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Opening extract from

# The Lion of Sole Bay

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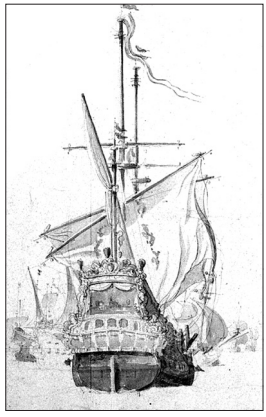
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# The Lion of Sole Bay



"Between four and five o'clock I saw the *Greenwich* board a disabled Dutch ship which had fallen among our ships. The *Greenwich* took her and carried her away."
*The Journal of John Narborough, Lieutenant and Captain of the* Prince, *May 28th 1672.*

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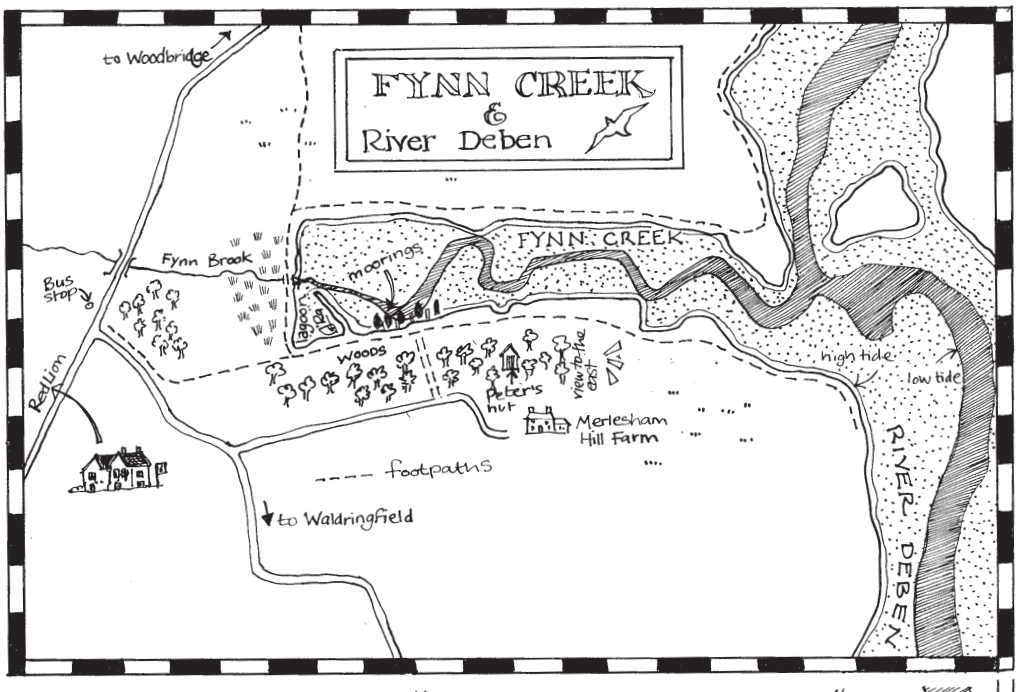
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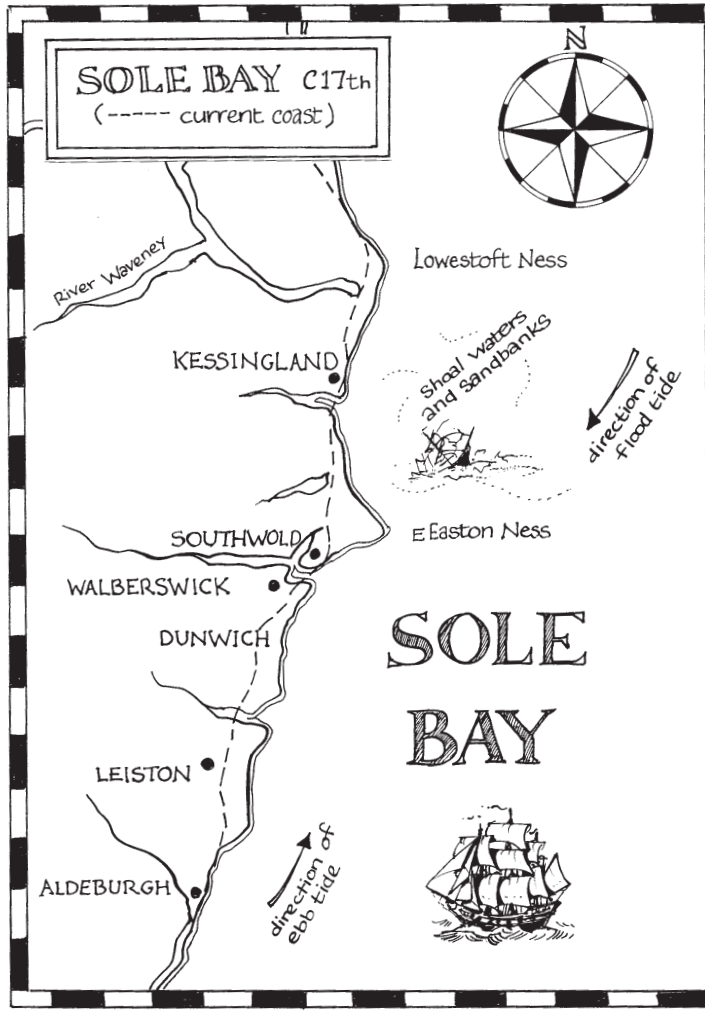
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*Strong Winds* series


to Woodbridge
FYNN CREEK
&
River Deben
FYNN CREEK
Fynn Brook
moorings
Bus stop
lagoon
Woods
Peter's hut
view to the east
high tide
low tide
Redlion
Merlesham Hill Farm
footpaths
to Waldringfield
RIVER DEBEN


SOLE BAY C17th
(----- current coast)
N
River Waveney
Lowestoft Ness
KESSINGLAND
Shoal waters and sandbanks
direction of flood tide
SOUTHWOLD
E Easton Ness
WALBERSWICK
DUNWICH
SOLE BAY
LEISTON
ALDEBURGH
direction of ebb tide

CHAPTER ONE



# Halloween I

Friday 31 October, moon entering the last quarter

*Luke, Angel*

Luke waited until he was certain he couldn't hear the car any more. Then he waited a little longer. It was a quiet car. So quiet the engineers had to fix a noise to tell people the engine was on. What if Lottie or Anna remembered one more thing and came back? He needed to know they were completely gone.

Then he let himself through the wicket gate and into the magic wood. He wasn't going down the asphalt track or through the cleared picnic area. He was living in the Land of Legends now. He was on a Quest.

Luke crouched low as he traversed the top hedge. It was brambly and bristling. There were nettles in the grass.

His backpack was no trouble. In his mind he'd taken out the t-shirts, pyjamas, boots and spare jeans and refilled it with imaginary weapons and a magic cloak. The extra blanket, sleeping bag and buoyancy aid were awkward because they were bulky and the supermarket carrier – loaded with all the provisions Lottie seemed to think he'd need for a week – was a complete pain. Its handles were too small to fit over his shoulders and, because Luke was still quite short for his age, it dragged through the damp grass. When he tried to lift it higher, it banged against his ankles. He might get jumped at any moment.

How could he use his sword arm while carrying stuff like this?

For a moment Luke considered running down the track to the moorings and leaving his luggage on his dad's boat. Coming up and starting his Quest again.

That would be one life lost before he'd properly begun.

Luke paused and glanced round, checking for danger. Then he put down the buoyancy aid, the sleeping bag, the blanket and the food carrier and slipped the backpack off his shoulders. He opened it and rummaged inside. In a game all this would be his inventory. He pulled out the scarf Lottie had forced him to pack.

"It's nearly November," she'd said. "There's no heating on *Lowestoft Lass* and you'll be out of doors most of the time – except in the mornings on the kayak course. People who work outside need to dress sensibly. Even Bill would agree with me about that."

Lottie was his step-mum. He mainly liked her quite a lot. He wasn't certain that he always liked the way she talked about his dad. Lottie was getting banished from his life this week along with all the rest of them – especially her daughter Anna, his know-everything step-sister.

Luke's dad was Bill Whiting. He worked part-time in a boat-yard. Bill was Liam's dad as well, and Vicky's. Liam and Vicky had chosen to go to Italy with Lottie and Anna. They'd all be on the main road to the airport by now.

Lottie was a singer. Her career had gone quiet after she'd had Vicky but now she was making a comeback and she had a recording date at a studio in Milan. Anna was going because she sort of managed her mother and Vicky would go anywhere as long as she didn't get left behind.

Liam was going – almost out of his head with excitement

– because Anna had booked tickets to a Champions' League football match with Manchester United and AC Milan in the San Siro stadium. She said it was his Christmas and birthday in advance. Probably for ever.

Luke didn't like football and had managed to make out he wasn't that bothered about seeing the recording studio or going on an aeroplane. He hadn't never in his whole life spent time alone with his dad. There'd been his mum when he was a baby. And then, later, there'd been Lottie. Then his dad had gone away and Lottie had gone too and all of them – him, Liam, Vicky and Anna – had been taken into care.

They'd met Donny and Gold Dragon and *Strong Winds*. And Xanthe and Maggi and Skye. The bad days were like a done dream. No more shouting or worry about money. They could be what they liked now.

Bill had been paid out for some salvage and he'd bought an old wooden fishing boat called *Lowestoft Lass* which he was beginning to restore. He and Luke were going to live on *Lowestoft Lass* all week and Bill had said he could do with some practical help.

No-one had ever described Luke as practical. Practical was mainly Liam. Luke, they said, was dreamy.

Now Luke was ready to enter the wood above the water. He wasn't going to come out the same person as the Luke who lived at home with the rest of them at Bawdsey. Nor the Luke who went to school neither. If he got through this wood safely, then he was going to come out someone new for this week: someone who would make his dad feel proud of him.

He looked at his bags and bundles – all that for one half-term holiday!

He hooked the scarf through one arm of the buoyancy aid and through both handles of the food carrier. He wrapped the next bit around the blanket and tied some knots, but then it wasn't long enough so he extended it with a pair of thermal leggings. Another of Lottie's orders. You wouldn't think she was as bossy as Anna but she was. He'd had to pack a full set of waterproofs as well!

The sleeping bag got shoved into the carrier on top of the eggs and bread, then he fastened the loose end of the leggings to his backpack. Hitched the backpack over his shoulders so that he was pulling everything else behind him. It wasn't exactly how it would work in a game but it left both his arms free for attack and defence plus it would brush out his tracks if there were sniffer monsters on the trail.

Luke fitted an imaginary arrow to his imaginary bow and carried on to the place where the trees grew close together and he could begin his descent to the river unseen by mortal eyes.

The supermarket carrier twisted and bumped. It must have brushed out his tracks pretty well on the grass as he made it into the wood without being jumped once. But then it started snagging against undergrowth and fallen twigs. It was possibly worse in the few places where it did run free as it collected a whole bow-wave of leaves which fanned out behind him. He was leaving a track like a motorway.

Jabberjays flew shrieking from the branches. Ivy snaked up and down the tree trunks while grey-brown roots lay across his path like old, gnarled knucklebones. The next section of the wood floor was littered with small, greeny-brown balls. They were totally spiny. They looked explosive.

Luke stopped and took off the backpack. Then he tried to untie the bundles but the knots were strained too tight. He stood up slowly and rotated 360 degrees, imaginary bowstring pulled taut against his ear, squinting intently along his imaginary arrow. Nothing dared move but he knew that they were waiting. A dark-green holly loomed twenty feet high. He'd never seen a bush so tall. It was a wood giant, robed and sinister among the brown and gold of the autumn leaves. He wondered how soon it would transform.

Luke wasn't used to being on his own. They'd all been in the car, cases packed and changes of clothes ready, when Lottie picked him and Anna up from school. She'd brought snacks but there wasn't hardly time to eat anything as she drove round the head of the creek and along the narrow road to the gate at the beginning of the track. They'd been carrying on the row about them dropping him at the top and not coming all the way through the wood to the boat.

"Bill won't be back from work yet and I really need to know you're safe."

"What's different about being safe at the top of a track and safe at the bottom end? I'm twelve now. I can take myself down. I've gotta do things for myself sometimes. You even said so."

"Ring me then. As soon as you get there."

"But you'll be driving."

"Okay. Ring Anna."

"Might not have reception." He could see they were about to gang up and insist. "Okay, okay, I'll text you when I can."

These days were short. Luke remembered it was Halloween and looked back at the wood giant. Was there something stirring

in its twisted leaves? He needed to check out the area. Create a forcefield maybe. He couldn't do that carrying a backpack and a blanket and a buoyancy aid and a supermarket bag. He propped them together and used the first of his invisibility philtres. He hadn't got many, even playing by imaginary rules.

Then he was off, darting from tree to tree, leading his pursuers away from his inventory and away from the moorings as well. He was planning to reach Fynn Creek further down. There was a path between the riverbank and the trees that would bring him round and back to the houseboats. He needed to arrive at *Lowestoft Lass* from an unsuspected direction. He'd only got a week. He had to start it special.

✦ ✦ ✦

Halloween. Trick or treat. Most of the other Year Eights were going round each other's houses. No-one had invited Angel and, even if they had, her parents would have fussed. They'd have wanted phone numbers. Find out who was organising. Ring the other parents. Check she wouldn't be exposed to flashing lights or eating the wrong food or over-excited.

To be fair they'd had some bad experiences in the days when everyone got asked to everyone else's parties. Angel's mum and dad had invariably been called within the first half hour to come and take their daughter away.

She wasn't a kid any more. She wasn't going to go home and bob apples. So she told her parents she might have an after-school rehearsal for a Christmas show. That seemed far enough away to be safe.

She didn't have any idea what she was going to do – except she was going to do something. If she hung around until it was nearly dark she might find a group of other people in her year and they might not notice it was her. Rules changed on Halloween. She'd bought a mask.

Her parents were so pleased it was embarrassing. Her mum got out her diary to pencil in the date and her dad wanted to ring the school straight away for tickets. Angel had to switch her story fast.

"It's not like that. Not for parents. It's just a tutor group thing. We might be doing a dance for end-of-term assembly."

Well, they might have been doing a dance for end-of-term assembly. Except they weren't. And she wouldn't have been in it if they were.

Angel didn't feel comfortable with telling lies and making plans so she did the whole day in school. Thought she'd go crazy. Didn't even bunk at lunchtime. Couldn't believe how boring it was. And people did this all the time?

Her phone was confiscated second period to stop her messing about. She was sent out in third period and by fourth she was in isolation. She'd never last in school till she was sixteen. Today she was doing it for her mum and dad. This once.

Angel was straight down the skate-park as soon as the clock hit half-past. Didn't wait for the bell or get her phone back. Grabbed her bag and punched the exit knob, then jumped down the steps of isolation, dodged through the cars and the bikes and the buses and ran.

Angel was quick and she had brilliant balance. She'd gone out over the roof at one of her primary schools. At some places

they'd thought she might be an athlete or a gymnast so her mum and dad had tried taking her to all sorts of different coaching sessions. They still hadn't completely given up. Every half-term and holiday they paid out and persuaded her along. The clubs they chose all felt like school – people talking at you all the time and waiting ages for your turn. Angel was a rubbish listener and she hated standing still. The other kids would get annoyed and start picking on her. Then there'd be a fight.

She'd got her tracksuit in her bag. It was black, with a hood. Wicked! As soon as she reached the public conveniences she changed into it and shoved her skirt and blazer in the bag instead.

Angel gave a skip of relief. She hated skirts. You could wear trousers to secondary school but they hadn't known that when she joined and her mum and dad said they weren't going to buy trousers until she'd grown out of the skirt. Basically they'd got fed up with buying her new uniforms cos she got thrown out of schools so often.

Angel hadn't got thrown out of Fitzgerald (so far) but she hadn't grown either. She'd always been small and she'd learned that if you were the smallest in the class you needed to be tough. That was partly why she'd dyed her hair red at the beginning of the second year. She gelled it to make it spring out from her head like a mane – warning people to back off. Her mum and dad hated it of course. It was no good trying to explain why she'd done it.

The skate-park was good. If she had a bike or a board of her own she'd be down here all the time. She'd given up asking her parents. It was partly the kit was expensive but mainly they were

worried she would hurt herself. There wasn't no-one responsible at the skate-park.

Angel knew that it was mainly the pills she had to take that made them fuss. And she wasn't any good at thinking about risk. They'd offered to buy her a scooter for her birthday if she'd completed a whole page of the frigging Behaviour Modification star charts that Extended Learning kept giving her.

And she had! But then the scooter was one of them stupid little folding ones. Her mum had bought it and it was pink …

Angel had run out of the house and down to the railway line and taken herself off to Ipswich and hadn't come back all day. When she did come home she knew her mum had been crying and her dad was in a grump. She'd tried to say sorry but she just couldn't see why they couldn't see it. She'd asked if she was adopted but that made her mum cry some more and anyway they said that she wasn't. She must have been swapped at the hospital.

There was a gang of hard-lads at the skate-park. They were older than Angel and they didn't do school. They did cigarettes and beers and other stuff and then they started shouting or got silly. When they were hanging-out the other kids soon went home.

They had all the kit though – stunt-bikes and skate-decks – and Angel knew they were as bored as she was. If she played up to them a bit, they'd usually let her use a deck or a bike. Then she could practise the wheelies and the flips, the grinds and the three-sixties that made them watch her and tell her she was a dude. She'd be buzzing and scared enough to concentrate.

If she got scared too much…that was different.

It didn't work out so well today. The lads had been there a while already and they were getting restless. It wasn't long before they took back the kit they'd lent her. Then they headed for the train station and the river wall. It wasn't worth her splitting and going back up the town cos it wasn't dark yet. Angel balanced across the railway bridge and did hand-flips on the flat top of the covered seating. The lads passed a bike up for her to try some stunts but then a couple of passers-by shouted that they were calling the police so they took it back and slouched on towards the boatyard.

Angel had been in school all day. Her body fizzed and crackled with unused energy. Maybe she could climb the crane. She'd leave if they started swearing at anyone or doing damage.

They were over the No Admittance gate – bikes and all – and into the Phoenix Yard. There were a load of boats standing out of the water on the stones. Some of them were on trailers but there were others propped up on telegraph poles or metal legs. The surface was pebbles so it wasn't any good for boarding but the lads had a couple of well-small bikes and soon they were daring each other to ride in and out of the props, close under the boats. You had to duck right down to do it.

Angel was the best obviously because she was the smallest but the others couldn't be beat by her because she was a girl. So they got stupider and louder and started showing off more and taking more risks.

They none of them noticed that the boatyard wasn't empty. There was still a bloke there, black woolly hat and a donkey jacket, clearing up before he left.

If people were on their own they didn't normally tangle with

the hard-lads. They shouted from a safe distance or got out their phones. But this bloke stopped what he was doing and came walking over towards them as if he had something to say, something to explain maybe.

Whatever it was they didn't get to hear it.

Angel had found the lowest boat of all. Little yellow one – *Gingerbread Man* – she liked that name. "You can't catch me!" she'd yelled and she'd gone under really fast. Her head right down, crouched flat to the handlebars. She'd felt the underneath of *Gingerbread Man* brushing the back of her hoodie.

One of the big lads was right behind her. Tanking it. Then he saw he wasn't going to make it under and he bottled. Spun his bike hard round and hit the first of the three telegraph poles that were chocked against the boat for legs. Hit it straight out.

*Gingerbread Man* lurched sideways.

The lads shoved Angel off the bike. They grabbed it and then they ran. Over the gate and across the railway line and…gone.

Angel saw the second leg begin to slide and she double-somersaulted backwards. The bloke in the donkey jacket couldn't have looked properly. He was running towards the boat with his arms out as if he thought he could stop the fall. She might have blanked for a minute, or maybe she just shut her eyes.

The man caught the boat all right. It came right down on top of him. Would have squashed him completely if the poles hadn't still been there. They were lying flat but they were thick and solid. They kept *Gingerbread Man* just that last bit off of the ground.

It wasn't a big boat but big enough. The man was stuck under the part towards the back where it started curving up again.

Angel could only see his top half.

"Guys!" she screeched. "Come back!"

But the lads were gone and the bloke on the ground wasn't saying anything and it was, finally, getting dark.

"Help, somebody help!"

There wasn't anyone and she didn't have her phone. She forced herself to crawl over to the man. She could see that he was totally trapped. She couldn't see whether he was alive.

"Hey!" she said, not loud. "Hey, mister?"

But he didn't answer. He was breathing which was something. There wasn't much more. His face was sort of whitey-green and his eyes didn't open. Not even when she leaned right close.

Angel tried to get her hands in his pockets case he had a phone on him. Knew it was urgent for an ambulance. Couldn't reach though. Bloody boat was in the way.

She stood up and screamed for help again. She sort of sensed that the lads hadn't all gone. That a couple of them might've stopped and turned back, needing to see what they'd done.

"Call an ambulance," she shouted into the shadows. "If you won't use your own phones, get into their office and use that. He's hurt really bad. You've got to or he might not make it. And tell them they need lifting gear. I don't know you. You don't know me neither."

She guessed they'd do it. Specially now it was dark and they could break into the office. They wouldn't have used their own phones – too scared to get caught.

It might be ages before the ambulance came. You turned their head didn't you? Case they were sick.

His head was heavy and the ground was lumpy with pebbles.

Angel sort of propped his head on her leg while she pulled off her sport-sack and got her blazer out. Made him a pillow with it. Kept his face off the damp.

She couldn't think what else. There was one of his hands available so she hung on to that.

Then Angel tried to say sorry. Tried to tell him it was going to be okay.

✦ ✦ ✦

Luke's Quest got put on pause once he'd crossed the gangway onto *Lowestoft Lass* and stepped down onto her scuffed grey deck. She felt safe. Like home, even though she wasn't.

The tide had lifted her out of the mud and he could see more than halfway down Fynn Creek. It was almost high water. The shallows were hidden and only the positioning of the red and green marker buoys revealed what a winding channel you had to follow if you wanted to reach the River Deben beyond.

Bill had had to bring *Lowestoft Lass* into the creek on the top of a spring flood to manoeuvre her safely into her berth. Luke wondered, fleetingly, how the long Dutch barge next door had managed to get in at all. She was from Amsterdam: Hooge 52 tonnes. That meant weight, he supposed. Her name was *Drie Vrouwen*.

It was a good spot where the moorings were. Right at the top of the navigable creek before the Fynn became non-tidal and changed its name from Fynn Creek to Fynn Brook. Luke and Liam had chased each other across the flood bank at the west end. Then they'd dared each other to climb down to check out the metal sluice that controlled the water flowing in from the

brook to the creek. It was just a trickle at low tide but when the tide was high or there'd been a lot of rain it came surging through. You could see why there were DANGER notices.

Fynn Brook arrived through reed beds with lots of different streams joining together. There was plenty of exploring to be done. Adventures, probably.

The high, sloping wood on the south side sheltered the moorings from the prevailing wind. There was a clutter of miscellaneous vessels secured to stakes and jetties. All sorts but mainly small. The people who came here a lot called themselves the creekies. They seemed a cheery bunch. There'd been barbecues in the summer.

Bill mainly liked Fynn Creek because it was cheap and you could get on with your work without being disturbed. If he'd kept *Lass* in Phoenix Yard there'd always have been people wanting him to help with all their jobs and his dad didn't seem to know how to say no. It was typical he wasn't back yet. He'd still be clearing up after everyone else had left to start the weekend.

His dad spent most of his free time on *Lowestoft Lass*. Didn't seem to want to come home to the rest of them in the big house at Bawdsey. Not unfriendly. More out of place.

Same with the holiday. It had been organised by Anna, who wasn't anything to do with Bill. She was paying but Luke was sure she'd asked Bill if he'd like to come. Asked as if she meant it. But his dad had said no.

Didn't matter. He hadn't gone to Italy either. They were going to have dads'n'lads this half-term. He'd never slept on *Lowestoft Lass* before. Been visiting on board and playing about with Liam but not slept. He could imagine the days when she'd been

buffeting out in the stormy seas. Away from home for weeks at a time, seeking her finny fortune.

Bill had been a fisherman before any of them had been born. And his family before him. When he bought *Lowestoft Lass*, he'd also bought a solid, flat, plastic dinghy and then he'd got some nets as well and he'd gone fishing in the summer evenings in the warm shallow water at the edge of the river.

Luke had been there when he'd caught a half dozen tiny sea bass. They were twisting and struggling in the net. Gills opening and shutting, desperate, like tiny wings that couldn't fly. His dad had tipped them all back. Said it was because of their size but it could've been because he saw Luke couldn't cope.

Luke was going to have to man up this week. Try not to think too much. Forget Land of Legends, maybe. All that stuff with heroes and monsters.

He got out his mobile to text Lottie:

`Safe. Love u xx`

But it wouldn't send.

He decided to make him and his dad some tea. Wasted loads of matches trying to light the gas before he realised it was off at the cylinder. Then he remembered he'd left all his bags at the top of that slope, including milk and stuff. If he ran up there to fetch them, using the asphalt track this time, his phone would get reception. His message to Lottie would ping off from the top and he'd be back with all the food and luggage before Bill could begin to wonder where he'd got to. They might meet. He wasn't sure which way his dad came home.

Luke shivered suddenly – violently – though he wasn't cold.

He'd told Liam that if you shivered like that it meant someone

walked over your grave. But Anna had got cross and said that was superstitious rubbish. An involuntary muscular reflex was all it was, she said.

It was a good thing, Luke thought, that his step-sister was always right. He couldn't see anyone as he left *Lowestoft Lass* and it was starting to get dark. There were birds flapping in the trees like trapped spirits; branches cracking like crushed bone. If he emptied his mind and forgot Halloween and didn't think of graves and ran until he was onto the asphalt path, he probably wouldn't shiver again.

It was like trying to make yourself stop having hiccups just by holding your breath. It didn't entirely work.

✦ ✦ ✦

Angel was holding the man's cold hand and talking to him and listening out for the ambulance and trying to see which bits of him the boat was squashing. And she was sort of praying – which was something she'd never done before – and she was feeling the pebbles sticking into the side of her leg and the other foot getting pins and needles and wondering how long this was going to be and whether the man would die and if she could move without making things worse and what her mum and dad were going to say and hoping they would never find out.

She was thinking angry thoughts about the lads who had run off and envious thoughts wishing she'd run off with them.

Her whole body was starting to jump and to fidget like it did at Sunday lunch or in assemblies but she knew that this time she was going to sit still and she was going to channel all those tickly

feelings into one bright stream. And that bright stream was gold and scarlet and warm and it was going to run together out of every bit of her and across into the man's cold hand. Then it was going to flow up and along his limp arm like molten metal until it brought the life back into his heart and brain. She wasn't going to allow this crushed man to freeze away.

Angel's foot wanted to kick something. There was an itch nibbling at the middle of her back. Her shoulder twitched. Mentally she grabbed the whole lot of them and pulled them into line. They were to go down her arm and into the man's hand. No argument.

She carried on talking to him. Made it louder and more definite. Promised him he was going to be all right.

His breathing was weird and it was too dark for her to see his face any more. She felt that he was growing colder.

Angel was small but she was supple. Without disarranging her hand for a moment or stopping her flow of words she wriggled her whole body close to his body, pulled her skirt out of the bag and draped it lightly over his chest. Then she held him without hardly touching. Angel had funny feelings about touching. Her mum was normally the only person who got near her. Except in a fight.

"You're going to be okay," she told him over and over. "You're totally, definitely going to be okay. Take it from me. OK. Gold Star Promise. That's the ones I really keep."

She was concentrating harder than she'd ever concentrated. Every bit of energy she had she was giving. She was concentrating so hard that it was a huge shock when she heard the ambulance sounding its way across the railway line and into the

yard. Its headlamps dazzled her as they swung round and settled on the pale hull of the fallen boat.

The flashing blue light was doing something funny to her head.

No! Not here!

Angel jumped to her feet, her arm shielding her face. Then she bent down, grabbed her skirt back off of the man's chest and pulled the mask from her bag.

A small witch fled into the night.

