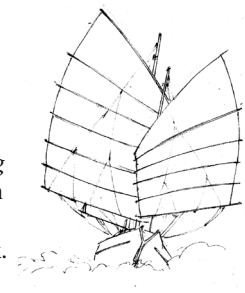
The *Strong Winds* series



Previous books

Books 1-3 *The Salt-Stained Book, A Ravelled Flag* and *Ghosting Home* form a trilogy. It begins when Donny Walker and his profoundly deaf mother, Skye, set out for the Shotley Peninsula in Suffolk. Edith, who brought Skye up, has died but they have received a mysterious message from her previously unknown sister Ellen who is travelling from China to meet them. They are completely unaware of Ellen's identity or the alarm her arrival will cause in the sinister underworld of 21st century pirates and smugglers.

Skye has a panic attack and Donny is taken into care. He meets other young people with problems, makes friends, discovers his talent for sailing and begins to learn more about his own family history. He also encounters extraordinary suspicion and hostility from some of the officials who might have been expected to help.

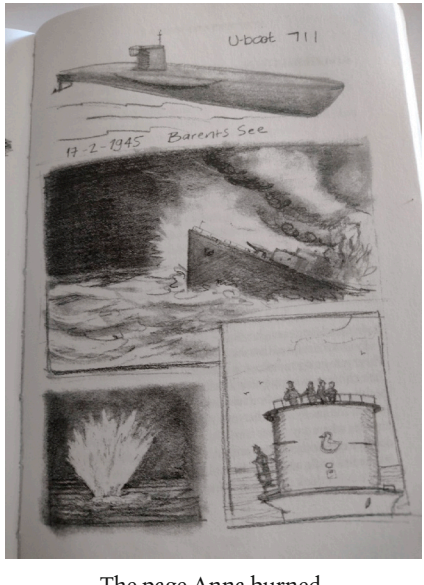
The action in these first three books extends up the Suffolk Coast to Lowestoft and across the North Sea to Belgium and Holland. There are links to events in the Java Sea and Fujian Province in China. Donny begins to understand the WW2 tragedy which happened in the Barents Sea years before he was born but doesn't yet realise this is only one side of the story.

Books 4-6 *The Lion of Sole Bay*, *Black Waters* and *Pebble* are less closely linked. *The Lion of Sole Bay* is a Hallowe'en story set in Fynn Creek, a fictionalised location off the River Deben in Suffolk, and the events of *Black Waters* happen in a similarly imagined waterside village in Essex. *Pebble* picks up on a feeling of residual trauma left by the kidnap attempt in *The Lion of Sole Bay* but introduces significant new characters and some situations that will lead on into *Voyage North*.

Pebble takes place in Fynn Creek and along the Suffolk Coast from Bawdsey to Lowestoft. New characters, such as Heike, the Estonian

shipwright, and the Russian oligarch Arkady Ivanov bring new problems, not all of which are resolved. Heike makes a welcome discovery about the identity of 'Old Peter' (first encountered in *The Lion of Sole Bay*) but Anna notices a detail in Heike's sketchbook which she knows will cause distress to Donny and Skye. She tears the page out and burns it.

The Russian oligarch, Arkady Ivanov, springs a surprise when he comes alongside *Strong Winds* in the early hours of a stormy morning, dressed in an Admiral's uniform. He explains the pressure being put on him by the Russian President, who wants to repossess him and his money and his secret knowledge. Arkady asks Donny and his friends to witness that he is acting for the best. He also reveals that he knew Donny's unknown father. As *Pebble* ends Donny makes the reckless decision to abandon Suffolk and *Strong Winds* and voyage north on board the Russian superyacht.



The page Anna burned.

People and boats from the earlier books

Nationality: British

Donny Walker: Aged 16, real name John. Also known as Vanya. Parents Skye Walker & Hermann Sehmel. Owner of *Strong Winds*. Until recently a student at Gallister High School.

Skye Walker: Donny's mother. Born with irreversible disabilities due to her mother having been infected by rubella in early pregnancy. Looks like her Ojibwa father. Skye's parents left England when she was a baby and she was brought up by her aunt Edith, usually called Granny or Old Nokomis.

Defoe: Hydrographer, real name Ned (same as great-uncle). Skye's younger brother.

Edith Walker (formerly Palmer): Donny's older great-aunt, usually called Granny, also known as Old Naromis. (Has died.) Edith was eldest sister in family of five. Badly affected by the WW2 deaths of her brothers, Greg and Ned, in the Barents Sea – particularly Greg, whose conduct abandoning his ship to attempt to rescue his brother was subject of a naval Court of Enquiry.

Ellen Walker (formerly Palmer): Donny's younger great-aunt, also known as Gold Dragon. Former owner of *Strong Winds*. (Has died.)

Greg and Ned Palmer, Donny's great-uncles. Both serving in WW2 Royal Navy. Died in Barents Sea.

Strong Winds: Chinese junk, home for Donny and Skye. Built in Bias Bay for Queen of the Pirates, Li Choi San. Bought by Ellen at the cost of her right hand. Bequeathed by her to Donny.

Anna Livesey: Donny's closest friend. Age 16. Daughter of singer Lottie Livesey, step-sister to Luke and Liam Whiting, half-sister to Vicky. Unexpectedly rich. Inherited top flat Bawdsey Manor and classic dinghy *Theodora*. Keenly academic, plans to become a doctor.

Lottie Livesey: Mother of Anna and Vicky, stepmother of Luke and Liam. Singer, currently promoting music festival on Suffolk coast. First husband died. In relationship with Bill Whiting.

Bill Whiting: Father of Luke, Liam and Vicky. Stepfather to Anna. Former fisherman, dock worker, boatyard employee. Disabled in accident. Attempting to restore old fishing boat in Fynn Creek.

Luke, Liam and Vicky Whiting: Aged about 12, 10, 6. Anna's siblings.

Theodora: Herreshoff-designed classic wooden dinghy. Named after Anna's novelist grandmother and beautifully restored by Heike at Lowestoft Shipwrights' College.

Lowestoft Lass: Bill's project. Ex-Scottish fishing boat with chronic leaks, now moored in Fynn Creek.

Xanthe and Maggi Ribiero: Donny's Allies, met on his first day at Gallister High School when they discovered shared love of the poem *Hiawatha*. Both sisters keen Laser dinghy sailors. Xanthe currently selected for Olympic squad, Maggi, age 16, still at school.

Joshua and June Ribiero: Parents of Xanthe and Maggi. Successful professional couple, originally from West Africa. He's a neurosurgeon, she's a magistrate. They own the yacht *Snow Goose* but spend most of their sailing time supporting their daughters' dinghy racing.

Snow Goose: Classic 1920s yawl designed 'by the hand of God', as Joshua Ribiero would say.

Rev Wendy: Former foster carer, married to Gerald. Busy vicar of six parishes, rural dean, indefatigable committee member, surprised mother of Baby Ellen.

Gerald: Former foster carer, permanently exhausted husband of Wendy and father of Ellen.

Ellen: Age 2. Born soon after the death of Donny's great-aunt and appears to have inherited her fierce determination.

Griselda: Coach/manager for GBR Laser Radial dinghy class.

Nationality: Russian

Arkady Ivanov: Russian billionaire, businessman with huge wealth from oil and gas development. Was formerly Captain First Rank in the

Russian Navy and has recently promoted himself to Admiral. May have had KGB past. Under pressure to return to Russia with his wealth and family. Badly injured by double-crossing agent. Owner of superyacht MY *Raisa*.

Raisa Ivanova: Arkady's wife. Former concert cellist, now raises money for private clinic. Known to suffer from inherited Gutcher's Disease.

Aleksandr Ivanov: Age 16. Known as Zander. Only child of Arkady and Raisa. Until recently student at private language college in Bawdsey, Suffolk.

Dmitri: Married to Maria, two children, Vasily and Tatiana, living in Kaliningrad. Former bodyguard for Zander. (Has died.)

Iakov Dzerzhinsky: SVR (secret agent), reporting to the President. Former bodyguard for Zander. (Has died.)

MY (Motor Yacht) *Raisa:* Built 1972 as Soviet 'survey ship'. Now converted to luxurious expedition yacht.

Nationality: Estonian

Heike: Donny's newly discovered cousin, now living in Fynn Creek with Skye. Former careworker, loves drawing. Just completed her apprenticeship as a shipwright and is ready to begin restoration of her grandfather's wrecked yacht *Ra'* using money from Arkady Ivanov.

Peteris Sehmel: Heike's and Donny's grandfather. Lives with dementia. Arrived in Fynn Creek searching for 'Vanya' but no longer able to remember who he is. Quarrelled with his son Hermann 16 years ago and lost contact.

Hermann Sehmel: Peteris's son, Heike's uncle, Skye's lover, Donny's father. Otherwise unknown.

Ra': Ruined yacht, storm-damaged in Fynn Creek.

Nationality: 'prefer not to say'

George Balt: Old seaman. First encountered running the Mutford Mariners clubhouse in Lowestoft. Now in charge of Russian superyacht *Raisa*.

Reprinted from *The Salt-Stained Book*: HMS *Sparrow*, the Barents Sea, February 17th 1945

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

Dark, thick, obliterating smoke.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

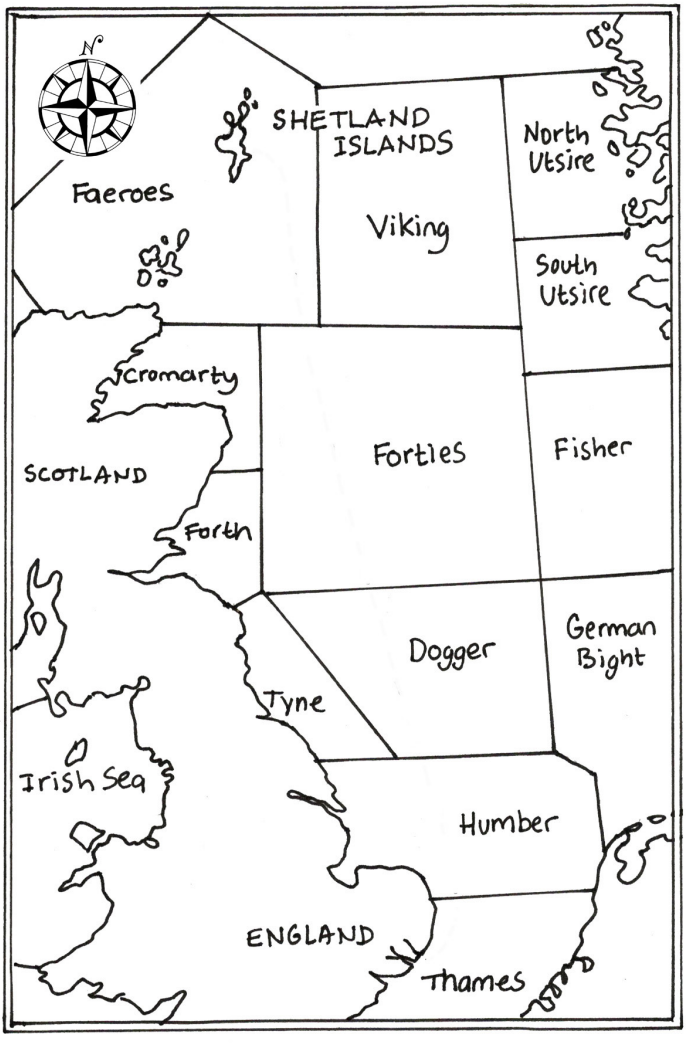
Both brothers lost.

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

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

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



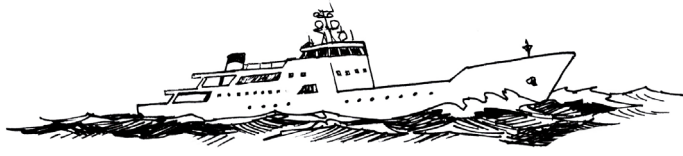

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SHETLAND ISLANDS
Faeroes
Viking
North Utsire
South Utsire
Cromarty
Forties
Fisher
SCOTLAND
Forth
Dogger
German Bight
Tyne
Irish Sea
Humber
ENGLAND
Thames

Voyage North

Julia Jones

VOLUME SEVEN
OF THE *Strong Winds* SERIES

Illustrated by Claudia Myatt



GOLDEN DUCK

Dedicated to Ann and Ned Palmer.

First published in 2022 by Golden Duck (UK) Ltd.,
Sokens, Green Street, Pleshey, nr Chelmsford, Essex. CM3 1HT
www.golden-duck.co.uk

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ISBN 978-1-899262-54-0

All illustrations © Claudia Myatt 2022
www.claudiamyatt.co.uk

Printed and bound in the UK
by Biddles, King's Lynn
using sustainably sourced materials

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CHAPTER ONE

Going Dark

Sea area Thames

'We turned north, heading for an uncertain future.'
from Return to Murmansk *by Henry Swain*

Unexpectedly, Donny remembered that day off Shotley when the compass needle had wavered left and right, spun, quivered and come to rest, magically pointing north. He'd magnetised the needle, shoved it through a piece of cork and floated it in a bucket of water. He'd been so much younger then. He hadn't known he was about to meet Gold Dragon and her Chinese junk, *Strong Winds*.

Gold Dragon was dead now. *Strong Winds* was his but he'd abandoned her. Early this morning he'd grabbed his passport and some clothes, then he'd handed her over to his friends. He'd told them to take her back into the Deben with a message to his mother that he'd given up on school, wasn't going to finish his exams and was heading north on a superyacht with a couple of dodgy Russians.

At least he thought that they were Russians: Arkady Ivanov, the billionaire oligarch who owned MY (Motor Yacht) *Raisa*, definitely was. He was wearing a dark uniform with gold buttons and had told them he was an Admiral of the Northern Fleet. Donny wasn't so sure about George, the other man.

When Donny first met George, the old seaman had been sitting on a white plastic chair in Lowestoft Inner Harbour. Donny

had been desperately needing to pee so he hadn't asked too many questions – except for the code to the Mutford Mariners' facilities. George had a pot-belly which was so round that it looked fake – as if he'd shoved a mooring buoy up his shirt. He didn't have much hair on the top of his head, but then it flowed down over his ears onto his shoulders, where it joined up with his amazing beard which had started somewhere halfway up his cheeks and gone tumbling down like a waterfall till it curled along the top of his belly-bulge.

Now that Donny was seeing George in the pilot chair of a superyacht and he'd spotted the hard grey eyes underneath the face fuzz, he was beginning to wonder whether George might be something other than a genial old buffer with a heart condition.

It hadn't stopped him joining them. When Arkady said he'd known Donny's unknown father and had promised to tell him more if he joined MY *Raisa*, Donny had been as unable to resist as the compass needle. He'd quivered, swung and settled. That's where he was going. North in a superyacht with these two scary men.

* * *

'Do you, like, need anything?' he asked them after a while.

They were in *Raisa*'s bridge deck. In, not on. It was a control room with banks of instruments, a library of paper charts, pilot guides, box files and scientific papers. The windows were huge and panoramic but the truly eye-catching feature was the row upon row of blinking, humming, snoozing or spooling screens. Was it more like the cockpit of a jumbo jet or a military observation centre? Donny hadn't been in either so he didn't know.

Arkady Ivanov was on a stretcher. He'd been badly injured by a double agent and could only talk when he was dosed up with morphine. His uniform jacket was unbuttoned; his breathing was quick and shallow and there was a sheen of sweat on his pale face. Donny remembered the time he'd sailed Gold Dragon on her final voyage. He didn't like the way the Admiral looked.

George was sitting in one of the three bucket-shaped pilot chairs, soft black leather with top-of-the range marine suspension that seemed totally unnecessary. The blood red sunrise had given way to a windy morning with sudden dark squalls and showers of rain which spat against the panoramic windows. The waves were steep and confused but where *Strong Winds* would have tossed and heeled, *Raisa* forged ahead without a tremble.

'Stabilisers' was what George had said when Donny'd asked what made her so amazingly steady. 'An' design. Built for Arctic surveys. Tracking subs mostly. Cold War stuff. She's mostly diving and geological these days.'

Donny wasn't quite ready to ask which Cold War side George had been on. It was obvious his current skills were completely 21st century. George had entered strings of codes to fire the engines, raise the anchor, set *Raisa* on her course – all without moving from his cushioned seat. It didn't seem as if there was anything for Donny to do.

He'd been watching the track on the chart plotter, which was about the only screen that he understood. They'd left the complex shallows off the Suffolk and Norfolk coast and were following the edge of a deep-water channel that would take them through the gas and oil fields. There was another screen that had to be a depth sounder but instead of only showing figures it

seemed to be giving a total readout of the contours and materials of the seabed.

'How much water does *Raisa* need?' he'd asked George.

'4.8 metres, young David.'

Why David? Donny'd spent enough time with George back in Lowestoft to know that that the old seaman's use of names could be random. At least he'd assumed it was random. Quite a lot of old people had difficulty with names; a few other people didn't get your name right because they didn't see you as worth bothering about. So why was George making these mistakes?

Okay, Donny had to admit his own names weren't totally straightforward. His official name was John, not Donny, then just yesterday he'd discovered that John in Russian was Vanya – and there was a different bit of family who'd always called him that – when they believed he existed. However he definitely wasn't David.

'I'll 'av a tea, David, if you're offering. That'll be black with a spoonful of jam.'

George was monitoring an amazing sort of periscope which gave him 360° vision without getting up from his chair. Their compass heading was 045° and their speed a steady 16 knots. They'd been going for an hour. Donny couldn't start to calculate how long they'd take to reach their destination because he hadn't a clue where it was.

All he basically knew was *Raisa* needed to clear out of UK waters as invisibly as she could. She was carrying a heavy canister of radioactive material. That was what the agent had rolled down the cliff at Arkady, knocking him backwards, breaking his ribs and his leg. It had been part of a Russian plot to

contaminate the Suffolk beaches with Strontium-90 and there was other dangerous material being removed in a submarine. It was something to do with a feud between the President and the billionaire. Donny was even beginning to wonder whether he'd volunteered as willingly as he thought he had or whether he'd been cleverly press-ganged. Was he a witness or a hostage?

He got George his black tea with jam – it looked disgusting – and made one for himself with normal milk and sugar.

'What about Admiral Ivanov?'

'Skipper? He don't look like he's wantin' his cuppa right now.'

They'd managed to manoeuvre Arkady onto a stretcher when Anna, Luke and Vicky were still on board. George had told them how to use a slider and they'd been as careful as they could, but the pain had obviously been intense. The Admiral hadn't shouted out, but he'd gone pale green and fainted. George had sent Anna running for the yacht's medical supplies and she'd fetched some sort of gas which had had an amazingly good effect. They'd kept him breathing it while they had moved the stretcher along to the bridge deck and then while George had straightened out the twisted leg and turned Arkady's foot the right way round before getting them to help him wrap it up with thick rolls of cotton wool. The Russian's greeny-white face went almost see-through on the twist, but as soon as his ankle and foot were straight and secured, there was an immediate flush of pink and his breathing seemed to steady.

'Seen them do that resetting without no pain relief,' George had commented. 'Seems kinder this way but you might want to be a bit thoughtful what you tell 'is missus when you get back home. You can tell 'er it's been fixed but don't go adding no more

detail. She's not a well woman, Raisa Ivanov. Seriously not well, though she don't mention it.'

Then Anna, Luke and Vicky had gone back to *Strong Winds* and Donny'd cast off her lines. He'd felt a massive lump in his throat when he headed back up to the bridge to tell George they were clear to leave. That hadn't been necessary either.

MY *Raisa* was already powering away. Donny realised it wasn't only the periscope that was giving George his all-round visibility, there were cameras positioned to cover every section of her hull and decks.

'Got them underwater too,' George told him, pressing a switch. A cabinet slid open to reveal another battery of screens showing the green-brown depths of the Southern North Sea. 'Her regular captain runs these on a repeater into the saloon when they've got guests. Adds a bit of fancy lighting and they thinks it's some sorta aqua show.'

Arkady Ivanov's dark eyes were still open then. He made a sound – it was, maybe, an objection? George chuckled. 'Skipper's sayin' I can be a bit more straight now you've thrown in your lot. Them cameras are more use to watch out for limpets than pretty fish – an' I don't mean the sort what lives on rocks.'

Donny took a moment before he understood. 'You mean… limpet *mines*?'

'I do. Always have a good check round this panel before you ups the anchor. Not everyone's Skipper's trusty tovarisch. But you might be gettin' wise to that already.'

Yes, Donny was definitely getting some hint of un-comradely behaviour – like that agent with the black parachute. The way George spoke was reassuring – as if he was being seen as a

volunteer, 33% of MY *Raisa*'s crew – or even half of it, if you didn't count the injured Admiral.

They'd passed Southwold, Lowestoft and Yarmouth now. He wasn't in his home waters any more. People would be getting up, turning on their radios, looking for internet headlines, wondering about the beach pollution scare the day before. 'Strontium-90 found on Suffolk beaches!' Donny hoped there'd be nothing new for them to read today.

The Admiral's eyes had closed again. 'We'd better start checking 'is vital signs,' muttered George. 'Done any nursin' David?'

'My name's Donny. It shouldn't be that hard to learn if I'm your only crew.' That felt a bit shocking when he said it aloud. 'Why David, anyway?'

'Little joke between me and meself. You ain't up on your Robert Louis Stevenson then?'

'He wrote *Treasure Island*. Of course I am,' answered Donny, remembering how he'd accidentally terrorised Luke and Liam with imitations of blind Pew. His stomach convulsed when he thought of Liam now. Facing blindness at ten years old.

'Not got no more of his titles?'

Donny thought about it. Granny had had a shelf of little red childhood classics which she'd read over and over to him and Skye. Mentally he scanned along the row of books in the living room of the bungalow that they'd left one day in the camper van, and never seen again. Going south that had been…

'While you're cogitatin' your literary heritage it's time you learned about taking a blood pressure readin', plus temperature, pulse 'n' that. We might be needin' to set up a routine.'

George wheezed his way to the medical store and found a

digital blood pressure monitor and an ear thermometer. He left *Raisa* to get on with the voyage while he taught Donny how to use them and told him what normal was. Then he started a chart to write them down. 'Every 15 minutes for now, young Da – '

'Donny. I don't know what book you mean if it isn't *Treasure Island*, but if you want me to do things, you're going to have to use my right name.'

There was only the slightest nod from George but Donny'd said what he needed. For the next two hours they drank tea and checked Arkady's heart rate and his breathing while the superyacht steamed northeast, and they took it in turns to keep lookout.

Visibility wasn't good. The rain showers got heavier and more frequent, but the radar set was top of the range and the screen stayed easy to read. Donny made them toast from slices of solid dark bread cut from a large round loaf. There was a whole row of different jams and jars of honey. The pulse and pressure readings weren't totally encouraging.

George started to frown. 'Could be worse,' he said as if to himself. 'Could be quite a lot better an' all.'

'If you put out a pan-pan call on VHF you could talk to a doctor. Maybe even get him lifted off.' He remembered when Gold Dragon had been plucked away to a hospital in Rotterdam. 'Can you land a helicopter on *Raisa*?' He'd heard some superyachts had their own helipad.

'Nah. Skipper kept the crane instead. This 'ere yacht carries a lotta boats.'

'You can have a winch man come down.' What wouldn't he give to see his uncle Defoe sliding out of the sky right now.

'We ain't advertisin', remember. Them choppers, rackety things.'

That brought Donny back with a jolt to what they were doing. Getting away unseen with their potentially lethal load. 'I suppose you've done what Anna said. You've turned the AIS off and you're going dark? I don't even know where we're going to.'

'Leave it to the yacht and we'll make Murmansk. She's got the range and keeps a good steady speed. Can't have Skipper dying on the way though.'

Donny wasn't keen on that either. 'No. And I don't exactly know where Murmansk is.'

'Arctic Circle. Over the top of north Norway then past where Finland used ter be. Kola Peninsula. But if he's gone and ruptured his spleen, he'll need stitching up before that.'

George picked up the satellite phone and put a call through. In Russian, of course, and very quick. A few moments later, he sounded like he was giving the readings from their sheet. Then he looked a bit relieved, if you could see that much under his chin camouflage.

'There's someone from head office visitin' one of their northern rigs. They can get a medic out on a RIB. Won't be till later. Gives us time to get you kitted out an' saluting. I dunno what he'll have said, business-wise… Likely not a lot, the way things are with Moskva.'

George took another good look round his periscope and the cameras and radar. Donny could feel the fat man's anxiety rippling back like flood tide up a beach. He had worries of his own.

'I've remembered the title of that book. My Granny had a copy. It's *Kidnapped*, isn't it? Is that what you're doing to me – because you're desperate?

