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Opening extract from

The Salt-Stained Book

Written by

Julia Jones

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The Salt-Stained Book

Julia Jones

VOLUME ONE
OF THE *Strong Winds* TRILOGY



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This book is dedicated to Bertie, its first reader.

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 propellers.

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.



CHAPTER ONE

Book Stopped

Colchester, Essex, September, 2006

When Skye Walker thought that they were close to meeting Donny's Great Aunt Ellen, she did a very odd thing. She drove them to a town and bought a book.

In many families this would not have been unusual. Mothers of thirteen-year-olds quite often drive into towns and it's not unknown for them to visit bookshops together —as well as buying clothes, sports equipment and electronic games. But for Skye and Donny this was a first time and it looked likely to be their last.

Skye's instincts warned them that there could be trouble but she'd got it coming from the wrong direction.

"Great Aunt Ellen," she had signed. "From the land of the Dakotahs."

Donny had nodded. They both felt wary of this new relation.

"Why should we buy a book?" he signed back. They were stamping out the remains of their small campfire and concealing all traces of the night they'd spent down an empty farm track in the last stages of their journey south.

"Nokomis said that it would help you."

If that's what Granny had said, that was okay by him.

So far in Donny's life, he'd always lived with Skye and Granny. Their rented bungalow on the outskirts of Leeds had

been their safe place, their private world. They had their own language – sign language – told their own stories, looked after each other. Donny went to school of course and did all the normal things – but normal at school and normal at home were different normals. They didn't usually mix.

The private world was mainly for Skye, his mum. She was the one who used the special names. In the normal world Granny's name was Edith, not Nokomis.

Edith Walker and Ellen Walker. Sisters. That should have been all right. Except Donny and Skye didn't know anything about Ellen. Hardly even that she existed until now.

Granny was dead. She had a stroke and lay helpless; then she had another and was gone. After that it was like the fence had fallen down. Social Services and Learning Services and Health Services and Welfare Rights Advisers and Mental Health Officers and Housing Officers and Disability Living Consultants began coming in one after another to make Assessments of him and Skye. Mostly Skye. They asked the same questions time and again and didn't seem to listen to the answers.

Quite often these unwanted visitors didn't even bring a signer when they came to Assess Skye. This bewildered Donny. Surely they must have known that his mother had been profoundly deaf from birth and was so dyslexic as to have almost no idea of written language. Else why had they come?

They had Concerns, they said.

Granny, who organised everything, hadn't quite organised

their survival without her. Death had been too quick.

The first thing that had happened was a man they didn't know came and searched Granny's room. He was a small man in a suit and a dark tie. He showed them some sort of ID but Donny wasn't really clear who he was. He said it was routine. To ascertain the Last Wishes. Maybe he was an undertaker or a lawyer or something. They didn't see him again so Donny couldn't ask him what he'd thought the Last Wishes were.

It was the small man who had found the letter in Granny's drawer. It was right on the top, very tidy and was addressed to her only surviving relative, her sister, Miss Ellen Walker, Shanghai, People's Republic of China. It could have been there for a while, Donny didn't know, but it was ready stamped and licked shut. The small man said he'd take it. He'd post it for them. No need to worry.

Donny was suddenly certain that he didn't want this man to have Granny's letter. He grabbed it back from him quite rudely and ran out of the house and down to the corner of the street where there was a post box. He shoved it in and as he turned to walk home again he saw the post van pulling up to make the afternoon collection.

The small man had left by the time he returned. Granny's address book and her most recent diary had left too.

"Who is Great Aunt Ellen?" he'd asked Skye later.

But Skye's signing had gone wobbly.

"Pirate," he thought she said. Or was it fighter? She'd started counting complicated patterns on her worry beads and rocking slightly. It had been a horrible day and they were both

tired and sad. So Donny had put his arms around her and hugged her tight and soon she hugged him back.

Donny didn't ask any more questions about Great Aunt Ellen. He just made sure that he was up and ready for the postman every morning. Skye couldn't read but he could.

The letter must have taken ages getting to Shanghai because they'd had Granny's first and second funerals by the time Great Aunt Ellen's answer came. Maybe the stamps had been wrong.

The first funeral hadn't been much good. It was in the crematorium and there was only him and Skye and a couple of neighbours. And a social worker. Donny supposed one of them must have organised it. The man giving the talk didn't seem to know anything at all about Granny. He even said she'd 'taken on' Skye as if she was some heavy burden rather than a beloved daughter. Donny'd been signing the service to his mother but he skipped that bit.

Skye hadn't looked very interested anyway. In the first weeks after Granny died she'd spent a long time working on a piece of wood, which she'd said was called a grave-post. It was brightly coloured and carved in ways that were particular to Granny. Donny thought it was beautiful. He expected they would keep it for ever.

When Skye had finished she left the grave-post one last night and a day in Granny's room with all Granny's clothes and hairbrushes and things. Then she took it out into the garden and burned it.

As the sparks flew up into the twilight, Skye signed to him that they were letting Granny go and all her problems and her

pain and they would keep their happy memories. What problems? What pain? Donny wondered briefly. Skye stretched her arms upward in farewell; the paint blistered and flared. The edges of the flame burned black.

Granny's clothes and shoes and brushes and bed-sheets went into a bin liner and Donny never saw them again.

It was a pity they couldn't get rid of the visitors so easily. Then they'd have got on okay. Donny thought so anyway. He went to school as usual and did the shopping while Skye washed and wove, baked flat bread and cooked aromatic meals. He tried asking if there was paperwork that they ought to do. He thought he needed to understand Skye's money and how they paid the rent and things. But of course the visitors told him not to worry which wasn't any help at all.

Then he very nearly missed getting Great Aunt Ellen's telegram because he hadn't expected it to come by messenger and he was so fed up answering the door to people with clipboards and zipped cases.

He read the telegram to Skye (or part of it) and they left. As soon as the school term ended Skye packed their food and clothes, and the few things they cared about, into the camper van that Granny had used for holidays.

"Going to wait for Aunt Ellen," she'd signed. "Better a Dakotah than these frowny-faces. You tell me where."

They could have walked it faster. It took them all of August to come south, travelling a few miles most days and stopping when they liked somewhere. They used country roads and stayed in woods and on the edges of fields. Skye drove (very

slowly) and Donny navigated. People were usually surprised that Skye could drive at all. Granny had taught her years ago when they'd been staying on a big campsite for their summer holiday. Then she'd gone to some special tribunal to get her a licence. Granny had been like that: always ready to fight for Skye.

By the time they got near the end of their journey it was September and Donny should have been back at school. That was when Skye signed that they needed to go into a town. A town with big shops: a town where they could buy a book.

"You don't ask much, do you, mum," he didn't say. He could see from the road map that they were quite near a place called Colchester which looked big enough to have a bookshop but he hadn't got a town plan and there'd be pedestrian areas and one-way systems. How was he going to get them in there? He couldn't sign to Skye while she was driving because she had to watch the road. They'd get lost and she might panic.

In the end he decided that they should go into the first car park they found and walk the rest. Symbols were okay so he drew her a white P in a blue background and showed it to her before they left. It got them into the car park anyway. They might have used some sort of service entrance by mistake but they'd done it. They'd parked the van and bought their ticket and now they were in the bookshop.

"We'd like a book with children and an island please," Donny asked. "And a lake. And boats."

Skye seemed to know exactly what they'd come for. She wanted pirates and treasure as well. A green parrot. All of them, in one book. Quickly.

"No," he said, "I don't know what it's called. Or who wrote it."

Skye was getting excited and Donny was finding it increasingly hard to keep up with her and to interpret her sign language for the bookshop staff.

"No, we haven't seen it on TV. We haven't actually got a TV. And I don't think it can be a new book because my Granny told her about it. And she's dead."

This was embarrassing. A crowd was beginning to gather as if they thought this was performance art – like juggling in the street or pretending to be a statue. People did often stare at Skye. Mainly Donny didn't take any notice but today it was getting to him. Okay, Skye was … unusual-looking. She was tall and big with a coppery skin and long dark hair which she plaited with bright ribbons. She wore tie-die kaftans and beaded skirts, which she made herself, plus lace-up shoes, a man-size anorak and sensible woolly jerseys.

The anorak and jerseys were Granny's choice. Old Nokomis (a.k.a. Miss Edith Walker) had been a small neat woman obsessed with keeping people warm. When Donny was younger she'd regularly sent him to school wearing two vests and two jerseys and two pairs of socks. It was as if she couldn't quite believe that schools had central heating.

Dear Granny … Donny missed her every single day. But he did sometimes wish that she and Skye could have harmonised their taste in clothes.

"That's sick! I know what she wants!"

One of the shop assistants – a girl dressed as a Goth with a white face, black clothes and studs – gave a sudden, delighted

smile and turned purposefully to the children's section.

"She wants *Swallows and Amazons*!"

The book she pulled out was a bulky beige and purple paperback, with some crudely drawn children on a turquoise sea. Skye looked uncertain. Then the girl opened the front cover and showed her more pictures and a map of a lake. There were drawings all through the book. Skye's face brightened. She seemed hugely relieved.

"Granny's secret book," she signed to Donny. "For you. Explains."

He paid the assistant gladly though it took almost all the rest of their money. That didn't matter: they'd still got lots of tinned food on the van and they wouldn't need to buy much more petrol now. Donny knew that he could always understand his mother when she was calm and they had time. She would tell him later what it was that Granny had wanted this *Swallows and Amazons* book to explain. What the secret was.

As it turned out there wasn't a later. They took a wrong turn in the car park and the camper van got stuck under a height bar. Then a queue built up and people began hooting and sticking their heads out of their windows and shouting. The car park manager was called and a breakdown van.

Skye couldn't hear the shouting but she knew they were trapped. Like a squall coming out of sunshine she had the worst panic attack she'd had for years. She clutched the steering wheel until her knuckles showed white and she screamed.

Then someone called the police and the police noticed that

the van's tax disc was out of date and Donny didn't know about its insurance or its MOT or where Skye kept her driving licence. He knew she had one but he wasn't sure that they believed him.

All the while Skye was screaming. And there was nothing he could do to help.

In the end he sat down in despair and cried as he hadn't cried for years for himself and for her and for dear dead Granny, who would certainly have checked the tax and insurance before they went on holiday and would have known where all the papers were. Granny would have seen in advance that the van wasn't going to make it out beneath the bar. He should have seen it. He was useless. How long before Great Aunt Ellen would get here and take over all this responsibility?

Plenty of people did get there. A fire engine arrived and an ambulance, then a second police vehicle. Two of the firemen took down the height bar; then a truck arrived and hooked up the camper van to winch it onto a low trailer.

"Where are you doing with our van?" Donny asked but they didn't answer him. "You can't just take it, it's got all our stuff in it!" he shouted.

"You'll have to speak to them about that," said the truck driver jerking his thumb towards the policemen who were talking into their radios. Then he swung himself up into his cab and towed the van away.

A paramedic in a fluorescent jacket tried to offer Skye a sedative. She let go the steering wheel and knocked it from his hand. She got out, looking wildly round for Donny. Quick as anything, as if they'd been waiting for the chance, they put

some sort of jacket on her, strapped her to a stretcher and gave her an injection.

Then the stretcher was inside the ambulance and there was a policewoman standing next to Donny telling him not to worry and his mum would be all right now.

"Where are they taking her? I need to go with her."

"Not in the ambulance, dear. You're too young. They're taking her to the hospital and she'll have a nice sleep."

"I'm thirteen. I need to be there. For when she wakes up."

"No. Not just now. We'll take you home and find someone to look after you. Where's your dad today?"

"I don't have a dad." He'd never had a dad. He didn't know anything about his dad at all. Dads didn't feature. Skye hadn't had one either.

The policewoman didn't look especially surprised.

"Well, there must be somebody. Don't you have any other relations? Friends? A neighbour maybe who can keep an eye on you? Where do you live? We'll run you home and I'll stay while you get in touch with someone."

"No. We don't live near here at all. We've come from Leeds. We're planning to meet my Great Aunt Ellen. I really do need to be with Skye. She doesn't like hospitals. They frighten her."

"Skye?"

"My mum. It's difficult for her to understand people because she's deaf. I've learned signing. I can explain."

"They're used to deaf people in hospitals, dear. She's in the best place. It's you we've got to worry about. Where are you meeting Auntie? Can I give her a ring and tell her we're bringing you round to her house? What's Auntie's number?"

"No!" Donny was feeling desperate. "She's not here yet. We're meeting her at a place called Shotley. We were going to wait for her. I need to be with Skye."

"Never mind Mum. Let's just think about Auntie. Shotley's not too far away. I'm sure she won't mind coming a little early if we let her know that Mum's been taken ill. Does she have a mobile?"

"NO! She's coming from China. In a ship … I think …"

The policewoman was looking disapproving now. Oh why did Great Aunt Ellen have to be so awkward? Why couldn't she have been like Granny?

But it was no good thinking like that. He needed to sound confident, even if he wasn't. He looked at the policewoman and tried to smile.

"We'll be quite alright waiting in the van. Skye likes the van. We've had lots of holidays in it before."

"With proper tax and insurance I hope. No, young man, if your mother's ill and there's no one else in the area to look after you, I'm afraid you've going to have to come back to the station with me. We need to have a little chat with the Child Protection Unit."

