarship exam to a top girls’ boarding school. She’d be moving house as well. All her family were going to live in Bawdsey Manor. It looked well posh. And Xanthe was taking her GCSEs and wasn’t sure about sixth form. Said she might change schools to do the IB. So there’d only be him and Maggi left.

He didn’t have the heart to call in at the DT block to ask Mr Mac if it was true that he was leaving. Toxic had been so sure and Spinksy hadn’t denied it. He supposed it wasn’t any of his

business. Mr Mac had made him feel that he mattered. Obviously he didn't.

Donny crammed his bike into the slot behind the Water Board hut at the top of Gallister Creek. He couldn't go to Flint's Boxing for the Fatherless. He just couldn't. And Edward was going to be away for three weeks! They must have known that. Three weeks of abuse by the fat policeman and his goons. Starting on Monday. Only three days away. Would Luke and Liam have to go? Their dad was in gaol. Did he still count?

No water in the creek yet.

Donny didn't usually find it too much of a hardship to wait for the tide. There was a big old curlew who stalked the mud getting irritable and a pair of oystercatchers who didn't even bother flying up when the Mirror dinghy *Lively Lady* grounded near their marshy nest. They were domestic and devoted and funny. Donny plonked himself on a hump of salting. He wondered whether to chuck a stone at them.

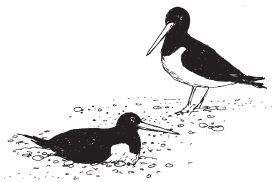
Everyone had to have a Father Figure, did they? Well, where was his? He knew as much about his dad as if he'd been fertilised by a fish. One final underwater spasm in the sun-warmed shallows and there was his dad, swimming away. A bit flushed around the gills, probably.

Donny tugged on his mud-shoes and began shoving *Lively Lady* an unnecessarily long way back towards the river, getting grub-bier and crosser as he went. It was time his mother answered some questions. She was good at telling him stories but now he wanted facts.

Contact details would be better.

☞ HOMEWORK ☜

Then he'd put in some practice at Flint's club, go find his dad ... and punch him.



## CHAPTER TWO

# A New Year's Luck

*Rural Fujian, China, February 2007*

In the last days of the old year Min's grandmother cleaned the house more thoroughly than ever before. It didn't matter that neither of them would be living there more than a few weeks longer; she was determined that every last mite of bad luck was going to be chased out of the small rooms where they had once been a family. She opened the front door and all the windows and mopped and swept and shook the cloths again and again as invisible traces of misfortune lifted away on the breeze.

"If I don't do it now," she said, "who knows what might cling to the shoes that you will wear to make your journey. You should have new shoes, new clothes – everything fresh for the Year of the Pig."

"We can't afford new clothes. My shoes are fine. You've washed everything."

"If the Lion Dance comes through our house, the evil spirits will certainly leave."

"We'd have to pay the dancers ..."

"When all the families are home, someone will help us. Your cousin, Chen Kai, is coming from Xiamen. He will know what to do."

Then she hurried off to fuss over her New Year cake.

Min wondered whether he should use this time to study. The village would soon be overflowing as the workers came home from the cities. It didn't matter that he and his grandmother had no-one special anymore. People would drop in. They might stay even though the house was small and old and hadn't got a television. There would be long games of Mah-Jong. He would probably have to share his bed with people whose houses were full.

Some of his friends would be back. The ones who'd left school already and gone to work in the factories. They'd be showing off their mobile phones and new clothes, telling him that there was no point staying any longer. He should come with them after the holiday and they'd find him work. The village was home but it was boring. The cities were where the future was.

He wouldn't tell them what he was planning to do.

He hadn't told the school that he was leaving. When he didn't come back they'd think it was because of the fees. It was, of course, but not the way they thought. If education wasn't so expensive, if it didn't matter so much, his mother wouldn't have gone away. And he wouldn't have to leave to go and find her.

It was an ordinary rural middle school. Students were always dropping out because they had to go to work. Their families needed the money. He was one of the best students, mainly because he tried so hard. His grandmother kept all the certificates he had won. She had been planning to show them to his mother when she came home.

It felt odd to have free time and not be studying.

“We should have fresh red paint around the doorway.” She’d hurried in again. “And some poems for decoration. All our favourites. Perhaps Xiao Ling will surprise us with a phone call and you can tell her which ones you chose.”

She had always been like this. Always busy and full of hope. Always assuming that he was still the trusting child he’d been when his mother went away.

Min’s grandmother gave two red envelopes this year: one to him and the other to his cousin, Chen Kai. Both of them were full of money, all in crisp new notes. He didn’t think she’d kept anything for herself. She packed tea-marinated eggs and rice balls for their journey – just as she had done for his mother – and gave them both a big bag of mandarin oranges and the last slices of the niangao, her special New Year cake.

On the evening of the last night he went to fetch some more coal but there wasn’t any left. Just a few chippings and the dust. She said it didn’t matter as she would be moving to her cousin soon. “Please ask Xaio Ling to call me when you have arrived. I am not afraid of the money-lender. I have nothing more to lose. You are a good boy and I know you are going to have a good life in your new country. This New Year’s luck will travel with you.”

“The village will always be my home, Grandmother.”

“And I will always be here. With your father and your grandfather. Always.”

They had climbed the mountain together on the eve of the New Year. Carried offerings to the family graves in a small clearing surrounded by trees and bushes. Min knew what she meant.

“Don’t worry,” he said. “I’m sure to find my mother soon. I can help her pay off anything that is left and then we’ll come back. Perhaps we’ll bring you a big coat to keep you warm next winter.”

“I have had good fortune in my life,” she told him. “I have never made long journeys.”





## CHAPTER THREE

# Muddy Trousers

*River Stour, Suffolk, Friday 13 April 2007*

Skye was weaving. Donny had made her a wooden frame for Christmas and she always had some piece of work under construction. Her latest project was shredding his outgrown clothes and ravelling them up again into an extra bed cover.

“Doh,” she said with a glowing smile. Then she signed to ask him how his trousers had got so wet?

Great Aunt Ellen was there too, not at all pleased at the dirt he was bringing in.

“To the scuppers with you, Sinbad. At the double. Tea’ll be ready when you’re sluiced down.”

She stood up as she spoke. She wasn’t a tall woman. Donny backed away and went up on deck to begin cleaning himself. Whatever your state of emotional meltdown you didn’t argue with Gold Dragon when you’d tramped mud down her companionway.

Skye followed him. She brought a clean pair of jeans and a bucket. There was a thin rope tied to the bucket’s handle. She swung it confidently over the junk’s high side then let it trail in the river until it filled with saltwater. She could get the worst of the dirt off that way before she or her aunt sailed the week’s washing down to the marina laundrette.

“Doh?”

"I have to draw my father for Art homework," he signed, grumpily. "So I need to know who he is. And don't tell me he's Kwasind, the North Wind, or anyone like that because my drawing skills aren't up to it. I'm old enough now. I want facts, not stories."

The lanyard dropped from her hand and Donny had to grab a boat hook to retrieve the bucket before it filled completely and sunk.

"Father?" she signed.

He had to put the bucket down and disengage the boat hook before he could sign back. It wasn't like he'd been a virgin birth for god's sake. Maybe she'd been drunk.

"My other half. The fifty percent of me that I don't have a name for. The person I possibly even resemble? Because – love you, Mum – but nobody would guess that I was your child from looking at us, would they?"

She had dark hair and a coppery skin: he was sandy-haired, grey-eyed, pale. She was big-built: he was wiry.

How could he have said that? He hadn't even known that it was what he thought. He didn't think it. Couldn't. His anger was completely gone, replaced by tears that hurt him to cry. He was in Skye's arms, clinging to her.

"Mum," he wanted to say, "I didn't mean it. I'm so sorry."

But he couldn't. He couldn't use his hands to sign because he was holding his mother's solid, utterly familiar and beloved body as if he were a drowning person.

Skye hugged him back. Then, very carefully, still holding him close, she sat them both down on the cabin roof. She pulled her head back, breathed deeply.

“Er-mann,” she articulated, as if from way down buried and dark. “Er-mann.”

A man? Her man?

That was the one bit he could probably have figured out for himself! Poor Mum. She hadn’t been to normal school. Maybe she’d never had Sex Ed? Maybe Granny Edith hadn’t got round to telling her the facts ... and someone had like ... well ... forced her? He wished again that he hadn’t asked.

His mum existed every day like a flightless eagle on a ledge. Poised above chasms of panic and darkness. She was different. She was an artist. She loved him. He loved her. He couldn’t bear to think ...

“’S okay, mum. We’re okay. Who needs dads? I’ll find someone else for homework.”

He wouldn’t tell her about Flint’s Initiative for the Fatherless. That was Monday: this was Friday evening.

Skye had stopped embracing him; stopped trying to speak words. Instead she was signing directly into his muddy hand – in the complicated private way that they’d developed when he was very small.

“His name was Hermann. But I lost him. Old Nokomis never saw ... she didn’t know. And then it was too late.”

“Huh?”

He pulled back so he could stare as well as sign. This wasn’t one of her stories.

“Hermann?” he repeated. “My father’s name is Hermann. A real name. Hermann who? Where did you meet him? Why didn’t he stay?”

Facts, questions, real names.

"I lost him," she repeated. "Then it was too late."

There was desolation in the shape of her brown hands, every bit as eloquent as the quiver of a speaking voice.

"We travelled home with you inside. Smallest of the sprouting seeds. I didn't know. But then we loved you, Doh. How we loved you! And Hermann ... would have loved you."

"Except he didn't the chance because he didn't know I'd been conceived."

So, that was it. He was an unplanned souvenir from a holiday romance. But the way she lingered over his father's name sounded ... as if she'd really liked him.

He couldn't remember Skye and Granny having holidays. Not the sort where you met people. They used to go off in the camper van and park by woods and look at stately homes and things. Walk up hills. If they'd gone back ... to wherever it was ... couldn't there maybe have been a chance that they'd have met the guy again?

Not 'the guy'. This was – Hermann – his father!

"They tried to take you, Doh. As soon as you were fluttering, the invaders came. They said I couldn't be your mother. Old Nokomis was your champion. All her fight and all her money. Then there was nothing left but us, still together."

Skye didn't do lying. Donny remembered when he'd overheard Rev. Wendy telling Gerald what a pain Granny Edith had been, spending everything she had on lawyers, refusing to let Leeds SS take him as a baby. No wonder there'd been no wild goose chases trying to re-trace the holiday, re-discover Hermann, tell him ...

"We were dancing in long lines. The chain was broken by

shields and truncheons. Angry men with boots and helmets. Then Hermann was gone.”

“Where were you?”

“We were in the Northlands. With the people who were free. Hermann was ... free.”

Her hands were telling their own story. She had loved this unknown bloke. Losing him had been one more tragedy in her unlucky life.

“You’re tired, Mum. So’m I. But thanks for letting me know. About my dad. About ... Hermann.” He kept trying out the name. “I bet he was a really great guy!”

“Hermann was a sailor. Like you, Doh.”

Skye put her arms round him once more and he hugged her back. A sailor. That was good.

Gold Dragon had set out the big brown teapot and a pile of bread and jam. The mud on Donny’s trousers had dried now – which was lucky as he and Skye had both forgotten what it was that they’d gone up on deck to do.

“I had a problem with my homework. I needed to ask Mum.”

This sounded a bit inadequate.

“To do with not having a dad. I needed one for Art.”

His great-aunt laughed like a barking seal. “That must be the reason why I’ve never learned to draw! My father was away for years. You were if you were in the Navy then. And there was boarding school. Did I ever tell you about the only week we were all going to take a holiday together – both parents and all five children? He got recalled by the Admiralty before we’d even begun storing the ship.”

“So what happened?”

“Oh, he and Mother marooned the lot of us and sailed off into the sunset while we stood waving on a desolate shore.”

Donny felt better now.

“Is it still okay if I go to the vicarage tomorrow? Anna gave Luke and Liam a tent for Luke’s birthday but they’re too scared to sleep out in it. I thought I could maybe help them pitch it in the garden and we could have a sleepover.”

“Borrow *Vexilla* if you’re going adventuring. The forecast’s north-easterly, fresh to moderate. You’ll have a stiff beat most of the way, but if you can bear to stay skulking in your bunk a bit later than usual, you’ll have the tide with you as far as Shotley.”

“You don’t mind if I’m away for a night? How about you, Mum?”

Skye looked uncertain but Great Aunt Ellen was full of jollity. She fetched a chart from the locker and spread it in front of her niece, tapping it significantly. She still couldn’t sign – the fact that her left hand was a hook made this almost impossible – but living and sailing together had brought the two of them onto the same wavelength.

Skye nodded. Donny had the impression that this was something they’d been planning for a while. He felt left out.

“Twenty-four hours shore leave for you, Sinbad – thirty-six if you want it. Nimblefingers and I are going to take this old lady for a turn around the bay. Batteries need recharging.”

Skye’s dark plaits swung forward as she leant over the chart, her look of uncertainty replaced by a gleam of interest. Gold Dragon was enthusiastic.

“There’s a spot of reconnaissance we’ve been waiting to do and if you’re not with us the SS bureau-rats won’t have any reason to complain. I’ll get the dinghy up in davits before we turn in.”

“Where’re you going?”

“The Desolate Shores,” she replied, tucking the chart away. “Now cut along and scrub those ducks of yours and I’ll give you the lat and long after supper.”

She was looking at his trousers again. These were school trousers. They’d got to be clean by Monday morning and no-one wanted to waste this weekend taking trips to the laundrette.

“Aye, aye sir!” he said, saluting smartly.

“Back of the hand, Sinbad, back of the hand. You’re not in the Army here. We don’t want to see your tarry palm.”

The blackness on his hands wasn’t tar, of course. It was more black mud, cracking across his lifeline between fingers and thumb where his hand had been curled round the mug of tea. Donny retreated hastily.

