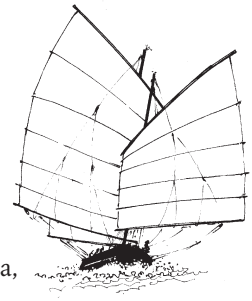
# The *Strong Winds* series



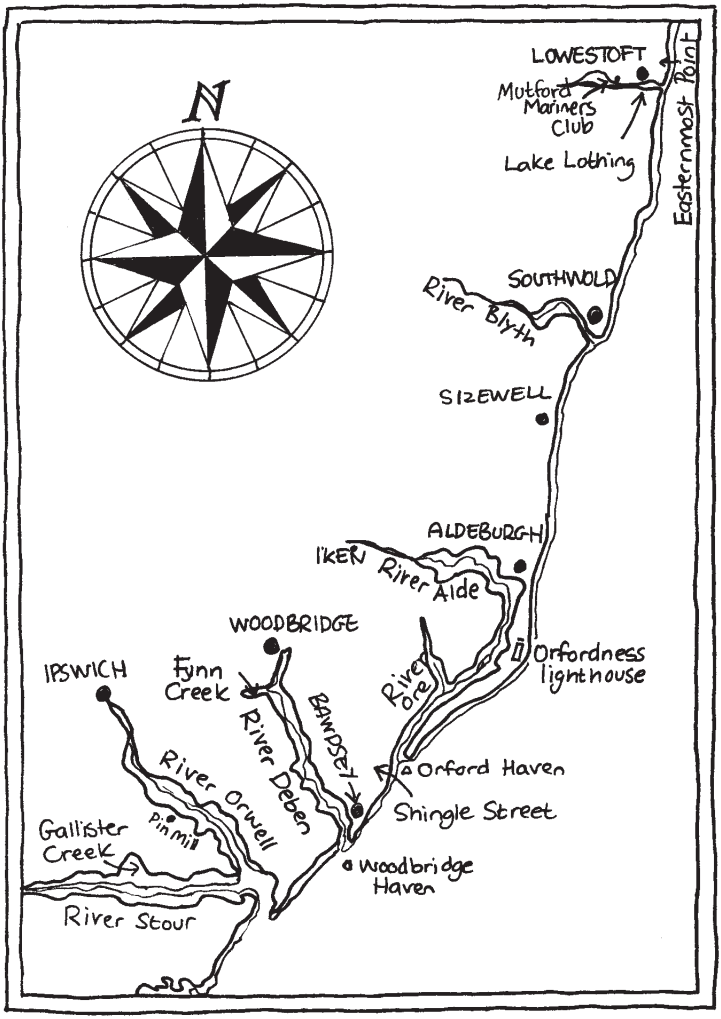
*The Salt-Stained Book, A Ravelled Flag* and *Ghosting Home*: The series begins when Donny, aged 12, arrives in East Anglia with his profoundly deaf mother, Skye. They are separated and Donny is taken into care at Erewhon Parva vicarage. There he meets Anna, Luke, Liam and Vicky. Anna's mother, Lottie, seems to have abandoned them and the younger children's father, Bill, is in prison.

Donny and Skye's family has been badly affected by Second World War tragedies. Now the arrival of Donny's previously unknown great-aunt Ellen in her Chinese junk *Strong Winds* brings new and far-reaching complications. His friendship with Anna and their alliance with Xanthe and Maggi Ribiero helps Donny survive the tumultuous events of the first three books.

*The Lion of Sole Bay*: Two years later it is Luke who finds himself alone. He has chosen to spend half term with his father on the dilapidated fishing boat, *Lowestoft Lass*, but Bill is hospitalised after an accident involving hyperactive redhead 'Angel' Vandervelde. It's Hallowe'en, a dark time of year, and there are dark deeds planned.

*Black Waters*: During the following summer it seems that Xanthe Ribiero's dream of sailing for her country is at an end. She takes refuge in a remote village on the Essex marshes where she helps investigate a long-running local feud and avert a future outrage.

*Pebble*: Donny, Anna and their Allies are sixth-formers, looking ahead to their future lives. Luke has blotted out his frightening adventure in *The Lion of Sole Bay* but for Liam, now almost ten years old, forgetting the past is not so easy.


N
LOWESTOFT
Mutford Mariners Club
Lake Lothing
Easternmost Point
SOUTHWOLD
River Blyth
SIZEWELL
ALDEBURGH
Iken
River Alde
WOODBRIDGE
IPSWICH
Fynn Creek
River Deben
Bawdsey
River Ore
Orfordness lighthouse
Orford Haven
Shingle Street
River Orwell
Pinmill
Gallister Creek
Woodbridge Haven
River Stour

# Pebble

Julia Jones

VOLUME SIX
OF THE *Strong Winds* SERIES

Illustrated by Claudia Myatt



GOLDEN DUCK

*This book is dedicated to all the people from many countries who work conscientiously and kindly in care and nursing homes, especially those in The Moat House, Essex, who look after my mother, June. Your round-the-clock care is invaluable. Thank you also for your friendship.*

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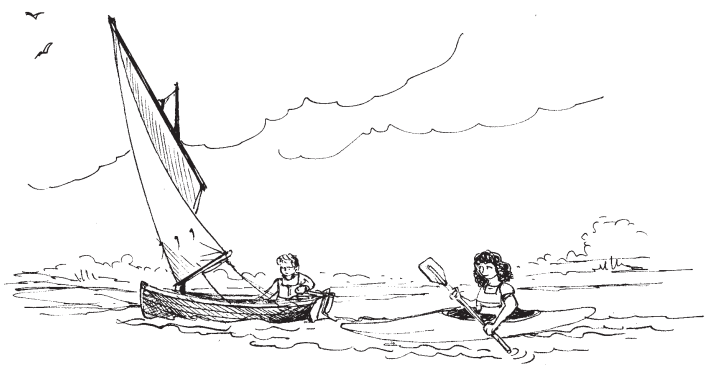
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# Some characters you may have met already…

| | |
|---|---|
| *Luke and Liam Whiting* | sons of Bill Whiting and Eva (who has died), aged almost ten and about 13 in this story. |
| *Vicky Whiting* | daughter of Bill Whiting and Lottie Livesey, soon to be six years old. |
| *Anna Livesey* | daughter of Lottie Livesey, aged 16. Her father died flying out to a North Sea oil rig. |
| *Lottie Livesey* | singer, Anna and Vicky's mother, Luke and Liam's stepmother. Her own mother (Theodora) was a successful novelist and her uncle (Callum) a research scientist but bitter quarrels in the past mean that their money and possessions have passed to Anna (and Vicky). |
| *Bill Whiting* | former fisherman, dock-worker, shanty singer; father of Luke Liam and Vicky, disabled in boatyard accident, struggling to restore old fishing vessel, *Lowestoft Lass*. |
| *Donny Walker* | son of Skye Walker and unknown father (Hermann), aged 16. Lives on board Chinese junk *Strong Winds* which was left to him by his great- aunt Ellen (otherwise known as Gold Dragon). |
| *Skye Walker* | Donny's mother. Brain-damaged before birth. Brought up by her great-aunt Edith (otherwise known as Old Nokomis). Father was Native American. Has a half-brother named Defoe. |
| *Wendy & Gerald*: | An overworked vicar and her husband, former foster parents to most of the children. Now with their own small daughter, Ellen, aged about three. |

| | |
|---|---|
| *The Ribiero family* | Joshua and June, Xanthe (18) and Maggi (16). Successful professional family. (Absent from this story as involved in the 2012 Olympics.) |
| *Old Mrs Everson* | very old lady with delightful habit of popping up just when she's needed. |
| *Miss Grace Everson* | former farmer and owner of the Fynn Creek moorings. |
| *Edward* | Anna's (and Vicky's) Trustee. Former friend of Anna's great-uncle and admirer of Donny's great- aunt. Does his best to act as a Mr Fixit when his legal responsibilities allow. |
| *Ben, the dog* | black terrier, rescued from ill-treatment in *A Ravelled Flag*. Comforts Luke in *The Lion of Sole Bay*. |



*Full fathom five thy father lies;*
*Of his bones are coral made.*
*Those are pebbles that were his eyes.*
*Nothing of him that doth fade,*
*But doth suffer a sea change*
*Into something rich and strange.*
*Sea nymphs hourly ring his knell,*
*Ding dong!*
*Hark now I hear them,*
*Ding dong bell.*

(There's a word change here.
Thanks, William Shakespeare, for the rest.)



CHAPTER ONE

# A lost carnelian

Liam had already lost his lucky stone before he missed the penalty. It was an orangey-red stone that you could nearly see through. It had extra circles of colour hidden inside and he'd found it on the day they'd heard that his brother Luke was safe.

Liam and his younger sister Vicky collected pebbles and shells, crab casings, driftwood and sea glass. They didn't take them far, only up the cliff to a hiding place in the garden of their house, which they were using as their treasury. Vicky said they were gifts for her magic sea people: Liam mainly just liked the pebbles. It was something to do with the way they felt and that you could never find the same one twice. And they were so old. If you were scrunching on a pebble, it could have been scrunched on by a dinosaur.

The lucky stone had been something different. It had been waiting for him on the beach when he ran out to look where Luke and the witch-women had passed them in the night. It was like a message, glinting in the winter sun as the water sucked away. Its wild swirls of orange-red reminded him of a lion's mane, a real lion, not a carved wooden pub sign. Or the crazy red hair of Luke's new friend, Angel, who had been in danger with him.

That was more than a year ago and you'd think people had forgotten about it. But Liam hadn't. Anna had had the stone polished for his Christmas present and he'd kept it in his pocket

ever since – left hand because that was his special side. He'd have given it to Luke, if Luke had ever needed it. Or to Angel.

But now he couldn't give it to anyone because he'd lost it – and he'd lost his touch as well.

The ball was on the penalty mark; the goalie from the other side waiting, looking tense; his team mates watching, ready to cheer. Liam took a deep breath, ran a few strides, kicked…and missed. Not missed obviously but missed the ball's sweet spot. His boot connected okay and sent it in the right direction but it didn't lift and curve and fly for that corner at the top of the net which was where he'd had in mind.

"Bad luck, Liam."

"Close one, mate."

"Come on lads, don't give up now."

The game went on. Liam was always there or thereabouts, running hard as ever. He was a trier, everyone knew that and they didn't lose by much, only that single goal.

"Better luck next time, lads. See you Monday after school."

Liam excused himself. He had a school music trip on Monday and he couldn't make the match next Saturday either.

The coach looked as if he couldn't quite believe what he was hearing. "Last match of the season, mate! I did get told about the music trip but what's stopping you on Saturday? Did I ought to have a word with someone?"

He looked around the edge of the pitch where kids were collecting their gear, finding their parents. He had to check they all left safely.

"Your mum not here?"

"Step-mum. No sir."

"Step-mum then. My mistake. How're you getting home?"

The lad seemed a bit low. Hadn't been playing well for the last few games. Coach hadn't said anything. He was a good lad. Bad patches like that could get people down. He'd been sorry when he noticed Liam'd had taken his name off the list for the half term activity camp. Wondered about calling the parents. Wasn't quite certain who he should ask for…

"Walking, sir. It isn't far."

Liam pointed to where you could see one of the Bawdsey Manor pinnacles poking upwards to the sky, beyond the belt of dark green pines.

"Posh place."

Liam sort of shrugged. It used to make him feel awkward when people said that but he'd got over it. Living in the Manor was better than being looked after at the rectory and very likely better than the Lowestoft caravan park where they'd lived after he'd been born. He didn't remember that far back.

"Your step-mum's Lottie Livesey. I bought her first album. Must be doing well to have a place like that."

"It's not her place, it's my sister's. We live in the flat at the top. The rest of it's a school."

"School?"

"Not a normal sort of school. It's kids from abroad learning English. We don't see them much."

"Oh. Right. Your step-mum's headlining at Luminal. You all going to be there?"

"Not sure. Sometimes she thinks we're too young to be at festivals. Anna goes to most things. She's the oldest. She's sixteen."

Liam needed to get away. It would have been different if he'd

been playing well. He'd have chatted all evening then. Nothing felt okay since he'd lost his lucky stone.

There was a bodyguard keeping lookout on the beach. That meant Aleksandr was somewhere around – 'Zander', as he'd told them to call him. It was 99 percent certain Zander would be being private with Anna in one of the caves or some hidden corner of the garden. Luke didn't like it and kept trying to tell Anna that she shouldn't be seeing the young Russian. Anna, predictably, flared up and said it wasn't any of Luke's business. Luke and Anna rowed a lot these days.

The presence of the bodyguard meant that the gate in the chain link fence would have been unlocked. He could get straight in from the beach. But Liam had other plans. He was going further along the shoreline, then up the cliff near where the defence station used to be. He'd got his phone and a note book. The phone had been bought for him after the attempted kidnap – even though phones didn't seem to have been much help in any of his friends' problems. They usually got dropped overboard. There must be hundreds of them out there. He wondered what Vicky's sea-people made of these unknown rectangular objects spiralling slowly down...

Liam didn't plan on taking his phone out to sea. Anna had downloaded him an app called ShipTrack. It worked because of satellites and also something called AIS – Automatic Identification System. AIS was so ships didn't run into each other but you could also use it to track them from the land. The app showed ships all over the world but Liam used it to check on the ships he could actually see or that might be heading in their

direction. In case they were bringing trouble. It was better up the cliff because he could see further. Though that hadn't been working so well recently.

He started along the beach. Millions and millions and millions of pebbles; all of them different when you looked close up and all blurring together into a long sweep of golden brown. The tide was low so he could have walked on the harder surface where the stones were mixed with some sand, but that would have meant jumping or climbing over the ends of the breakwaters. He'd misjudged the heights a couple of times and it could have been then that he'd lost his lucky stone.

Except it was more likely he'd lost it on the day he hadn't noticed that all the shingle had been swept off the metal launching track which led from the hut under the cliff to the water. That had totally taken him by surprise. He couldn't think what the track might be going to be used for: the hut wasn't big enough for any sort of boat. He tried the door but it was locked and the padlock looked new. When fishermen had used the track, their boats had lain out on the beach. There weren't any fishermen or any boats anymore. But someone was using that track for something.

Liam trudged through the dry, deep shingle above the high water mark. He skirted the fleshy clumps of sea cabbage, picked up a few random bits of plastic for his litter bag and climbed to the top of the sandy cliff.

The horizon was blurry again today but the app wasn't bothered. It used satellites so it didn't mind what you could actually see. Liam turned the screen brightness up to max and zoomed in to each separate vessel to try and read their info and

add it to his book. He had a headache now and he was glad when it was done. He'd almost lost his brother off this coast. You didn't get over that sort of thing. Next time there were enemies approaching he'd be looking out for them.

It wasn't a high cliff. It was mainly sand, coarse and reddish, held together by plants whose names Liam didn't know. At the top there was grass, dry and rabbit-nibbled, and clumps of brambles which were hard to get around but could give cover if you needed it. People didn't come this way much. And no one could get inland from here because of the high chain mesh fencing topped with barbed wire surrounding the jumble of abandoned buildings and the bare grassy space that used to be the defence station.

Donny had once said casually that all fences had a gap in them if you looked hard enough but Liam and Luke had searched every centimetre of this one, all the way round, getting badly scratched and dirty in the process, and they hadn't found as much as a loose link. When they told Donny, he said he was sorry, he'd mainly meant school fences or building sites, not former RAF defence stations. And this place hadn't just been for defence, it had missiles.

Liam didn't much want to go inside anyway. As well as the half-hidden buildings there were random metal structures and covered mounds. They gave him bad feelings. He kept his back to it and watched the sea.

It was a bright May afternoon with a breeze blowing straight inland. That meant it was coming from the East. Liam wondered what it might be bringing with it. A few people were sailing. They looked as if they were having fun. Donny had said he

might come round with *Strong Winds* when it was half term and that was straight after next week.

His eyes felt gritty. He must have got some sand in them climbing up. He blinked a lot and used some spit but he wasn't sure they felt much better. His left hand reached into his pocket but the lucky stone still wasn't there. He could climb back down to the beach and search for another, he supposed. There wasn't much to go home for: Lottie and Vicky were out, Anna was somewhere with Zander and Luke was at Angel's. After that he was staying with their dad at Fynn Creek. Liam wished he was staying there as well.

Dmitri, the bodyguard from Kaliningrad, wished he was at home. He'd got this job because he was okay with kids. He had a top service record from his time with the Baltic Fleet and he needed money. Most people in Russia needed money and protecting billionaires' children was very well paid. Then the pressure had been put on. Unofficial jobs. Reconnaissance. Extra hours. Extra cash. Nothing to be talked about but an uneasy feeling that this wasn't something that could be refused. Then last night a delivery. Received and hidden. No questions asked. It had been heavy and today he felt tired. Bone-tired.

Dimitri checked up and down the beach, watched out to sea, kept his radio link with the gatehouse at the main entrance. Held on to the key to the beach gate in case the young master chose to take a stroll. Guessed that he wouldn't – Aleksandr Arkadyevich Ivanov wasn't what you'd call the outdoor type.

Dimitri missed his own kids. The weather would be warming up now that it was May, though colder there than here. Vassily

and Tatiana were energetic and adventurous. They might be on the beach; biking, dune-sliding or looking for amber. Keeping out of trouble, he hoped. He sighed as he thought of the pale light on the blue-grey sea, the miles of sand and the miles of forest. He wanted to know what his children were doing and who they were with. He'd never get back the time he was losing from their lives.

He'd watched the little lad from the top floor flat picking his way along the beach and climbing the low cliff. He was the boy with the crippled father. Dmitri had made it his business to investigate the family as soon as Zander began showing such an interest in the oldest girl. He couldn't see they were any sort of threat. Though if he'd been that boy's dad he'd have made it his business to be round more often.

Dmitri tried to convince himself that this separation from his family wasn't any different from when he'd been with the fleet. They had often been away for months at a time, could be years. Living conditions were much harder on a sub, pay was poor and there was a lot there you couldn't talk about. Everything, really.

But this job was so lonely. No chance to get drunk and grouse about the officers. And again, too much he couldn't talk about, even when he rang his wife back home. He didn't like the extras he was being asked to do.

Dmitri comforted himself with the rate he was earning. Not too much longer and he'd be helping his own son get through college, though it wouldn't be a place like this. He'd want Vassily to get some proper learning. Zander wasn't enjoying it much. Kept saying that he'd rather be in London. Dimitri saw his point

but it wasn't his place to say so. This had been the Boss's choice for his only child and there was no doubt that surveillance was easier here.

Dmitri'd been issued with a top-of-the-range GPS tracking device linked into his phone so he could always check Zander's whereabouts – as long as the young master consented to wear the corresponding wristband, expensively incorporated into his designer watch – or carry his modified phone. Dimitri was savvy enough to know that both usually got left in the language school when the lad was with his girlfriend.

"I'd have him micro-chipped if he were mine," Dmitri grumbled to himself. But that reminded him again that his own children were a thousand miles away.

He could be home in less than twenty four hours if the Boss loaned him one of his fleet of fast cars. But his work was here, guarding Zander – and doing those other jobs – until the school term was over and the Ivanovs decided where they were heading for the summer. Dmitri dreamed of weeks in a dacha, berry-picking and mushroom-hunting, family time.

Bodyguards weren't paid to dream. And billionaires were much more likely to spend their summer cruising on a super-yacht than deep in the forest telling tales round the samovar.

Dmitri began to wonder whether he was going down with something. He'd been sick when he'd got in last night, felt a bit feverish when he'd gone to bed and his breakfast had gone straight though him this morning. Hadn't felt like eating since.

He looked out to sea again and along the beach. Then he got a message on his phone –'Pretty Girl. Alone?' and a picture of Tatiana walking home from her music lesson.

Dmitri felt hot, cold and sick to his gut. The palms of his hands were slippery with sweat. He had no idea who'd sent the photo but he knew only too well what it could mean. His worst nightmare – every parent's worst nightmare – looked as if it was about to come true. There was someone he didn't know watching his daughter.

He checked Zander's location. The GPS tracker showed he was in the school study area where Dmitri knew he wasn't. He didn't have time to search. He wanted to pull the jet ski out of the hut on the beach where he'd been told to hide it, run it down the metal track across the shingle and head straight across the water, east and north. He knew that was stupid.

Dmitri texted his wife: 'Keep children close. On my way. Love you.' Then he switched his mobile off, took out a pad and scribbled a note. Set off along the beach to climb the low cliff, shivering as he ran.

"I need your help," he said to Liam. They hadn't ever done more than nod and smile before now. Dimitri was panting, sweating, holding out a piece of paper. "This is for Zander – Aleksandr Ivanov. You know who he is? It's important that he gets it but nobody else. He's with your sister. Can you give it to him for me?"

Liam couldn't read any of the writing.

"It's in Russian. Zander will understand. They'll be in the garden, probably in one of those caves. If you can't find him in one hour, give it to the principal. But you will."

Liam nodded. The man's thank-you was left floating on the air as he plunged down the cliff again and lurched back along the beach. Liam took the private route along the top even

though there were places where he had to crawl. He reckoned he knew where Zander and Anna would be. He didn't want to meet anybody else.

The app on Liam's phone couldn't register a wooden dinghy with no AIS and Dimitri's powerful binoculars couldn't see twelve miles to the northeast, round a point and through a lighthouse. So neither of them had spotted the little boat that was struggling south against the ebb. And both of them had left their lookout points before it was engulfed in sea fog.

