Black Waters

"Every man approached in Flinthammock went off without question in any old boat. 'Di'nt get no further than Ramsgate. Owd boats fell ter pieces,' said Auburn spitefully."
(from *The Oaken Heart* by Margery Allingham)

Black Waters *is dedicated to Claudia Myatt, in gratitude for all the songs she has sung with my mother as well as all exquisite pictures she has drawn for me and all the good advice freely given.*

It is also dedicated to Nicci Gerrard in recognition of the extraordinary shared experience that is John's Campaign.

Black Waters

Julia Jones

VOLUME FIVE
OF THE *Strong Winds* SERIES

Illustrated by Claudia Myatt

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www.claudiamyatt.co.uk

Design by Megan Trudell
www.emdash.me.uk

e-book conversion by Matti Gardner
matti@grammaticus.co.uk

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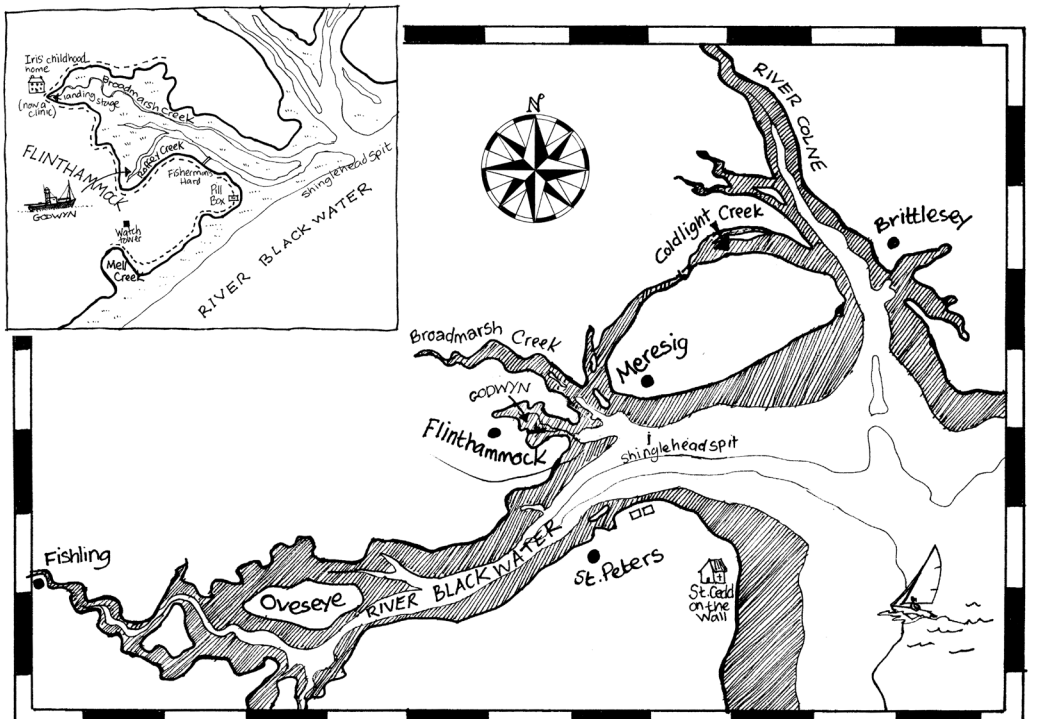
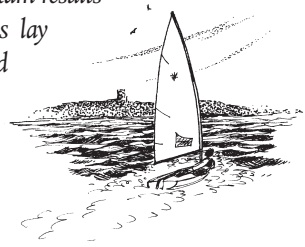

Iris' childhood home
(now a clinic)
Broadmarsh creek
Landing stage
FLINTHAMMOCK
Abbey Creek
Fisherman Hard
Pill Box
Godwyn
Watch tower
Mell Creek
shingle head spit
RIVER BLACK WATER
N
RIVER COLNE
Coldlight Creek
Brittlesey
Broadmarsh Creek
Meresig
GODWYN
Flinthammock
shingle head spit
Fishling
Oveseye
RIVER BLACK WATER
St. Peters
St. Cedd on the Wall

It was everything she could ever have hoped for! They were offering her their full, official sponsorship. It was public affirmation AND a new Laser dinghy. There'd be new kit as well and help with travel expenses if she was competing abroad. It meant she wouldn't need to keep asking her parents. She was sixteen now. It was time she began managing for herself.

She really wanted that new dinghy. She'd won the Area Championships using her younger sister's boat. It was okay but it had been getting old before they bought it. She was still in mourning for her own boat, Spray, *her wave-arrow, her foam-flyer – the dinghy she'd wrecked. If the sponsors brought her a new Laser she'd call it* Spray *as well –* Spray II *maybe – and the spirit would live on.*

The letter from the GB Racing committee had already arrived. The selectors had confirmed the offer they'd made earlier in the year. Xanthe was off their potentials list and into the squad. The letter said that she was expected to attend the Getting2Gold Easter training camp at the National Sailing Academy in Weymouth. By then she'd have the new dinghy and the new equipment which she'd sort of earned for herself.

Xanthe pledged that she would do whatever it took – she'd train harder, get up earlier, watch her diet and her weight, learn everything she could from the top coaches she'd be meeting there. They'd be medal-winners themselves, some of them. Her life of racing stretched before her. Maybe she wouldn't have to bother about exam results and university applications. The Olympics lay glimmering beyond her horizon like the gold at the end of the rainbow. She was on course. Her wave-arrow, her foam-flyer, her new Spray.



CHAPTER ONE

Rule 69

Xanthe was sailing badly and she knew it. She couldn't concentrate: couldn't get that sugar-sweet patronising voice out of her bad-tempered head. Their coach had ordered them to swap dinghies then race two-on-two. A dozen pairs of Laser Radials duelling in the clear blue waters of Weymouth Bay. She was in Madrigal Shryke's *Imperium*: Maddie had Xanthe's *Spray II*. The selectors were watching.

"If the helmsman's good enough, they can step into any boat and win," Griselda, their coach, had said. "Yes, when one of you reaches the final stages – when it's the Olympics and you're against the best in the world – then everything's going to matter. Now and here I don't need you to give yourselves the excuses that a team-mate has a richer sponsor or a better boat. Let's find your weak points now and get them sorted."

"What a treat this'll be for you!" Madrigal had said, smiling as if for camera, with her big, white, perfectly-even teeth. "The chance to take a peep at all those clever little tweaks and niggles my techies have dreamed up for me. Honestly, it's okay if you want to copy across. I mean we're all in this together, aren't we? For now."

Her golden tan was as smooth as if she'd paid for it – which of course she had, though not directly. Everyone knew that she was just home from the Antigua Classics where Daddeh had a Yacht. "The climate's so absolutely perfect for us fair-skinned

types at this time of yeah. You must feel the cold terribly," she had added, turning to Xanthe. "I expect you need thermal undies even in our English summer!"

Xanthe hadn't bothered mentioning the years of childhood she and her sister Maggi had spent on the Canadian Great Lakes before their family returned to live in Suffolk. She knew Madrigal's comment was only one more way to draw attention to her colour. Yes, so Xanthe was the only black teenager competing in the Laser classes at this level – yes, *so*?

At least that's how easily she would have coped before this week at the Getting2Gold training camp. Now she was struggling. She was on her own and missing her family, Maggi especially. Maggi was a sailor too. They'd always competed together, since the days when they'd had little white Optimists and their old Mirror dinghy, *Lively Lady*. Maggi was good but she was in it for fun, not necessarily for winning. This week was only about winning.

Which should have been totally fine because Xanthe was desperate to win. She was capable of winning, she was determined to win. She just wasn't succeeding.

It had got harder and harder to keep her focus. She'd expected that it would have been easier without her sister always teasing her and setting her straight and their parents unobtrusively waiting in the background, watchful and ready to help. But it wasn't.

Xanthe had watched herself on the training video looking tense and uncertain and reacting too soon or too late. This afternoon was the worst yet. She knew she was a better sailor than Madrigal Shryke. Swapping dinghies shouldn't have made any real difference at all. So why couldn't she simply tune her out and win?

The course had started with a deceptively straightforward

down-wind leg, sending each pair of sailors directly away from the harbour and out to sea, giving them time and space to adjust to their borrowed boats and too much time to chat – or to 'sledge' as they'd probably say in cricket. It was almost the end of the week. Xanthe should have been accustomed to Madrigal's subtle put-downs, her fake compliments and the in-jokes, which she knew that Xanthe wouldn't get. Every other competitor was her 'bestie', it seemed, and she could lock Xanthe out of a conversation with a shrug of her shapely shoulders, a lift of plucked eyebrows or a flick of her honey-blonde hair.

Xanthe had mainly walked away. Sailed away. She'd spent all her free time either in the Academy library or out exploring Weymouth Bay – and trying to think. "Let's find your weak points," Griselda had said, "and get them sorted." First part done: second…not so obvious at all.

The water sparkled in the pale sun; the wind blew lightly off the land. It shifted with the swell and dip of the Jurassic coast and curved with the chalky outcrop of Portland Bill. It was tricksy and interesting. That's where her attention should be, not on Madrigal's continuous dissing of *Spray* and her over-excited cooings about how Xanthe'd simply *love* some particular feature of *Imperium*.

"Honestly, her high modulus ropes are to die for! Do get your sponsors to dig a little deeper. Most of the stuff they've given you is so twentieth century. Or did you deliberately down-grade for today?"

"It wouldn't have crossed my mind."

"Of *course* it wouldn't. You're so *refreshingly* straightforward. I expect you grew up with the lateen rig and rush-plaiting!"

"Huh?" Xanthe hadn't noticed how neatly Madrigal

had positioned herself and *Spray* to get maximum tow from *Imperium*'s quarter wave. When she understood what had been said, she lost concentration for a moment, shifted awkwardly and slipped sideways ahead of her rival.

"Ooops, careful," said Madrigal, fouling Xanthe's wind from behind, before luffing slightly and moving upsides.

"I've always imagined you being like those *amazing* footballers who learn in the dust without boots," she continued.

She had a high clear voice with perfect pronunciation. She turned her head to make certain Xanthe could catch every word, whilst simultaneously, expertly, adjusting her balance as *Spray* creamed ahead.

"You've done so well simply to get here – even with the help you've had from the quota system."

"I'm here," Xanthe snapped, "Because I'm the Eastern Area Champion. There is no quota in Suffolk."

"Ooops," said Madrigal again. "Sore spot? *So* sorry!"

With a huge effort Xanthe banished the conversation from her mind. She hung on grimly, inched *Imperium* forward and the two dinghies were almost together as they rounded the first mark. Now for the long up-wind beat.

"Oh *lovely*," called Madrigal, knowing that the assistant coach in the race boat could hear. "Oh well done! You're really starting to get the hang of *Imperium* now. Super!"

Xanthe saw her moment and luffed, seizing the windward position as brutally as she dared. Madrigal didn't seem fazed at all.

"You're sensing how good she is, aren't you?" she called again, not missing a beat as she eased *Spray*'s sheets, sailed through *Imperium*'s dirty wind and held her course smoothly

as she waited for the first wind-shift to call for Water! and to tack across. "What an experience this must be for you!"

It was an experience – but not a good one. Madrigal was sailing her down as if the only thing that mattered was that Xanthe would do badly, not that either of them would do well. They made a hundred tacks where a dozen would have been normal. They pushed each other from side to side, they forced fouls and penalties on one another. Whatever Xanthe tried, she was blocked and she did everything she could to retaliate. It was a battle of tactics.

Her lack of flow and concentration made her sailing worse than it should have been. Slowly and surely Madrigal was getting the upper hand. On the final leg of the course, *Spray* began drawing away from *Imperium*. Madrigal was going to win by a distance.

Xanthe had nothing more to lose. She'd been out sailing at around this same time on the previous afternoon and she'd felt the wind grow stronger as it bent round the inner edge of Portland Bill. She'd take her own line and if she caught that same strengthening – well, at least she'd have had some fun. She was also gambling on the chance of an additional tidal boost.

It seemed to take forever to reach. The assistant coach followed anxiously as if she thought Xanthe'd forgotten the course. Xanthe gritted her teeth and carried on. She didn't even look at Madrigal and *Spray*.

Then she caught it – wind and tide powering her forward. She could feel *Imperium* shifting up a gear. There was more wave motion than she'd expected. That was joy. Xanthe loved sea-sailing. She steered up and surfed down, pumping the Laser's sail to increase her speed on every wave. It was absorbing and delicious. She was rushing on her way.

She didn't lose the race by much but she knew that she'd lost unnecessarily. If she hadn't allowed herself to be so angry and distracted for so long she would have gone up-wind earlier. She would have grabbed every knot of that extra speed – and she would have won. In the mind-games competition Madrigal had totally lapped her. Her moment of elation faded. She felt furious with herself.

"Not bad at all," said Madrigal as she passed *Spray*'s painter to Xanthe but made no move to fetch the launching trolley or help her take the dinghy from the water.

Her own team had been standing ready to wheel *Imperium* away and begin the careful washing-down process before removing the control lines and rolling the sail from head to foot.

"They've given you something quite solid there. It must have been such an unbelievable break for you when those Suffolk container people were forced into offering sponsorship. It was some sort of compensation wasn't it? Or do you think they were trying to make their image more multi-cultural?"

"I've no idea." Xanthe still couldn't credit what she was hearing. "If you're not going to fetch the trolley maybe you could hold the dinghy while I do? If it isn't too much trouble."

"Of *course* not," Madrigal smiled and stepped helpfully towards her.

Somehow this sent *Spray* swinging against the rough concrete of the landing slope. Suddenly there were two deep scratches scored along her hull.

"Oh, I'm *so* sorry! And you haven't any support, have you? Absol*utely* no need to worry, my team will patch her up. After all, it's us under the spotlight: our skills and not our boats – or so

Griselda claims. Between you and me, though, Daddy's certain that the selectors will be looking at the total package. They'll want to know who's bringing the most to the GBR party. He's made a *big* contribution to the Academy. And that's in addition to my sponsorship. He likes to give me what I want."

Madrigal's sponsors were some sort of property firm with a distinctive curved sword as their symbol. (Xanthe happened to know that it was called a seax.) Their spending was legendary. As well as the money that was lavished on *Imperium* they'd provided Madrigal with a different set of logoed clothing for almost every wind direction, let alone temperature change. The men on her support team were employed full-time and had her name and the logos on everything they wore. If Maggi had been here Xanthe would have taken a bet on there being seax patterns on their boxer shorts but she'd felt too much of an outsider to make jokes with anyone else.

Madrigal paused and smiled again. She got a lot of money from sportswear modelling contracts and always seemed to hold each pose those few seconds extra to give the cameras time to click.

She still didn't go for the trolley and Xanthe was definitely not going to leave her alone with *Spray* while she fetched it herself. She stood knee-deep in Portland Harbour wondering whether anyone else would offer help. A half dozen of Madrigal's besties were blocking her access to the ramp.

"Yeah, sure, waddever, but we need to get my dinghy out. The sooner we hit the training room, the sooner Griselda gets her post-mortem done and the sooner we all go to tea."

"Of *course* we must. Everyone's noticed your appetite! It's genetic, isn't it?"

Maggi always said that she didn't know when her sister was most likely to go ape: when she'd just lost a race or when she needed food. At the moment it was both.

"Can I share one teensie thought with you?" said Madrigal, her blonde hair haloed in a shaft of sun. "When I saw you struggling out there in *Imperium* I couldn't help wondering whether you'd ever thought how much it would mean to your own country if you elected to sail for them instead? Wherever it is in Africa that you originally came from…I'm so completely *hopeless* at geography. They probably haven't even got a sailing team! Rig a bathtub and you'd make it unopposed. It wouldn't be like country-shopping; you'd be a national heroine. Your own *tribe*!"

The afternoon breeze seemed to whistle with Madrigal's voice; her sight was full of Madrigal's pretty face and Madrigal's laughing friends; a whiff of Madrigal's flowery fragrance blew sweet in the sea-salt air.

Xanthe stepped up and punched her.

The other girl fell back. She lost her footing and missed the edge of the ramp. Her eyes were wide and her mouth an O of surprise as she tumbled backwards into the shallow water. Her primrose pull-ups were soaked. There was a rip in her lilac logoed windcheater.

Xanthe could not believe herself. How could she have done this? She was totally ashamed. She stepped forward to help her rival up with her hand held out and apologies pouring from her heart.

It was far too late. Madrigal was white with shock and fury. The luvvies were gasping. Griselda had been on her way out from the training room to hurry them along and had seen

Madrigal go down. She was told what had happened – and more – by all of Madrigal's friends.

Xanthe gave up trying. She pushed blindly past and heaved *Spray* onto the ramp. She fetched her trolley, loaded the dinghy and hauled it away.

Madrigal stood dripping and shaking as the sun went in. She refused to move until every single person had expressed their horror and she'd been given a phone to call her parents.

Her father, Sir Hubert Shryke, arrived within half an hour, threatening action for assault. Her mother was there even sooner, ringing Madrigal's orthodontist – despite the fact that Xanthe's punch had landed on her shoulder. Griselda did her best to pacify them. She summoned Xanthe and asked for her explanation but Xanthe found nothing she could say. Her shame at her own behaviour was too raw. Anything she could say would sound like an excuse. So she said nothing.

There was a disciplinary hearing at the Academy the next morning. It should have been informal as the incident hadn't happened in a race situation but the Shrykes had briefed a lawyer. He was a grey, fussy man who earned his fee by invoking International Sailing Federation Rule 69.1. Xanthe was charged with gross misconduct and bringing the sport into disrepute. *A competitor shall not commit gross misconduct including gross breach of a rule, good manners or sportsmanship, or conduct bringing the sport into disrepute. Throughout Rule 69 competitor means a member of the crew, or the owner, of a boat.*

Xanthe's mother, June, and her sister, Maggi, drove down from Suffolk but Xanthe made them wait outside the meeting

room. She didn't want them to hear what would be said. The collapse of her dreams was so utter that she couldn't bear to share it. Not yet – probably not ever.

Inside the meeting she agreed that her punch had been deliberate. She listened dumbly as the assistant coach related the scraps of conversation that she'd heard and when Griselda asked her directly whether there had been provocation, she waited for a moment and then shook her head.

"I was just a sore loser."

The coach tried again to help her but Xanthe couldn't respond. It was too humiliating and too hard to explain – she wasn't ready to understand it herself. Let alone put Madrigal's insinuations into words in a room full of white, uncomprehending faces, however basically kind.

She was thrown off the squad and given a six month racing ban. The Shrykes demanded an injunction that she stay away from their daughter but were finally persuaded not to prosecute. The Ribieros drove home to Suffolk, trailing Xanthe's dinghy.

The first tweets had been posted before they reached the motorway.