

Chapter 1

The Plough

The Plough Inn at Fen Ditton is at the bottom end of the little fenland village. You get off the double decker bus from Cambridge at the crossroads on the through road, and walk down the side road that's on the side where you got off. That takes you down a street with houses on both sides. It runs toward the river, but before you get to the water, you take the road to your right, and that curves round past the village hall. The attractive half timbered inn, a hundred yards further on, has a pleasant well-kept garden fronting on to the river, and a tidy path leading down to the *grind*, which is what the natives call the chain ferry that crosses to the towpath side of the river Cam.

The next field down river from the Plough is a rather neglected residential caravan site that is officially being closed down as part of the government's policy. In fact, as our story begins, there were only four caravans left. Two of those were only used at weekends in the summer, and both of the others looked tired and little neglected.

Today was a fine sunny Wednesday, ten days or so before the school Easter break, and it was half an hour after the bus had brought the children home from school. Ten year old Patricia, known to everyone in the family as Pet, came out of the caravan nearest the road which was where she lived with her grandfather. Pet was a bright happy looking little girl, with short pony tailed brown hair, and today she was dressed in boyish swimming trunks that showed that she hadn't seen much sun last winter. She ran barefoot to one of the boats moored in the long row of pleasure craft and called to someone in the cabin.

"Can I start cleaning the paint now, Granddad?" She asked.

An elderly white haired man looked out of the open door and smiled at her style of dress.

"I know Easter's late this year, but isn't it a bit drastic to undress this early in the year, Pet? What I said was, put some clothes on that won't mind getting wet. But, OK, come in and get the bucket and sponge."

Pet was starting to sponge warm soapy water on to the greasy water line round the white hull of the boat, when she noticed a small boy watching them. A small boy, wearing knee length grey shorts, a torn collared grey lumber jacket and black plimsolls. Her grandfather saw him too, when he climbed ashore with a second bucket.

"Looks like you might be getting some help." He said, nodding toward the boy.

"That's Ben." Answered Pet in a whisper, trying not to seem to be looking, although she had been watching him since he came through the open gates. "He's in my class at school. He's dirty, and they say he smells because he never washes. Nobody talks to him."

"Perhaps he'd like to help you?" Asked her grandfather. "That is, unless he's afraid of soap and water."

Pet still didn't look up, but she shrugged her shoulders. "Maybe. It *would* be easier with two of us. I'll never finish it tonight any way without some help."

Grandfather grinned, and went over to the boy.

Ben didn't smell! Pet sniffed cautiously as she fetched the bucket that grandfather had put on the landing stage and went to show the boy what she was doing. She chose a point nearer the front of the boat and set him cleaning toward the bows whilst she worked from there too, but going the other way toward the part she'd already done.

They worked in silence for quite a while.

“Is this your boat, the - *Redgrave*?” asked Ben, reading the name that was painted above his head on the side of the boat.

Pet had nearly reached the part where she'd cleaned already, and looked up as she wiped the last greasy patch in front of her.

“My granddad's boat. He's just bought it. It's a tug really and he's going to work with it on the river.”

She looked over at their caravan, and back at the boat, and confided in a stage whisper. “I'd like us to live in the boat, but granddad says the cabin's too low for him to live in full time, and he prefers to have a caravan these days.”

“I'd like to live in a boat, too.” Said Ben, reaching out as far as he could to scrub the side of the boat near the heavy stem post.

Pet carried her bucket past Ben and poured the dirty contents into the water a few yards downstream of the boat, then walked back and pulled on the downstream mooring rope. That pulled the boat so that the bows moved further in toward the bank, so the boy could finish the last patch without reaching out too far.

He reached out and scrubbed at the grease.

“That's pretty good.” Complimented Pet, “But there's just a smudge up there, look!”

Ben saw it as she pointed, and reached out and scrubbed at the small grey patch. It wouldn't go away at first and he dipped the sponge back into the dirty soapy water in the bucket and tried again. Now it was gone. He grinned at Pet and wrung out the sponge, dipping it in the river and preparing to rinse the last traces of soap away from where he'd been working.

“Be careful!”

Pet could see that Ben was leaning out too far.

Then.

“Oh!” She exclaimed, as he overbalanced and fell forward into the very cold, not too clean, water.

She called out again as his head came out of the water and he started to thrash about.

“Grab the landing stage, Quick!” She shouted.

Pet took one more look at Ben in the water and decided that perhaps he wasn't going to grab anything. Perhaps he couldn't swim. Taking a firm hold of the mooring rope with one hand, she jumped into the river as close to him as she could.

Without letting go of her rope, she took a grip on the collar of his lumber jacket with her other hand.

“Stop struggling, boy!” She commanded. “Grab the landing stage and hold tight.”

She gave him a sharp push toward the bank, and pulled herself back with the rope that she was still holding tightly. One more effort and she had managed to half roll, half climb, back on to the bank.

“Give me your hand.” Said Grandfather in a quiet calm voice, as if people fell into the river every day.

He reached down grabbed the boy's wrist and lifted him out of the water.

“Well done, young lady!” He continued, helping Pet to her feet. “And the two of you had better have a warm shower before you catch something. I'll tidy up here.”

Ben squelched and his teeth were beginning to chatter as he followed Pet to the nearby caravan. He pulled off his wet and muddy plimsolls and left them outside as he followed her into the door. Cold or not, he stood and looked around in surprise at the inside of the caravan.

“It's just like a house inside.” He exclaimed.

“Of course it is! It *is* my Granddad’s house.” Answered Pet.

Ben was standing dripping in a small hallway, looking into the clean and tidy open kitchen in front of him. On his left he could see through a glass panelled door into a large living room, with a window that looked out to the river. Then, there were two more wooden doors in front of him to the right of the kitchen and a third one at the end of a passage on his right, but they were all closed.

Pet was opening the first door in front and led the way into a bathroom, a real bathroom, just like the one in any ordinary house.

When grandfather came in from the boat and went to the kitchen he could hear them giggling and the water running.

“Don't be long you two! I'll be making some hot soup to warm you up.” He called.

Pet's head came round the shower curtain as opened the door and looked into the bathroom.

“We're nearly finished.” She said, “But I want the new bottle of Shampoo. This one's empty. I'm having to do his hair again. The first time we washed it the water came out black, and he's got such a lot of it, too! Did you know his hair's nearly red?”

Grandfather fetched a new bottle of shampoo from the kitchen cupboard and passed it to her.

When the two children came out a few minutes later, taking turns with the big fluffy white towel, Ben did look clean. He was as tall as Pet, but a lot thinner, and his dark brown hair colour really did have a reddish tinge, just as Pet had seen. He sat down on the seat behind the table next to Pet's chair as her grandfather followed them in to the living room with a tray, set with bowls of soup and slices of bread.

“Tuck in!” Ordered Grandfather, taking his bowl with him and sitting down in an armchair opposite. The three sat and ate hungrily.

“Working outside certainly gives you an appetite!” Commented the old man.

Ben and Pet were sitting side by side on the settee, watching a film on the little television set, when grandfather came in from washing up and asked what time Ben was expected home.

“Any time.” Was his answer. “My mum works evenings in a café in Cambridge, and she won't be home until the last bus. I have to put myself to bed.”

“Good!” said Grandfather, but he still looked a little worried. “It'll give your clothes a chance to dry a bit. They're hanging over the stove in the kitchen, but you'll need something else for school tomorrow. They're muddy as well as damp.”

“What about the washers and dryer in the Launderette?” Asked Pet.

“I thought about that, but it will be closed before we could get there.”

“I haven't got anything else, anyway,” Said Ben, looking over his shoulder. “I'll have to wear them!”

“You can't, they'll never be dry in time.” Grandfather started to say, but Pet interrupted him.

“I'll lend him some clothes.” Pet offered. “I've got just the thing!”

She had, too. Ben followed her obediently into her bedroom, the little room between the bathroom and her grandfather's big bedroom, and she started to rummage in the untidy wardrobe. A few minutes later, Ben came back dressed in a pair of dark blue rugby football shorts and a light blue shirt and carrying a blue pullover. With his hair combed and different clothes he looked surprisingly neat and tidy. He stood in the doorway with a sheepish smile on his face. Pet had pulled on yellow shorts and a matching top and led him back to the place where they'd been sitting before.

“There!” she exclaimed. “That'll do, won't it?”

“What do you think, Ben?” Asked Grandfather.

Ben still looked sheepish.

“I didn't ought to borrow your clothes. They are better than anything I've ever had. I'll bring them back as soon as my mother has washed and repaired mine. I promise, really.”

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On Thursday morning, for a change, Ben looked almost like any of the other children at his school. He had always stood out from the others, partly because of his dirty oversize clothes and also because he got upset when people commented about him. It was usual, too, that he was the butt of everyone's jokes. But suddenly, today, everything was different.

Perhaps the most important change was that he rode in on the bus with Pet, who was one of the most popular children in the school, and came into class talking to her. He had always sat alone at the far side of a double desk, across the main gangway from Pet, and today he swapped sides to be next to her.

Two hours later, at playtime, she invited him to turn the rope in her skipping game instead of leaving him all alone, and some of her radiance rubbed off on him. Several of the children he barely knew actually spoke to him now and, to his surprise, his class teacher actually had a good word for him instead of treating him as the village idiot.

He followed Pet into the dinner hall, and sat beside her with his lunch.

“Can I come and help again tonight?” He whispered.

Pet looked at him, and nodded.

“Of course! You must come! We've got to clean the other side of the boat before we can go away for the weekend.”

Chapter 2

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Ben and Pet got off the school bus at the top of the road that afternoon and started down the village street side by side.

“When can I come to the boat?” Asked Ben.

Pet looked at him in surprise.

“Now, of course. When you like! Granddad invited you. We're going to start the cleaning straight away and eat later on. Else it'll be too dark before we finish.”

“I'll see if my mother's done my clothes. I'll come down in a minute, then,” Answered Ben, turning into the yard that led to the row of cottages where he lived.

Pet carried on toward the caravan and the mooring.

Ben's mother was just coming out of their front door as he was getting his key out.

“So that's what you were wearing to school.” Was her greeting to him. “I wondered, when I found that dirty wet mess in the kitchen. It'll have to stay there until I have time to go to the launderette. Who did you borrow those things from?”

She stopped speaking for a moment, but not long enough for him to say anything. She started to walk toward the road.

“Dinner Money?” Called Ben.

His mother stopped and opened her handbag.

“You'd better have your pocket money too,” She said, counting out a handful of small change. “You won't see much of me this weekend, I'm working overtime.”

He watched her start off again on her way to the bus stop, and went indoors and into his untidy bedroom.

Ben's father was a merchant seaman, who hadn't been home for more than two days at a time over the last few years. On the way home, Ben had remembered a summer visit and one of the few presents from his father and that was why he was busily searching through the cardboard box of old clothes that was kept in the bottom of his nearly empty wardrobe. As you might expect, it was mostly full of old and far too small clothes that should have gone to a jumble sale long ago, but he'd remembered right. There at the bottom was the pair of unworn swimming trunks that his father had bought on a trip to the seaside the summer before last, when his father had wanted to teach him to swim and he hadn't even got into the water. He took them out with a whoop of delight.

Ben threw them on to his bed and thrust everything else back in the box, pushing the box into the wardrobe as far as he could. Not far enough to close the doors again, because things had fallen behind it, but it would do for now.

He tried on the trunks, and looked at himself in the mirror. They might have turned out to be too small, after all he was only eight when he last wore them, but he had grown upwards rather than outwards and they stretched enough to fit quite well. He pulled on his borrowed shorts over them, and prepared to go to help Pet. As he went past the hall stand he looked in its mirror again and pulled his fingers through his hair. It was long and tangled, he knew that of course, but he couldn't do anything about it. Mother had their only comb in her handbag.

He sighed.

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Pet was just going into the caravan as Ben came round the corner to the big field. He saw the flash of her pony tail and her bare back as she went in her front door.

Grandfather looked round the corner from the kitchen as Ben knocked on the inside of the open front door with his knuckles.

“Come to help again? We've just turned the boat round and now we're waiting for the water to get hot. Come in!”

Ben stepped inside and Pet put her head out of her bedroom door.

“Are you changing too?” She asked. “Or aren't you going to fall in ever again?”

“Of course he won't fall in again!” Exclaimed Grandfather. “He'll be careful. Won't you Boy?”

Pet giggled, but Ben looked proudly at her.

“I'm going to change anyway, so even if I do fall in it won't matter.”

“Come in my room and change then.” She ordered.

When Ben had folded his clothes on Pet's bed, and come back outside, she was waiting with the two filled buckets steaming beside the door.

“Come on, bring yours. Let's start!”

They dropped the big plastic sponges into the soapy water and ran across the long grass to the boat, at least as well as they could with the buckets held in front of them.. Pet started at the upstream end again, this time the front of the boat, and Ben worked from the back toward her. They were talking as they worked and each was fascinated to hear what the others parents were doing. Ben explained that his father was always away. After he left the Royal Navy in the year when he married Ben's mother, he had gone off to be an engineer on a big merchant ship.

“I wish my father was a sailor” Said Pet, standing up with water dripping over her bare legs from the big sponge. “I'd make him take me with him. My parents are just ordinary old school teachers and they're working in South America.”

“I don't think my father would want to take me.” Ben had never thought of such a possibility before, so he paused for a moment. “I suppose I'm company for Mum. He only comes home for one or two nights at the end of his leave, and then rushes off first thing in the morning to get the train back to the port.”

He made a sort of giggling noise.

“Anyway, your father doesn't take you with him, so why should mine take me?”

Pet didn't have an answer, so she bent down and scrubbed violently at an already clean patch.

Grandfather came over from the caravan as they were finishing the last patch, both trying to clean off the remaining few grey smudges on the middle of the side. He too was dressed in swimming trunks and shivering more than a little in the evening sun.

“Ready to turn her back round for the morning?” He asked.

“Only if we can do the poling!”

Pet put the sponges next to the empty buckets that were standing on the grass at the end of the mooring and reached on to the boat's cabin roof to pick up a long wooden pole. She stood rather defiantly, looking at her grandfather as if she expected him to say `No'.

He didn't, so her challenge fell flat.

“Of course you can. There's two of you to do it tonight. Get on with it and show Ben how it's done!”

There wasn't really much to do, the current of the river did it almost on its own. Ben climbed on to the high foredeck at Pet's bidding, and held the pole which she passed up to him. Grandfather undid the rope at the down river, back end, of the boat whilst Pet undid the other rope and climbed up with Ben.

"Ready!" called her Grandfather, starting to pull his rope so that it drew the boat up against the current.

At the same time the children pushed the pole into the side of the bank and leant with their full weight on it. As they pushed, the boat moved out into the stream.

Even before they had reached the full length of the pole, the current caught between the boat and the bank and it started to swing out across the river.

The point of the pole dropped down to the water.

"Quick. Put the pole on the roof." Pet was pulling it out of Ben's hands and swinging it round so fast that he nearly fell over it as she ran along the narrow side deck.

By the time the pole was laying flat on the roof, against the hand rail that went along its side, and the two children were standing side by side on the deck on the other side, Grandfather had pulled his end of the boat upstream as far as the top of his moorings and was waiting. He stood, just holding the rope in his hands, waiting for them to do their part. They did it. As the boat swung exactly into its place, Pet jumped ashore with the mooring rope and tied it to the metal post.

Ben jumped ashore, too, and looked suspiciously at the boat, laying just as it had been when he first saw it last night.

"I thought you'd have to drive it to turn it round. You did it so quick!"

Pet was washing out buckets in the river and didn't seem to hear, so her grandfather answered for her.

"It's called *winding*. You use the flow of the water to do the work for you and Pet's been practising for a long while. Next time you two can do it alone."

"Thank you, Granddad!" Pet had heard after all. She jumped up and kissed him on his cheek.

"Just get those buckets clean if you want some tea!" He said, with a grin to Ben, and leant down to kiss her back

A few moments later, Grandfather had untied Pet's tidy knot with the mooring and was showing Ben how to tie the rope, crouching down and watching Ben's serious expression as he copied the hand movements of the clove hitch for the third time.

"Throw it once, throw it twice," Ben chanted, turning his hand to drop the two crossed loops and pulling them tight. He looked up in triumph.

"Well done," Grandfather complimented the boy, and then jumped up with a shout as Pet poured a bucket full of river over the two of them. He grabbed Pet, and the bucket, and in a single movement dipped a full bucket of water and poured it over her. She looked for the second bucket, shaking water from her eyes and laughing happily, but she could only see the one. She soon found out where it was! Ben threw its contents over the two of them. That was a mistake! Pet grabbed Ben as Grandfather took both buckets, and dipped them both full.

"Get him, Granddad!" She ordered, holding Ben tightly round the waist. Grandfather scored with both buckets, over both of them, and started to walk toward his caravan leaving them to refill the buckets and run after him. As they threw the last buckets of water over him at the caravan door, the lady in the other lived-in caravan was at her door.

"You're mad, all of you," She said, but smiling at the children.

“I like them a bit mad, sometimes,” answered Grandfather. “It makes things more interesting. But if you'll excuse me I'm going to make the two of them take a shower before they catch something!”

Grandfather chased them out of the shower after a few minutes, and when he came out five minutes later drying his curly grey hair they had already made an impression on the plate of cold pork sandwiches that he'd prepared for them.

“Good job I didn't stop to make a pot of tea!” He exclaimed, taking two sandwiches, “or take another five minutes in the shower. There'd have been nothing left. What are you? Locusts?” He was laughing as he sat next to Pet and took two more sandwiches.

“I love you, Granddad” Whispered Pet, putting her arms around him.

It was another fine evening, so after tea the three of them went to the Plough Inn and Grandfather brought drinks out to a table at the riverside.

“There's two ladies over there, wanting to come across on the ferry” Said Pet, looking up. “Can we go and fetch them?”

As grandfather nodded, the children went to the ferry boat. Pet released the rope that was hooked into the wheel that wound it along its chain and Ben started to turn the wheel.

“The other way,” Laughed Pet, going to the front edge of the punt shaped boat and standing with her legs apart and her hands on her hips like a pirate captain.

Ben wound the handle, so that it pulled the boat forward on the chain and moved toward the far bank. As they arrived, and the ladies climbed aboard, Pet turned round to face the other way.

“Back again, Mr Engineer!” She ordered, and Ben wound the handle again.

“We must pay the ferryman!” Exclaimed one lady, opening her handbag as she stepped ashore.

“No, thank you,” Ben protested.

“Oh, yes. It would be bad luck not to give you something!”

Ben thanked her, and went to secure the wheel.

“Are we too late?” Asked a voice, and an elderly married couple climbed aboard.

Ben worked hard for nearly half an hour, with Pet riding and watching until she got bored. Most of the people gave him something and Pet fetched his drink from their table. At last there was a break and he could sit down again at the table with Pet and her granddad, who by now were looking at an unfolded map.

“This is where we're going on Saturday and Sunday” Pet explained, pointing to one of the blue wiggly lines. Ben hadn't seen the rivers on a map before, and he was surprised when Pet showed him how far the rivers went.

“You mean we could go to Bedford or Bury or Lynn?” He asked. “I've only been to Bury on the bus.”

Pet nodded, but her grandfather shook his head.

“You can't get to Bury any more, not with our boat, you can't. You could with canoes though. We can only go where there are locks.”

Ben didn't know what a lock was, and Pet wasn't all that sure how to explain it. “We'll have to show you sometime” Said Pet's grandfather. “We'll take you down to the next lock one day, when we're not going away.”

“Have you finished?” Asked a voice, it was the innkeeper collecting glasses.

As they passed him all those from their table, Ben held out the money he had collected. "People gave me this for winding the ferry for them" He said. "It's your ferry, shouldn't it be your money?"

"Did you do all the work?" Asked the Innkeeper, picking up his tray and wiping the table top around the boys outstretched hand.

Ben nodded.

"Then keep it. You earned it."

"What are you going to spend it on?" Asked Pet, as the man walked away.

Ben went red.

"Don't worry him," Said her grandfather, "He's never been that rich before!"

Chapter 3

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Ben enjoyed his Friday at school. They had a proficiency test that morning in the gym and he found he could do it all. He sat next to Pet at dinner, and told her about it.

“Why do you always think you can't do things?” She asked.

He shrugged his shoulders.

“I never can do anything” He replied. “My mother says I never could do things, even when I was very little.”

Pet snorted.

“I can't do things either, but Granddad always makes me try. Look how quick you learnt how to do the ferry. Look how good you were helping me clean the boat. You're stupid if you say you can't do things when you can.”

Geography was Ben's biggest despair. It was always difficult for him to think of other places, even though he knew his father was somewhere out there. Or perhaps it was just because his father was some other place that he didn't want to know about it?

Today, almost as if she'd known about Ben's visit to Pet and her grandfather, the teacher was talking about inland waterways, and boats carrying goods all over the country.

“Ben” Asked the teacher, suddenly. “Why can't canal boats come up rivers like ours?”

Someone sniggered as Ben stood up. He often stood and looked silly when asked a question, and nobody whispered the answer as they might have done for their friends. He took a long breath, and remembered both Pet's words at dinner time and the map last night.

“Perhaps the locks aren't big enough?” He guessed.

“What's a lock?” Asked the teacher, who hadn't mentioned them and had expected a different answer.

“The way boats go up and down hill?” Ben answered with a question.

The teacher was impressed, and found them a picture of a lock further on in their text book. When she finished explaining it, Ben had learnt how and why a lock worked and his classmates were impressed.

After that lesson it was time to go home, and the children rushed to the buses. The one that Ben and Pet were on had to stop several times on the way home and one stop was at the parade of shops at the end of Cambridge. It let some children off, and on a sudden impulse Ben jumped up too as the conductor rang the bell for it to start again.

“I'll come down later. I've got something to do. I'll catch the next bus. See you before you go, though!”

He got off just in time as it started to move.

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Grandfather had the boat turned to face upstream when Pet arrived. She looked at him with surprise as he came across the field to meet her.

“I thought we were might be going to rush down to Ely tonight?” She asked.

Grandfather winked.

“A job?” She asked, as he cupped his right hand and stroked its palm with the index finger of his other hand.

He nodded, and smiled at her.

“A job. Where's Ben?”

Pet looked at him in surprise.

“He got off at the shops. I think he wants to spend his ferry money.”

“Then he hasn't been home yet?” Asked Grandfather.

Pet shook her head.

“Then I hope he hurries up. They're waiting for us up at Jesus Green lock.”

Ben did hurry up. He spent twenty minutes under a young man's clippers in the chair of otherwise empty barbers shop, and caught the local bus just as it was starting off. Dropping off at home, he opened the front door to put his school books in his room and saw one of his mother's shopping bags on his bedroom doorknob, with a big sheet of paper pinned to its handle. He ripped off the paper and read it.

“Mr Farrant asked if you would like to go with him and Patricia for the weekend. Your washing things and swimming costume are in the bag. See you Sunday if you're back before I go to work.”

Within seconds, he had thrown his books on his bed and was running down the street toward the river.

Pet was standing on the boat's front deck, furiously beckoning, as Ben came on to the field. He was already running and speeded up as much as he could. She met him at the back of the boat and grabbed his bag.

“Hurry up. Granddad's in a tearing hurry. He's got to fetch a boat from Cambridge, and we're going to take it down to Ely.”

Ben climbed aboard, and looked around.

“Where is he?”

“Here” said Grandfather, coming out of the cabin, “and ready to go as soon as my crew is ready.”

'Getting ready` meant going down into the cabin and changing into swimming trunks. Pet threw a long sleeved blue pullover to Ben and started to put on another. She stopped with her arms in the sleeves and looked at him.

“Uniform!” She said, pushing her head through the neck and pulling it down.

“Who's Farrant?” Asked Ben, reading the name on her pullover as he straightened his.

“Granddad, of course. It's his company.”

“But your name is Harrison, not Farrant.”

“That's because he's my mother's father, stupid,” She said, and then grinned “Haven't you got any grandparents? I've got three!”

Ben shook his head.

“Nor uncles, nor aunts, nor cousins!”

“Where's my crew” Called her grandfather from outside. “I need the engine starting!”

Pet seemed to be the engineer. She took off the lid of a big box in the middle of the steering well, leant inside, and started turning taps. Then she went right to the back and opened a little trapdoor and turned something else.

“Remember what I'm doing” She ordered, and went to the steering wheel and turned a key. With a sudden whine from the starter motor and a cloud of black smoke from behind, the big diesel motor started to thump.

As they put the lid back on the engine box, which made the engine a lot quieter, Pet's grandfather came up from the cabin. He too was wearing one of his blue pullovers and a pair of short grey shorts.

"Ready to go?" He asked, and without waiting for an answer he jumped ashore and started to undo the mooring ropes.

Ben watched as Grandfather undid the downstream rope and Pet pulled it in and started to roll it up. He looked over the side as the man threw the front rope on board and started to push it off.

He wasn't too sure that he could remember what the experts had done to start the boat, but he recalled Pet's words at school. Maybe they would let him try something soon.

They did let him try something, very soon after they had started. Pet was standing on the side seat beside the steering wheel and reaching over to steer as she looked over the side of the cabin roof.

"You try" She offered, and moved back to let him step up in front of her.

She put his hands on the wheel and let go of it herself.

"Don't do anything too sharp. You'll put a waggle in the wake if you do, and you mustn't do that. Steer along to the right of the middle."

It didn't make much sense to Ben, but he did his best to obey Pet's order not to waggle and concentrated on keeping the boat straight. Grandfather came up from the cabin.

"A bit more to the right" He said, looking in front and behind. "You have to be ready to let a boat come past on your left hand side, so keep over your own side a bit further."

Ben now understood what Pet had meant by 'right of the middle', and carefully steered so that the boat would move gradually over. He looked over his shoulder at the wake behind the boat and was pleased to see it was a smooth curve.

"Do boats keep right, instead of left like cars, then?" He asked, glancing quickly at his captain and looking back at the river.

Grandfather nodded. "Everywhere," He answered. "It makes it easier if it's all the same."

Pet and Ben took turns at steering on the short run up to Cambridge. Ben was steering as they passed the Sea Cadet motor boat and its two sailing boats, just leaving their moorings by the gasworks on a camping trip, and although both Pet and her grandfather stood close to him they didn't touch anything except to slow the motor down.

Pet was back on the wheel again as they passed the swimming pool at Jesus Green, Ben was standing on the roof as lookout.

"You're looking for a green centre-cockpit cruiser opposite the pool," Grandfather told him.

"There it is!" Ben called, recognising the boat as soon as he saw it.

It was tied up on the right hand side of the river, just below the weir, and someone was waving to them. Ben waved back as their boat turned toward the bank. Pet climbed up and walked across the roof toward him.

"Granddad says you're to take the back mooring rope ashore and hold the boat, when he says."

Ben had never imagined that he could do anything like the things that he was doing today, it was all so new. He and Pet jumped ashore and held their boat steady as Grandfather took a thicker rope to the front deck of the cruiser and tied it to a ring. There seemed to be two people on the boat, wearing white clothes and yachting shoes, a black haired man with a little moustache and a red haired boy of about twelve. Grandfather soon had them on the bank looking after the cruiser's mooring ropes. As he went back to his own steering wheel, he looked round at everyone.

“Let's go!” He called and his own crew jumped aboard, Pet on the high foredeck and Ben into the well, as the propellor started to turn.

As the tug started to pass the cruiser on its way back down river the boy jumped aboard their tug and the man stepped aboard his cruiser and took the wheel.

The boats turned across the wide river below the weir and started back down the way they came. Pet had tidied up the ropes on their front deck and had come back. Now, Ben was sitting beside her on the engine box and they were both looking at the boy from the other boat. He was sitting on their side seat wearing clean and ironed white shorts and shirt and was looking at them in their pullovers and trunks as though they were some sort of animals.

“I've been steering our boat all week” He said, in a very posh sounding voice. “Then the motor overheated. The boatyards don't look after their engines nowadays!”

Pet whispered to Ben behind her hand,

“Look over the side at our exhaust pipe. I bet he didn't look at his!” Ben looked at it and saw water spurting out with the smoke.

He looked at her, a little puzzled, and she nodded.

“The water cools the engine. When the water stops, the engine gets too hot.”

They both looked at the boy, not very sympathetically.

“Would the captain let me steer this one?” The boy asked.

Pet shook her head at the boy's question and looked at her Grandfather, who looked over his shoulder with a grin which showed he'd been listening.

“Isn't it about time we had something to eat?” He asked. “Have you eaten, boy?”

The boy nodded.

“We went to that hotel across the road before you came. My father said we wouldn't get to Ely in time for Dinner!”

“Good,” Said Grandfather, looking at Pet. “That leaves just us. Do you think you could cook us a three course meal with all the trimmings?” He winked.

Pet shook her head.

“Then keep us running straight while I look for some dry bread and cheese,” He said, and disappeared into the cabin.

Pet stood proudly at the wheel and ignored the boy, who was looking jealous.

The big boy looked even more sour a little later, as Ben took over from Pet whilst she ate a hot pie and peas that her grandfather had prepared in the cabin. She took over at the wheel again as they passed the ferry near their moorings and her grandfather passed Ben his food on a plate. He and Ben sat on the engine box and ate their meals from their laps and looking at the passing river bank. Ben was only just finishing eating as the boats ran into a lock and Grandfather untied the towrope and let the cruiser loose.

“What's happening?” Ben asked, as gates closed leaving the cruiser in the river above.

“Our boat's too big to get in with yours at the same time” answered the boy, and jumped ashore.

“Don't be too hard on him,” Warned Grandfather, “Come and see how the lock keeper works us down.”

Ben jumped ashore and watched. It worked just as the teacher had told them at school, and he ran around behind the keeper watching every step. After the top gates were closed, they opened little shutters in the gates to let the water out. As soon as the lock was empty they could open the gates at the other end. Ben was sure he'd be able to do it himself, if he had the chance to try at any time.

He had a chance to watch it a second time, too, because as soon as their boat was out below the lock the keeper closed the bottom gates again and refilled it with water.

At last the second boat was through too, The tow rope was made fast again and they started off again, with Ben steering. The big boy was on his boat behind and he was at the wheel, which Ben could feel was making the boat behind behave very differently compared with how it was before. He glanced over his shoulder a few times and decided that the cruiser was not being steered as it had been. Instead of the bow pointing steadily at the tug's stern it was sheering from side to side.

As they approached another lock and Pet reached out and slowed the engine there was a terrific jerk, much worse than any before, as the cruiser went to one side, overshot and the towrope snapped tight. It was so bad that Grandfather came up from the cabin to see what was happening.

“We'll tie up below the lock, Ben,” He said, waving to the man on the boat behind.

“You said you wanted to go to the village,” He called. “We'll go through the lock, and then we'll call it a day, if that's all right by you?”

The man held up his hand in a `thumbs up' sign.

Chapter 4

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At first, Ben couldn't think where he was when he woke up the next morning. He was in a warm bed with someone beside him and it was bright, very bright. He rolled over, looking at the moving patterns of light on the ceiling above his head before he realised that he was in a boat. The lights up there were the sunlight reflecting from the water outside through the window on to the ceiling.

He wriggled around again until he could look at Pet beside him. She had one eye open and was looking at him. She opened the other eye.

“You went to sleep at the pub,” She said. “Granddad had to carry you back to bed.”

“I remember being there, and that boy being silly.”

“He's called Marcus, and he's even sillier than you saw,” Pet told him, with relish. “He had something to drink and got very sick. He nearly fell into the water when we got back. I bet he feels bad this morning!”

“If you two are going to shout” Grandfather's voice came from the bed opposite. “Go and shout outside.”

Pet got up and went to look out of the doorway.

“It's nice outside” She said. “And the man from the boat is swimming in the river.”

Her grandfather groaned and turned on to his back.

“I suppose you expect me to swim too?” He mumbled. “Why don't you two go and swim with him?”

“You know I can't swim!” Exclaimed Pet.

“I'd bet Ben can't swim, either?” Asked Grandfather.

Ben was looking out of the door too, and shook his head. “No! Nobody ever taught me” He answered.

“Well, I'm not going to teach you this morning. All right. I'll show them we're not sissies.” He was already at the door with them and pulling on his trunks. He took a last look back into the warm cabin and dived into the cold water.

The man from the cruiser swam across to them and then the two men swam some way downstream.

“They're racing” Said Ben, climbing on to the roof to see better.

“Come on Granddad! You'll beat him easily!” Pet and Ben urged on their captain as the two men turned and swam toward them, They cheered loudly as he reached the lock gates a good two yards in front of the other man.

The men swam slowly back to the boat.

“Get a couple of towels for us, and put the kettle on for some coffee, please. We're coming aboard.

The man was nicer than his son. He sat on the motor box drinking coffee and eating biscuits, talking as if he'd known everyone for years.

“You two had better get dressed. We'll have to be starting in a few minutes if these people are to catch their train.” Said Grandfather at last, as he finished the last of his second mug full.

“And I'd better see if that son of mine is going to be a bit better today.” Said the Man.

“Is Marcus ill?” Asked Ben.

The man laughed aloud.

“He will be if his mother hears about him drinking spirits last night. I hope his headache will teach him more sense!”

Ben volunteered to go on the cruiser and help, and was rewarded by being allowed to take the wheel as soon as the boats started off. It was easier to drive too, because there was a driving seat that could be wound up and down to make it exactly the right height. The man made sure that it was set right before going to undo the mooring ropes. He came back and warned Ben to keep the bows pointing exactly at the middle of the curved back of the tug, and he made sure that he was doing it, before going to cook some breakfast.

It was a pretty good breakfast, too. Ben was sat on the driving seat drinking a bottle of lemonade and concentrating on his job when Marcus came up from the cabin with a hot drink and stood behind him. For a long while the boy said nothing.

“You must have been practising that a long while?” Marcus asked.

Ben looked over his shoulder.

“Are you better now?”

“I've still got a headache, but I had an aspirin and it's a lot better.”

“Do you want to steer?” Asked Ben, who had been sitting still for three quarters of an hour and wanted to see some more of the cruiser.

“Would you trust me? Dad says I don't do it right.”

Ben found himself in the position of teacher, something he'd never been before, but he saw straight off what Marcus was doing that was different. He was turning the wheel too far and too fast.

“Don't wind the wheel like that! The boat goes along like a snake if you do.”

Marcus did a lot better than he did last night. He managed to keep the bows pointing in the right direction without jerking at the towrope, and after a while Ben could investigate the cruiser.

“Come in!” Invited the man, who was tidying up in the cabin and packing their clothes and washing things in two canvas holdalls.

As the boats came out under the railway bridge above Ely, Grandfather steered over to the far right and turned down his engine speed until the engine was barely turning at all.

Ben, who had only just taken the steering back when the man called his son inside to pack, was worried as the bow of the cruiser nearly touched the back of the tug. He needn't have worried. Pet jumped the gap and ran across the roof to him.

“Just keep steering straight ahead now. Granddad is going to turn you round so we're going back upstream.”

“You take over, please,” Ben begged her.

Pet shook her head.

“Granddad said you were to do it. I've got a job to do.” She stepped down to the side deck and ran on to the rear deck of the cruiser.

Ben shot a glance over his shoulder to see what Pet was doing, but she was only standing there so he looked ahead again. In the few seconds that he'd not been concentrating, the tug had turned across the river and the cruiser was already drifting past. Grandfather waved, and pointed on down the river. Ben waved back and held his steering wheel tight as the tug started to turn upstream, pulling the cruiser across the current with it.

Ben wondered what Grandfather would do to get the cruiser pointing upstream, and then he remembered how they had turned the tug, centuries ago, the evening before last. It happened like magic again. Grandfather held the front of the cruiser steady with the tug and the current finished turning the cruiser. The two boats were ready to go upstream and Grandfather waved to Ben and pointed to the boatyard.

“Keep going! Steer into the moorings.” Pet was standing on the side deck by Ben's left elbow, and the tug was pulling slowly upstream.

“Marcus? Do you want to take one rope? She asked, and as he obediently set off for the rear deck she went off over the roof to the front.

Ben steered the boat toward the only space left in the moorings, and tried to see where he was going. It wasn't easy because he was on the wrong side of the boat and he wasn't really tall enough to see everything. The edge of the quay was hidden below the high sides of the cruiser, but Marcus's father was standing across the other side of the cockpit and looking at the bank.

“About two feet to go” He called, looking at Ben and at the bank.

Pet jumped ashore first, as the boat was barely moving. and then Marcus and his father stepped ashore too.

“Well done! That was jolly good,” Marcus praised Ben as he left his post and came to look. “One day I'll be that good!”

Ben and Pet waited on the outer side deck of the cruiser as the tug drifted backwards toward them. It was still a long way out and the motor stopped as Pet took a flying leap on to their boat and went to fetch the mooring rope.

Ben copied her, and his bare feet slipped on the side deck of the cruiser as he jumped. He didn't quite reach the side of the tug, and fell into the water with a terrific splash. It was a long way down and he could see rays of light slanting down through the muddy water and the silvery surface of the water above him. He watched the two dark shadows of the boats above him as they merged into one.

Some instinct saved him.

He was already moving outwards, away from the cruiser, and passed face up under the bottom of the tug. He must have remembered enough from the times his father tried to teach him to swim and given a kick, because he came up high on the outside of the tug, with a long rope fender within easy reach.

“Ben!” There was a lot of fuss and shouting going on on the wrong side of the tug. He could feel it moving toward him as they pushed the boats apart, but he couldn't do anything about that. He reached up and grabbed hold of the rope above the woven part of the fender. He was floating, and it was cold, and he wanted to get out of the water. His toes found something to grip on the side of the boat, and he felt with his other foot for it too.

Once he was in a sitting position, he reached up cautiously with one hand until he found the top of the rope on the side deck.

He grabbed tight hold and, with a push and a pull, he fell over the side into the boat.

“I'm here!” He whispered, and burst into tears.

Chapter 5

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It was Easter Monday, and Ben was sitting on the roof of the tug's cabin waiting for the others to get up. Today was the first fine day after a full week of rain. Last Sunday evening, as they came back from his first trip ever, Ben's mother had met them at the moorings and Grandfather had asked, and she had agreed straight off, that he could spend the long weekend with Pet.

"I'd be pleased. I'm working every evening, so it will be nice not to have to worry about him for a few days."

Then on Tuesday morning it had started pouring with rain as they went to school.

Ben hadn't minded the weather too much at first because there were still plenty of things to do aboard the boat to get it ready for the weekend, but it had been a relief when they could finally start on their way on Friday morning. It had rained all this weekend, too, and they had built up the windscreen and canopy over the steering wheel before leaving, so whoever was steering could keep dry. But it was still rather boring to sit and watch the rain.

Not that there weren't things to do, and places to see along the way. If you got bored with steering the boat, or looking at the banks, or housekeeping, you could stop and explore on the bank. You just had to dress in a waterproof and put up with the trickles down your neck.

"There's no such thing as bad weather, just wrong clothes." Grandfather told him when he complained the first time and he hadn't complained since.

In any case, Pet and her grandfather made a joke of the weather, and Ben didn't really mind as it was all new to him. There was always plenty to eat, they were warm in the cabin after tea, and there was the big battery radio that received programmes from the whole world and gave them music and news from all sorts of countries he'd never heard of before.

It had stopped raining at last as they arrived at these moorings in Kings Lynn last night. The skipper of a departing coaster called out that it would stay fine now and Granddad had decided that called for a celebration. He took them for a meal in a large restaurant before bed.

"That will set you up!" He told them as they got ready for bed. "Have a good nights sleep, get up refreshed and we'll be able to get a good run home."

They had discussed their journey home yesterday, and already planned the long run up the tidal river to Earith for today and back along the old rivers and up the Cam to Cambridge the day after. The trouble was that today's run had to wait for the afternoon tide and everyone else was still asleep.

Ben had already stowed the canopy and folded the windshield, but the others hadn't woken up. He sat for a while longer on the roof, before he slipped down to the side deck, stepped ashore and went for a walk.

Although it was early, a coaster was coming in from the sea and he stood and watched as the three men aboard brought it into the moorings across the basin from their tug. He heard someone call "breakfast" aboard the working boat, and remembered he was hungry too.

When he got back to his own side of the basin, Pet was looking out of the cabin doorway. "Granddad's not feeling well. Come and help me make breakfast."

The kettle was on, and Pet was just lighting the toaster under the little stove top. Ben looked at her Grandfather, still tucked up in bed and looking rather pale.

“Will we have to go up the river on our own, or will you be all right soon?” He asked.

Grandfather smiled weakly.

“The way I feel now, you might have to go for the doctor instead. I'm sure it's only what I ate, but we'll have to see.”

Both children were sitting on the roof at lunch time. Granddad hadn't wanted anything to eat, but insisted that they made something warm for themselves. So they had made fried egg sandwiches and were eating them in the sun.

They had been up the street into the town, and came back to see that the crew of the coaster were working. It was tied up across the basin and the crew had started to tidy up the decks, Ben was looking intently at the men on board, and shook his head.

“What's up, Ben?” Asked Pet.

Ben shook his head again.

“I thought it was my Dad, over there” He said. “But he works the engines on really big boats, not these little ones, so it can't be.”

Pet looked into the cabin several times, to where her grandfather was sleeping again. Each time she looked at the clock.

“If we don't go in the next half an hour, we won't get up the river today” She said after the fourth time.

“There's nowhere between Denver and our river to tie up, and the tide helps us going up,” She explained. “But if we're too late, then the tide starts to flow out again and it'll pull us back to Denver, however strong our motor is.”

Ben wasn't listening. He was standing up looking at a tall figure in blue trousers and donkey jacket who had left the coaster and was just carrying a heavy kit bag round the end of the basin. As the man approached, he suddenly leapt off the high roof and ran to him. Pet watched as the man lifted Ben into his arms, swung him round to a pick-a-back and carried him over to their tug boat.

“But you don't work on little boats.” Ben was saying as his father turned with his back to the boat and lowered him onto the roof by the door. “You came off that little coaster.”

“So I did!” His father looked very much like an older version of his son, and Pet decided immediately that she was going to like him. “I got paid off in Hull, and they offered me a free ride down. I was expecting to catch the train home, not to finish the trip by water.”

He was looking pleased at seeing them.

“My compliments to the Captain. Permission to come aboard?” He said to Pet.

Pet giggled. “Come aboard” She answered. “We have to go now, but do you want a cup of tea first?”

Pet looked into the cabin, where her grandfather was starting to sit up.

“Don't get up. I think we've got a crew to take us home. Can he come in?”

Ben led his father into the cabin and they sat opposite him as Pet put the kettle on and the adults started to speak.

“I know you” Said Grandfather, looking the seaman up and down. “Where did we meet?”

Ben's father mentioned several places, and then the name of a well known battleship.

“That's it!” said Grandfather, reaching out his hand. “That was my last ship!”

By the time that Ben's father was drinking hot sweet tea, and Pet's grandfather was drinking his without milk and sugar, it had been arranged that they would leave straight away to catch the tide. Pet and Ben went to start the motor.

“We're ready to go” Called Pet as the big diesel started its slow thump-thump.

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It was a grand trip round the bends to Denver and on up the long straight river. Now the rain had stopped the wind had turned and was blowing across the river, the high banks shielded them and it was warm and still. It was so warm after Denver that Pet took off her top and Ben, who was steering, wriggled out of his sweater and dropped it on the seat beside him.

“That's a good idea” Said his father, picking it up. He looked up the river ahead and the down at the water. “Keep her going like that, I'll be back in a minute.”

The children could hear talking in the cabin, but it was a lot longer than one minute before Ben's father came back wearing just khaki shorts. He looked at the river again.

“The Owner's hungry. Anyone want to help me make sandwiches?”

Pet looked at Ben, who'd been steering for quite a long while.

“You help your dad. I'll look after the boat.”

Ben's father seemed to be used to making sandwiches. Ben spread margarine on the slices his father cut from the loaf and his father took them back and stacked them up with slices of luncheon meat. They soon had a good pile on one of the dinner plates.

“Don't put mine separate” said Grandfather. “I'll have a couple with you when I get up.”

The kettle boiled, and Ben poured the water on to the tea in the teapot.

Grandfather sat in the sun and looked tired. He had one sandwich and two cups of tea, but neither grownup would have any of the swiss roll so Pet and Ben finished it between them.

“Good job you came along” Said Grandfather, leaning back against the side of the boat and smiling.

“You've got a pretty competent crew already, from what I've seen.” Ben's father winked at the children.

Grandfather looked at them, Ben just taking over again from Pet, and nodded.

“I've had worse. Who put our cutter aground in Malta?”

The children listened enthralled as the adults told them how, when Ben's father was in the navy, he didn't pay proper attention when he was steering the little motor boat and how it had gone more and more off course. He finally ran it on to sand between rocks where it took until the next high tide to get it afloat again.

“Look where you're going” said Pet, “You'll be aground too!”

Ben spun the wheel round and back so that the boat moved back on to its proper course. He apologised.

“Keep it in the family,” Laughed his father, “But I was watching this time, just in case. You did all right!”

They made good time up the river, despite the late start. The tide had stopped running long before they reached the entrance lock they would take tomorrow but the river was only flowing slowly. Pet looked at the lock entrance.

“Will we be all right now? Or should we go through the lock?”

Ben, who was steering, looked at his father to see if he should change course.

“The tide's no problem up here” His father answered, climbing on the roof and looking ahead.

“It won't be any stronger than this.”

“Where do we tie up?” Asked Pet, looking both sides of the river, “There's nothing here but big banks each side.”

“Carry on to Earith. There'll be a mooring there.”

They tied up at a mooring at the downstream end of the town. It was starting to get cool as the sun set, and they all went down into the cabin and selected tins to open for supper. Granddad had a cupboard full of every possible tin and jar, and he sat smiling as the children chose first one thing and then changed their minds when they found yet another label that looked exciting.

Finally they had a large steak and kidney pudding and peas ready to open, and everything was stacked back inside except a tinned Christmas Pudding which Ben was holding in his hands.

“Dad wasn't home at Christmas, he missed ours,” He said.

“Why not?” Ben's father took the tin and read its label. “It's a long while to next Christmas,” Grandfather agreed.

“And if you don't get on with the cooking, it'll be Christmas before we eat it, too!”

It was as much fun to prepare the meal as it was to eat it. The two puddings fitted into the big pressure cooker and two smaller saucepans shared the other burner of the stove for the last few minutes, boiling milk and water for instant potato and heating the peas. The four sat around the folding table, set up between the bunks, and their meal was a real party.

Although Grandfather only had small helpings he seemed to be better again and when at last they had eaten everything and the children were clearing the last of the table he started to wash up.

Pet protested.

“If you want to do something, you can make the beds for us,” Grandfather ordered. “We'll clear up!”

After they had undressed ready for bed, Ben's father took his cocoa outside and stood in the dark looking down the river.

Ben came out to see what he was doing, and looked too. His father stood behind him, and put his hands on his son's shoulders.

“What are you looking at, Dad? I can't see anything!”

“There's everything happening out here. Animals, birds and even fish. Don't look. Listen.”

They stood and listened, and Ben started to hear the sounds himself. Little rustles from the bank as small animals pushed between the reeds. A splash as a fish broke the surface of the water. A cough and the thump from a cow stamping on the other bank.

“It's my home,” Said Ben's father, breaking their silence at last. “I was born down the river there at Manea, and went to sea as soon as I was old enough to leave home.”

“I know Manea,” Said Pet, shutting the cabin door behind her and coming out to see what they were doing. “We've been there.”

Ben's father put his arm around her too, and pulled them both to him.

“I don't know it any more” He said. “When I left there, my father and Grandfather still worked a gang of lighters on the Middle Level, and I wanted so much to go with them.”

“Why didn't you?” Asked Ben, looking upwards in the dark.

“Your Grandmother wanted me to have an education, not to work with boats, so we moved to Bury St Edmunds. I still went to sea, though, but it wasn't what I wanted after all.”

“What did you really want? Asked Pet.

“What I have today, Pet. This is the first time I've been in charge of a river boat since I was your and Ben's age!”

He stood for a few moments more and then turned Ben to face him.

“I'm home for good and I'm looking for a job so I can live with you and your mother, always.”

Pet's grandfather stuck his head out of the door.

“If it's all the same to you, I think some of us need to sleep.”

Ben's father tucked the children up in their bed and spread out the sleeping bag on the floor for himself. As he started to climb in, Pet's grandfather cleared his throat.

“I heard what you said, outside. I need a full time skipper for this tug.” He said. “A ships engineer who wants to come home would be ideal for me.”

“Go on Dad! It's just what you said you wanted!”

Ben's father reached over and shook the old mans hand.

“I'll be pleased and proud to serve in your ship, admiral!” He said, and the children dived out of their bed again and hugged everyone all around.