

The
Skipper's Child

by
Valerie Poore

THE SKIPPER'S CHILD

Copyright © 2011 by Valerie Poore
Cover design © 2011 by Cade Butler
(inspired by an original drawing by Maryssa Scott)

The right of Valerie Poore to be identified as the author of this work has been asserted by her in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

This book is a work of fiction.

All Rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, without the prior written consent of the publisher and copyright owner, nor be otherwise circulated in any form of binding or cover other than that in which it is published and without a similar condition being imposed on the subsequent purchaser.

ISBN 978-1-907984-11-2

FIRST EDITION

Sunpenny Publishing - www.sunpenny.com

MORE BOOKS FROM SUNBERRY BOOKS FOR CHILDREN:

If Horses Were Wishes, by Elizabeth Sellers

MORE BOOKS FROM SUNPENNY LIMITED:

The Mountains Between, by Julie McGowan (Sunpenny)

Just One More Summer, by Julie McGowan (Sunpenny)

Don't Pass Me By, by Julie McGowan (Sunpenny)

Dance of Eagles, by JS Holloway (Sunpenny)

Going Astray, by Christine Moore (Sunpenny)

My Sea is Wide, by Rowland Evans (Sunpenny)

A Little Book of Pleasures, by William Wood (Sunpenny)

Far Out, by Corinna Weyreter (Boathooks Books)

Watery Ways, by Valerie Poore (Boathooks Books)

Embracing Change, by Debbie Roome (Rose & Crown Books)

A Flight Delayed, by KC Lemmer (Rose & Crown Books)

Blue Freedom, by Sandra Peut (Rose & Crown Books)

This tale is dedicated to the memory of
Hendrikus Fernhout (1908 -1972)
whose stories and influence led to the
creation of the Kornet family.

It was also written for
Koos, Jodie and Maryssa.

".. a rollicking and unputdownable story. Beautiful."

– Koos Fernhout, Netherlands, whose childhood as a skipper's son inspired this book

"I love how you managed to squeeze every ounce of drama from this story. Well done!"

– Anne Marie Klein, Canada - author

Chapter 1

21 December 1962

Arie stared fixedly out of the wheelhouse window, straining his eyes so hard they were almost popping out of their sockets. He was trying to work out what he could actually see up ahead, which in fact wasn't much with the rain splattering so violently against the glass. It was a game he often played with himself on these long, boring trips. There wasn't really anything else to do, especially when the weather was wet and grey and sitting up in the bows of the barge got too cold.

Today was like that. In fact today was endless, with every minute feeling as if it had been stretched. It reminded him of the slowed-down films he sometimes saw at the *bioscopes* when the projectors weren't working properly. Staring glumly out of the window, he thought he'd go crazy if it went on raining.

How he hated Christmas school holidays. They were always like this. Arie wondered for the hundredth time why his father had to be a skipper and not a normal office or factory worker like other people's papas. Still, he thought, all his friends were in the same boat. Then he sniggered at his own joke.

Being a bargee's child meant you had to go to boarding

school, if of course you went to school at all. His sisters didn't go anymore. They'd been to primary school, also as boarders, but that was that. Now they spent all their time on their barge, the *Rival*, helping Mama with the chores.

Education for skippers' families was different from normal, much like everything to do with living on the inland waterways, or the *binnenvaart* as it was called. Other children started school when they were six, but barge kids only began at eight so they could spend more time with their parents. Because of this, they had lessons every day till five o'clock, even on Saturdays. By the time they were twelve they'd caught up with the boys and girls at the regular schools.

Arie realised he was lucky really. He was only still at the special boarding school for *binnenvaart* children because he was a bit brighter than most. His teacher, *Meneer Visser*, had persuaded Papa he should go on.

The girls weren't given that chance. They didn't seem to mind, but for himself, Arie was glad he could stay. He liked it there. There were lots of other kids to play with, and they were all like him: *binnenvaart* children. They understood each other, and nearly all of them found it boring in the holidays when they just had to sit in the wheelhouse and gaze at the world disappearing behind them.

Arie often thought it was funny that normal people watch the world go past, but boat people go past the world instead.

There was one thing different this Christmas, though. They were going south. Normally, they were in Rotterdam or Antwerp for the end of the year. Papa said the load of wool they were carrying was for a place called Lomme in north eastern France. They would be in Lille for Christmas, because it was so close by. He said that Arie would like that, because the Christmas and New Year celebrations in France were much more fun than they were in Holland. It was the Catholic way.

Not that Papa really approved of all those decorations and markets and fairs and stuff. It wasn't what good Protestants like them did, but at least he understood that Arie and the girls

would like it. He was looking forward to that, and looked fondly at his father, who was standing and gazing with his customary narrowed eyes into the distance, humming tunelessly to himself.

Right now, though, the canal from Terneuzen to Ghent looked like an endless grey ribbon ahead. At the point where it disappeared on the horizon, Arie could just make out some shape or other, probably a lock.

He decided to challenge himself to guessing when precisely he would be able to see what it was. He could measure the distance by the kilometre markers on the banks of the canal. The only problem was that he couldn't remember which way the markers were going, so he'd have to keep an eye out for the next one. Did the numbers go down towards Ghent or up?

And if he was watching out for the markers, would he know exactly when he could see whatever it was that was up there? No. Well, it wouldn't work then, would it?

Kicking the wall in frustration, he turned to see his father frowning at him. Arie knew he shouldn't get annoyed, but what else could he do? He looked around him at the confines of his world.

The wheelhouse was quite small and perched in front of the *roef*, or saloon cabin, at the stern of the *Rival*. It was panelled completely in pinewood and varnished a dark, dreary shade of brown. Still, it was cosy. And it was comfy too. There was a long bench across the back wall with flat cushions on it, and a separate high stool behind the huge steering wheel for Arie's father to use when he got tired of standing. He mostly stood though and when the weather was fine the starboard door would be open and he would keep his left hand on the wheel and lean his top half out of the door.

The stairwell to the *roef* was next to the bench and was covered by a heavy, crimson curtain. There were other nice things in the wheelhouse too, like the big brass bell and the brass horn that Papa used for the warning signals when he was turning, or had to pass another barge on the wrong

side. There was also a clock and a barometer hanging on hooks above the front window. Arie liked polishing the brass implements and as he looked around the small space, their shiny surfaces winked at him kindly.

It was warm as well. There was a sliding door at the bottom of the stairs, but mostly it was left open. Because of this, the heat from the old oil stove in their living quarters below spent more time up here than it did down there. Sometimes it got too hot and his father would open the door to get some fresh air, but if it was cold out, *Mama* and the girls would screech at him, because of course all the warmth from the cabin would escape outside too.

Thinking of the girls, Arie decided to go and see what they were up to. Maybe he could spice up his day by finding ways to tease them. The thought sent him grinning below.

Jannie and Anneke were sitting at the old oak table in the centre of the saloon. They were shelling peas while looking at a magazine their mother had bought at their last stop in *Sluiskil*.

Their whole lives revolved round the saloon and the other small rooms that made up the *roef*. Arie wondered how they could be so content, but he supposed they didn't know anything else. He felt a surge of pity for them. There was a big aluminium cooking pot in the middle of the table and they each had a small bowl beside them into which they were popping the peas. As soon as the bowls were full, they emptied them into the pot, and started the process again.

Arie leaned across Jannie's shoulder and grabbed a handful of peas from her pile, shovelling them into his mouth before she could stop him.

"Arie!" she yelled, indignation screwing her face into a livid scowl, and she grabbed a large wooden spoon from the cooking pot and thwacked him sharply on his bare knees.

Arie responded by grabbing a second handful from the pot, and chuckled wickedly at his younger sister's fury, while darting a conspiratorial wink at Anneke, his usual partner in crime.

Anneke grinned mischievously back, instantly complicit. Her wide mouth, dancing eyes and riot of glossy dark curls were made for laughter. At fourteen, she was the older of the two girls. Arie was twelve and came in the middle, an even two years between each of them. As Jannie raised the spoon to strike another blow, Anneke grabbed her upturned wrist with one hand and twisted the wooden weapon from her grasp with the other.

"An-ne-ke!"

The outrage in Jannie's squeal only provoked her roguish sibling further. She promptly took up position on the other side of the table, prancing on her toes, a fistful of peas ready to serve as missiles in the imminent war.

Arie's intention to wind his sisters up had worked sooner and better than he had expected. But now, he felt distinctly guilty as he saw his mother's horrified face peering out from the tiny kitchen in the corner of the cabin.

"Anneke," he hissed, "Mama's watching!"

Arie loved his mother dearly and was the only one in the family who never became impatient with her deafness. She'd had measles as an adult, in fact had caught it from Anneke who had then been a toddler, and it had left her with a serious hearing impairment.

At the moment, although he knew she could only hear a muffled and muted version of events, her stricken face was enough to show Arie that she was very upset with them all. Fresh vegetables were not precisely a luxury, but they couldn't always keep them long on board, so only small quantities were bought at the various shopping stops on route. It was wrong to waste them, and he knew it.

Anneke and Jannie fell still instantly, and looked sheepishly at their mother who shook her dark head wearily and withdrew again to the kitchen.

"Come on, girls, let's sit down and finish this together. I'll help you," Arie soothed, skirting seamlessly round the fact that it was his fault they'd almost been in trouble in the first place. "I'll put the radio on so we can listen to some nice music too, shall I?"

“Oh yes, please, Arie,” both girls chimed in unison, and then burst into giggles at the same moment, which in turn caused them to collapse further into hysterical mirth. Arie watched them a moment in puzzled amusement, then turned towards the radio. This was his pride and joy; the love of his life.

It was a real transistor model and it was brand spanking new. They used to have a big old valve radio that his Papa called the Wireless. That had puzzled Arie. How could something that needed a flex attached to big batteries be called wireless? It was only when he learnt it was because the radio’s signal came over the air, and not up the wire, that he’d understood what it meant.

Then just before they’d started on this trip, Papa and *Mama* had gone shopping in Rotterdam and had come home with the transistor. Arie was immediately fascinated. And hooked. It was so small and so beautiful compared with their old one. It had a green plastic case that was almost creamily smooth and totally unscratched.

He ran his fingers over its sides and marvelled at its silky touch. The front was a kind of beige colour with tiny holes over the circular speaker. The dial ran along the top of the front cover with the selection knobs at each end: one for choosing the waveband and one for the tuning. The volume control was a small wheel set into one side.

There was only one thing he missed about the old radio, and that was the shortwave option. He’d always enjoyed fiddling around and finding exotic stations as far off as Russia and even Canada. This one only had medium and long wave, but to make up for that, it was portable.

It was actually called a Portable Transistor Radio, and Arie thought it sounded very smart and expensive. It even had a beautifully stitched leather handle on the top so you could carry it around, and it didn’t need a flex at all, because the neat oblong batteries sat in the back under a removable cover.

He lifted it almost reverently off the small dresser that stood against the starboard side of the cabin, and which was where all the crockery was stored. Then he set it down on the table

on top of the magazine the girls had been reading. Switching it on, he quickly found a station that was playing pop music and turned the sound down so Papa wouldn't hear. Mama couldn't anyway, so she wouldn't object, but Papa didn't like them listening to pop, especially rock and roll. He said the beat was bad for people; appealed to their base instincts, or something like that. Sometimes Papa was so stuffy.

Anyway, Jannie and Anneke liked it too and Telstar was playing. They all loved that one, and no one could complain, because it wasn't like Elvis Presley, and there was no singing. It was even number one in the hit parade this December.

Heads nodding to the music, the three of them sat quietly and in harmony for once, systematically shelling peas and slowly filling the big pot.

Arie watched his sisters from under his eyebrows. Their lives consisted of an endless round of chores. In here, everything had to be kept spick and span, and was.

The bedrooms, if you could call them that, were beyond a sliding door behind him. There were two double beds built into the curved stern of the hull, but they were separated from each other by means of partitions, between which was a tiny passage.

Underneath each bed were two drawers, and below them was a cupboard, where most of their clothes were kept. *Mama* and Papa slept on the one side and the girls on the other. All the woodwork was painted so that it could be washed down easily and kept clean, which was one of the girls' weekly duties.

Arie's bed was in the *vooronder*, a small cabin found under the deck in the bows of the *Rival*. There were no windows there but it was his place and with its own shelves and panelled sides, it was snug enough. It was beastly cold now though, and he dreaded getting out from under his covers every morning.

The girls had to help with everything, from doing all the washing in a tin bath outside to opening the hatches for loading the barge. They also had to sluice down the decks

and help with the cables in the locks and when mooring up. It was a hard life, but nearly all skippers' children did the same, and since they tended to marry other skippers' children, it was a way of life they all knew and accepted. Except for Arie. He had long ago decided it wasn't going to be for him.

He thought of his poor mother, slaving away in their tiny kitchen. It was set into the recess on the starboard side of the old oil stove. All it consisted of was a small stone sink unit and a cupboard on which there was a four-ring gas hob, fed by bottled gas. There was no work space, so all the preparation had to be done on the saloon table.

The only thing they owned that wasn't strictly a necessity was the small harmonium that was tucked between two cupboards against the wall opposite him. It made Arie cross to think of his mother struggling with these limitations all her life. Other women lived in nice, modern houses with electricity, hot and cold running water and luxurious showers. His mother had never had anything like that.

In fact, there was no shower room on board at all, let alone a luxurious one. The ship's toilet was in a tiny cubicle on the port side of the stairs leading up to the wheelhouse, and at least that had its own sliding door too, but otherwise, personal hygiene was an awkward business. Mostly, bathing was done in the same tin bath that the clothes were washed in, and had to take place in the saloon. On bath nights, they would take it in turns to wash, and then everyone else had to stay out of the way. It wasn't really surprising that in winter, none of them was particularly fussy about keeping all but the necessities clean.

Arie studied his older sister's striking features. She was so pretty. He wondered how she could imagine wearing herself out as a barge wife for the rest of her life.

"Anneke," he started "what do you really want to do when you're grown up?"

She looked up at him, surprise giving her face a suddenly vacant look, as if she had no idea what he was saying. But before she could open her mouth to reply, they all jumped

as the door at the foot of the stairs scraped back, and their father's head appeared through the opening.

Arie's hand had already reached for the radio and he turned it off with a speed and dexterity born of frequent practice. However, his father caught the guilty expressions on the three young faces, and this was enough to tell him they'd been crossing a boundary or two. He frowned and drew in his breath. They waited for the blast. But instead, Hendrik Kornet just exhaled noisily and shook his head. He would deal with them later, but right now he needed Arie to help him on deck.

"Arie, the Customs men are coming on board. Help me tie up and then show them the load and everything else they want to see, will you? I have to sort out all the papers for them."

"Sure, Papa!"

Arie jumped to his feet, relieved that he'd escaped a scolding for leading the girls astray. Winking cheekily at Anneke, he ran up the stairs after his father and walked out on deck, making his way quickly up to the bows as his father steered the barge towards the quay. As he threw a line over the bollard on the quayside, the drizzle blew cold and was sharply unpleasant on his face. He wrinkled his nose at the bleak view in front of him.

They'd arrived in Zelzate on the border between the Netherlands and Belgium. The Customs House here was an austere concrete building, which spoke of its dominance on this busy canal. The Customs officials themselves were all stocky, well-padded individuals who were smugly convinced of their own importance at this crossing post.

The two approaching the barge now were no exception. It was a nuisance because the amount of time it took for them to check through the load and the paperwork generally depended on how much spare cash you had ready to slip into their waiting hands. Nothing was said, but they would hold them crossed behind them with their palms up, as they prepared to walk out with your documentation. What you put into these cupped hands was the grease

that smoothed the passage. If the pile of notes was not to their satisfaction, the process could take hours. Although he knew it was wrong, Arie hoped his father wasn't feeling too righteous today as the trip was already tedious enough. He sighed as he prepared to lift open one of the hatches.

Marijke Kornet peered out of the porthole that served as the kitchen window. She could see Arie hunched against the wind and stinging sleet, and her brow creased with concern. He wasn't wearing oilskins, nor was he wearing gloves. He'd be ill if he carried on ignoring the weather like this. She couldn't bear the thought, as it always led to other, more tragic memories. Losing her first child to the water had been unbearable. Another would finish her. She shook her head to rid herself of the unwelcome and unbidden images that reared up in her mind.

Banging on the glass, Marijke tried to attract his attention, but at that moment, she saw him stop and turn his head. Not towards her, but towards the Customs officials who were now walking along the gunwales. One of them had a hand raised in command, and Arie immediately let the hatch he was lifting fall back into place.

As she watched, she saw her son looking up in question. The officers gestured that he should leave the hatches, and waved him impatiently up to the bows. The expression on his face spoke of bewilderment, but Arie swung round and led them towards the *vooronder* where he had his room. The last she saw was of him leaning down to open the teak-wood entrance to his own quarters. Then, he disappeared, followed by the two men.

As he ducked out of view, Marijke felt a movement behind her. Twisting her head round, she came face to face with her husband, and jumped back in alarm. Hendrik smiled reassuringly and patted her shoulder affectionately before moving over to the cupboard by the wall, and opening one of the drawers in its base. He, at least, understood her anxiety over her children, and the gesture had been kindly meant. After all, the drowning of their first-born had crushed him too, even

though it was before Anneke was born. Marijke felt guilty about recoiling from him so, but he'd caught her unawares.

She sighed. That was one of the problems with not hearing much. You could never tell how far someone was from you and all too often she found her children or husband right beside her before she'd even felt their presence. It put her at a disadvantage, she knew, but then in other ways, being deaf was quite useful. It was like escaping from reality. You never had to take part in conversations that you didn't like, or be bothered by questions you couldn't answer. She had perfected the art of unseeing incomprehension too. Her face would be turned just enough to avoid those questioning looks, because in her case what she couldn't see, she couldn't hear. Still, she knew it annoyed her family, and Arie was the only one who kept his patience over her disability.

It wasn't that she was completely deaf. She could hear the higher notes - whistles, children's screams and such - and if she focused her attention, well, sometimes, quite often in fact, there was more. Not that she'd admit it. Of course, she'd heard the girls when they were squabbling this afternoon, and it had upset her to see them messing about with the food like that. It wasn't scarce, but it certainly wasn't surplus either. What's more, fresh vegetables were meant to be just that - fresh - and not mauled by a pair of bickering teenagers being egged on by their mischief-making brother.

She moved into the saloon, following her husband to the cupboard. He was sorting through a pile of neatly arranged paperwork.

"What do they want, the Customs?" Her voice was slightly slurred, but she spoke well for one so hard of hearing. Hendrik looked up to face her so that she could read his lips.

"They are checking everything, Mari," he answered with exaggerated care to make sure she could follow him. "Apparently they've had orders to tighten up on smugglers, so they want to see the living quarters too, not just the load. It means they'll take their time and we'll have to wait until

they're done." He grimaced at the thought of the inconvenience.

"But Papa, why do they want to see Arie's room too?" Anneke sounded incensed at the intrusion into her brother's private space.

"Well, you never know, Anneke, he might have a smuggler hidden in there. Or a big stash of butter." Hendrik laughed.

The girls laughed too, not understanding but finding the notion absurd. Marijke, however, remembered the last time someone they'd met had really tried smuggling. It had proved to be very embarrassing for those concerned.

It was years ago, in the early fifties when all food was still very short, even though the war had been over for years. They'd been on another of their Belgian trips, and had stopped at the border post south of Maastricht. All the skippers and their wives were being checked for contraband as it was almost considered a sport to smuggle goods across the national boundaries then. In fact, everyone crossing from Holland to Belgium did it, even on the trains and buses.

One trick was for the wives to hide pounds of butter under their skirts, as they knew that while the Dutch Customs officials would search everything else, they wouldn't search the women.

Even so, one of the officers had the better of them this time. Very politely, he asked all the ladies to wait in the interior office, "just to keep warm, while we complete the paperwork". Brooking no refusal, all the skippers' wives were ushered into an insufferably hot office where the heating had been turned up full blast. Marijke was with them and had almost passed out in the stifling room.

As time passed, some of the wives began to get very agitated, and before long it became apparent why. Small pools of yellow liquid began to form around their feet. Within minutes, these had merged to become lakes of molten butter while the women's skirts were darkened by large greasy stains. When the Customs official came back in again, he looked at the floor, and then directly into the

women's faces, one by one.

"My apologies, *dames*. If I had known you required the WC, I would have escorted you there myself." His smile was as cool as his voice.

The poor skippers' wives were mortified. They could hardly protest that the puddles on the floor were not the result of personal accidents. Not to him, they couldn't. But Marijke had seen it all and she knew that he knew it too. It was quite kind of him not to betray them, really. Clever, too, as she was sure none of them would ever try that scam again.

Peering back out through the kitchen porthole, she could see Arie had emerged from the *vooronder* and was heading back towards the wheelhouse with the two Customs officers in tow. At least now they would find out what was going on.

When Arie's head preceded the rest of him down the steps into the *roef*, the excitement in his eyes was positively pulsating. Still, he couldn't say anything with the men in uniform following close behind, so instead he gave his family a nod and a huge grin before moving to sit beside Anneke at the table. Marijke studied her son's barely restrained exuberance. There was clearly something of immense importance about to be divulged. Arie wasn't usually given to such interest and excitement when it came to border controls, and mostly he found it harder to conceal his boredom than his animation. She looked up to concentrate better on what the officers were saying.

The senior of the two men seemed more authoritative than the average border post Customs official. He was big, bulky and striking with his black hair and beard. Nonetheless, he wore his uniform with well cared-for elegance. Marijke couldn't help noticing that his hair was neatly brushed and trimmed too, and it made her conscious of her own more ruffled appearance. This was a man used to taking command, so much was clear. The other man was smaller, rounder and looked a little ragged at the edges.

Perhaps it was the result of working alongside so imposing an authoritarian figure. Between the two of them, they filled the modest sized room, and Marijke was uncomfortable in the shadow of their dominance.

Luckily, Hendrik did not seem cowed by the presence of the law in their midst. Mostly, his relationship with officialdom was pretty good, even though he resisted giving out the usual backhanders needed for ensuring a smooth passage across the border. Marijke watched as he passed a sheaf of paperwork to 'Mr Big', as she had mentally branded him. The man's intelligent eyes scanned the first few pages, but this was clearly not his main concern. As his lips moved, Marijke worked to understand what he was saying.

"Mr Kornet, you are known to us. Your ship is known to us too and we are sure that you carry an honest load, but what we want to hear from you is whether you have seen anyone suspicious at any of the stops you've made on the way here. Has anyone asked you to give them passage, or offered you money to carry anything for them?"

Hendrik's back was turned to her, so although she couldn't make out the words, she could hear the query in his tone of voice. She also noticed the back of his neck turning pink. This usually meant he was upset or angry. He was probably furiously indignant that they should even suggest he might accept any kind of bribe.

"I appreciate that, Mr Kornet," the burly Customs man was saying, and then to confirm her suspicions he went on. "But not everyone is above accepting payment for carrying illicit goods. I am very glad to hear you are not one of them. Nevertheless, we will have to make an inspection of all your living space and storage areas to ensure no one has decided to avail himself of your hospitality anyway. You will understand this, of course?"

Marijke was surprised at Mr Big's eloquence. She would never have given the Customs officials much credit for being bookish. Not that she had much chance to read herself. The Bible and their prayer books were about as much as she had time for these days. Still, she knew an educated person

when she met one, and anyone who spoke like this man must have been to a good school.

She glanced over at Arie. His face was still bright with expectation and what looked like some kind of secret knowledge. A thought occurred to her. Maybe this man was not just an ordinary Customs official and Arie knew it. As she turned back to the two men, Hendrik took her arm. His face was grim, but he had clearly resigned himself to the delay.

"We have to sit here, Mari," he told her. "These officers want to look at everything up here, and down below too, but they don't want us interfering."

He guided her to her chair at one end of the table, and then sat down at its other end himself, nodding to her encouragingly.

Jannie was already apparently bored with the whole affair and was immersed once more in the magazine, looking at all the latest fashions. She was poring over a page on which long-limbed, slender models were wearing sleek knee length sheath dresses that appeared to be moulded to the curves of their bodies, even though they were actually quite straight. Marijke sighed with regret. She had long been aware that she would never have the chance to look cool and elegant like that.

Anneke and Arie were mouthing what seemed to be secrets to each other behind their hands - all the while keeping their eyes on the two officers, who at that moment were looking in the two small bedrooms. As if anyone would be hiding in there, Marijke scoffed to herself. There was nowhere, not even space under the beds. Even so, the men were lifting the mattresses and checking all the drawers, as well as the tiny cupboards below them. She wondered what they could possibly be looking for and catching her husband's eye, she raised a brow in question. His response was to shake his head ruefully and shrug, but the fleeting glance he gave to his watch was enough to tell Marijke he was impatient to get this over with and be gone.

When the two officials had finished investigating every nook and cranny of the *roef*, the burly senior one motioned

to his assistant to stay with the family. He himself went back up to the wheelhouse and a few moments later, they heard him beneath them in the engine room, clattering around on the steel floor. He obviously didn't trust them, even now, or he wouldn't have left a guard with them. Marijke suddenly felt sullied by the whole episode. Not only were these men poking around in all their private things, they were also conferring a sense of guilt on them for something they hadn't done, or had any knowledge of. It made her angry just to think of it, but catching sight again of Arie's suppressed excitement, she knew she must contain her feelings; that with just a few more minutes' patience, they might all learn something more about it from her son.

The silence bristled with a multitude of unspoken questions. Arie could almost see them jostling for position in the airspace above his family's heads. Anneke's cheeky "c'mon Arie, I know you know what they're here for, so tell me, go on?" was vying for front spot with his Papa's "why are we suffering this endless indignity?" Then there was Jannie's pained and petulant "What now?" which was sulking around in the background. But it was his mother's intense eyes that held the most searching query, and he knew it would be her he would answer to first.

All the same, none of the Kornet family dared to give voice to their curiosity while the sour looking Customs official was standing guard. The tension in the small room was like a heavy blanket, suffocating them into silence.

Arie watched the man out of the corner of his eye. He could imagine that the officer was not too charmed to be on baby-sitting duty either. He looked about as interesting as a bowl of cold porridge with his bored, vacant eyes. Arie noticed too that his mouth was permanently curved down, like a frown, giving him an unpleasant, resentful expression. It reminded him of what Mama always said when he made an ugly face: "The wind'll change and you'll be stuck with it". But this man was probably just feeling bitter about losing out on that nice bit of extra cash he might have got

if he hadn't had the other, obviously more senior officer, foisted on him. This one looked just the type to look the other way if the price was right.

As if to confirm Arie's assessment, the officer sniffed loudly in disdain and crossed his hands behind his back in the customary 'ready to receive' position.

The big official was still clattering round in the engine room. It sounded as if he was dismantling the motor single handed and throwing the parts angrily to the floor. Hendrik Kornet looked anxious, and Arie knew his father was worried that the officer might damage some essential equipment if he wasn't careful. He just hoped they would finish and go soon. He was dying to tell his family all he'd heard, but of course he had to be patient. Folding his arms on the table he put his head down, feigning sleep.

At long last, the big man came back, not surprisingly looking a little less pristine than he had done when he came on board. His hair was ruffled from poking it under ledges and in cupboards, and he had a smudge of grease on his right cheek - a nice big black one. Even so, he did at least seem satisfied that they were carrying nothing more interesting than a hold full of wool.

"Everything appears to be in order, Mr Kornet, so we'll leave you to go on your way as soon as the paperwork has been stamped in the office. If you'd like to come with us, we'll complete the necessary and you can go." There was no apology and no explanation. That was it. Arie was disappointed, as he'd been hoping to find out if his hunch was right after all. He didn't get a chance to dwell on it, though. As soon as the two officials had left, followed closely by their father, the two girls and his mother turned to him, their faces alight with eager anticipation.

"So, Arie, what is it you've been itching to tell us all this time?" His mother's slurred voice was surprisingly quick in managing to broach the silence ahead of Anneke.

"Was it that obvious, Mama?" Arie's reply was careful but still teasing.

"Only as much as a flashing beacon in a lighthouse," she

laughed. "I can always tell with you, Arie. You'll never be able to keep a secret for long. You just can't wait to tell everyone."

"Aha, so no future in a poker game for me then." Arie gave an exaggerated sigh.

"You'll have no future at all if you talk like that around here," his mother retorted sharply, and they both began to laugh.

"Arie, come on!" Anneke's patience with this touching display of mother and son affection was now totally exhausted.

So, with the full attention of his mother and both sisters Arie began to talk.

He told them that when he went down into his room in the *vooronder*, the two officers had lingered for just a moment before following him inside. What they hadn't remembered of course, was that below decks, you can hear what people are saying above you with much more clarity than if they are there in the same space. He'd often noticed this before when lying in his bunk at a mooring. You could hear everything everyone said, and whispered as well, even if they were standing on the deck of the barge lying next to yours. Well, in this case, he had overheard the big, senior official warning the other one not to give him away or betray him by any word or gesture. He'd been very adamant about it and those were the exact words he'd used, Arie was sure. So, that had got him thinking. Why should he have said that if he was a genuine Customs Officer?

"Perhaps he just didn't want us to know what he was looking for," said Jannie, always rather prosaic and matter-of-fact in her thinking.

"No, Jannie, I don't think it's only that," Arie insisted. "I'm sure he isn't one of them. When have you ever seen a *douanier* as smart and good with words as him? I tell you what I think. I think he's a Secret Service Agent!"

"Oh don't be daft, Arie," Anneke butted in rudely. "What would a secret service agent be wanting, poking around in the things of a poor skipper's family? That's stupid!" She finished mercilessly.

"No, it isn't, Anneke," Arie shook his head tiredly. "I'm sure he wasn't looking for normal smuggled goods, because what you don't know is that he asked me lots of really strange questions about Papa. Why would he want to know who Papa talks to whenever we stop anywhere and why would he ask me, of all people, what Papa's beliefs and politics are? I'm just a kid!"

Anneke had no answer to that. Neither did his mother or Jannie. They simply stared at him in astonishment as if totally dumbstruck. And so it was into this scene of suspended animation that Hendrik Kornet walked, waving his signed and stamped paperwork and smiling with the air of a man relieved.

When he followed the Customs men from his barge, Hendrik was holding his irritation in tight check. *We'd have been snugly moored up in Ghent by now, he grumbled to himself. If the Lord knew what they were looking for I wish He'd told me, but all this time-wasting's going to cost me the best part of the day, and we're on a tight schedule as it is.*

He hugged his jacket closer against the needles of freezing rain as he trudged across the quay in their wake. Smuggling was still quite a problem these days. Not as bad as it had been just after the war, he recalled, but enough of a headache to keep the border posts busy. Of course it didn't help that there was so much bribery and corruption among the Customs officials themselves, particularly at these Belgian crossings. He mostly tried to ignore the open invitations to 'pay' for a quick check through, as he'd never felt that scratching backs did any more than worsen the itch. Besides that, he was a God-fearing man and a regular church-goer too, but sometimes even *he* had to go with the flow - just to keep the flow going.

As he stepped into the Customs House office, the senior official moved behind a brown Formica-topped counter and pulled over a flat tin that held the ink-pad for the big stamp that was used for border clearances. Lifting each sheet of the sheaf of papers, he began a rhythmic pattern of inking

and stamping. Then, without lifting his eyes, he started speaking to Hendrik with a casual and friendly familiarity.

"So, what does a good, honest skipper like you do with his free time then? What kind of social life do you manage to have? Must be hard when you're always on the go."

Hendrik hesitated, finding the question unaccountably strange. Why suddenly so friendly? And surely Customs men knew what kind of life skippers had? There *was* no time for 'free time' as he called it.

"Social life is not something we look for, sir. Not with our way of life. If we get the chance to get together with other families like ourselves... well, we sing."

The man's dark head lifted in surprise. He stared at Hendrik a moment before recovering himself.

"Sing? What do you mean? What do you sing?"

"Well, we sing hymns and psalms round the harmonium. You'll have noticed it on board, sir."

"Yes... I did." The officer looked nonplussed "Is that right then? You all sing hymns together in one jolly group? No going ashore and getting drunk in bars or mixing with foreigners and the like?"

"Sir, we're decent Protestant folk, and we only sing with other Protestant skippers and their families. Drinking alcohol is for Catholics and heathens, not for us!" Hendrik flashed. He regretted his words as soon as they were out, but he was tired of the game now and just wanted to go; to leave without this unreasonable feeling that he'd done something shameful.

The officer's face solidified into stone as he regarded Hendrik coldly. He was most likely a Catholic himself, but he made no response to the insult. Turning away and fixing his eyes on a spot just beyond the grubby windowpane, he spoke as if to himself.

"You'd better be right, Mr Kornet, else you'll be singing a very different tune if we find out you're playing us false."

Then, pushing the paperwork across the counter, he seemed to lose interest in Hendrik altogether and without another word, swung on his heel and retreated through the

door at the back of the shabby office.

Shaking his head in angry bewilderment, Hendrik collected up his documents. Holding them close to keep them dry, he shouldered his way through the main door and out onto the wet quay, suddenly breaking into a skip of pleasure to be finally free of this miserable Belgian border post.

As he climbed on board and made his way down into the *roef*, he was waving the papers in front of him and grinning with almost boyish glee. Until, of course, he noticed the almost uniform expression on his family's faces. Without exception, they were staring up at him in dismay.

"What is it? What's happened?" He asked, dropping his hand and replacing the smile with a look of suspicious alarm.

"Tell him, Arie," urged Anneke. "Tell Papa what you heard those men saying."

Arie repeated his story about what the senior official had said to his colleague, and then went on to tell his father what the big man had asked about his politics and beliefs.

"I think he's a secret service agent," finished Arie importantly. "Why else would he ask questions like that? I mean a Customs officer doesn't care what you do in your free time Papa. Nor does he care what your politics are, and anyway, why ask me at all? I'm just your son. How would I know? It's not as if we talk about stuff like that, is it?" His last words carried a daring hint of sarcasm.

However, if Hendrik heard it, he ignored it as he sat down heavily and ran his hands through his hair.

"I don't know, Arie. He started to ask me the same things, but I didn't let him get very far," and he told them what had transpired in the Customs house. Marijke concentrated hard, frowning as she heard what her husband had said to the officer about Catholics. She hoped uneasily that they wouldn't come to regret his unusual outburst in the future.

"Anyway," Hendrik went on, "I know what you think, Arie, but I'd guess it's still about smuggling. Maybe that officer was just one of their top men and he didn't want us to know that. I can't imagine what the intelligence services

would have to do with people like us." He paused thoughtfully. "And smuggling's still a problem, especially across these borders. Not like before, though. It's not that long ago that smugglers would be shot at for taking coffee through illegally."

"Shot at? Really, Papa? For coffee smuggling?" Jannie's eyes took on an unaccustomed glint at such excitement.

"That's right, Jannie, but maybe I should say they didn't shoot at the smugglers themselves, just at their car tyres. It was a bit of a game if truth be told, and no one died, but it was quite a chase." Hendrik paused, into his story now. "If the Customs' bullets threatened to get too close, the smugglers would throw things called crows' feet out of their car doors. They were sort of steel hooks crossed over each other and welded together so that whichever way they fell, there was always a sharp point sticking up." He linked two curved fingers together to demonstrate how the crow's feet were formed. "They pierced the tyres of the pursuing cars if they hit them, and then of course the smugglers got away."

"Wow, Papa! Did you ever see it? Did anyone ever get hurt?" Jannie's bloodlust was clearly up.

"No, chicken, I didn't and as far as I know, no one was ever seriously injured. Anyway," he sighed, "enough of this now. I can't sit here telling stories all day."

"Come on, Papa, tell us some more. *Please?*" pleaded Jannie.

"Not now, Jannie, we've got to get on. We'll not make Ghent tonight, but we can at least get a bit closer before we tie up for the night. Come on, kids, give your Papa a hand now, all of you."

Sighing moodily, the two girls and Arie pulled themselves to their feet. Marijke went back to her chores in the tiny kitchen, taking the pot of shelled peas with her. As they clambered up the stairs to the wheelhouse, Arie whispered in Anneke's ear.

"I still think it was more than just smuggling, Anneke," he murmured mysteriously. She turned, blue eyes full of

eager mischief, and winked at him. He wasn't sure if that meant she agreed with him or not, but he'd have to leave it for now.

In the wheelhouse they all busied themselves with pulling on coats, boots, oilskins and gloves before trekking out onto the rain slicked deck to cast off the lines for the next stage of their journey.

Chapter 2

The day was looking sadly dismal by the time Hendrik Kornet began to manoeuvre into a space between two other barges lying alongside a quay just outside Ghent. Any remaining colour in the sky and water seemed to have washed itself out with the rain and the fading light. Eyeing the desolate view with disgust, Arie was only too glad to leave the world outside after checking the last of the cables that would hold them safe against the wall for the night.

Back in the wheelhouse, he threw off his soggy gloves and rubbed his fingers together briskly to get the blood flowing again. Hendrik was busy tidying up his maps and paperwork. He always liked to leave an orderly 'office', as he jokingly called the cramped area around the steering wheel.

Arie stood watching his father thoughtfully for a moment, and then, as if he could contain himself no longer, he blurted out, "So, Papa, what do you think those men wanted with us today? They weren't just looking for smuggled goods, I'm sure about that."

Hendrik glanced over at his son and smiled fondly. "I really couldn't tell you, Arie, and I think I'd rather not know, anyhow. There's enough evil afoot in this world without us going looking for it where we can't already see it." He gazed out at the darkening sky, his thin face trou-

bled. "That man got under my skin, he did, and I don't like that. I shouldn't have let him get to me, so I think I'd rather let the matter go if you don't mind, Arie, my boy." His eyes were warm with understanding as he saw the disappointment in the earnest face before him. "I know you found it exciting, and so it was, but it was also insulting to be treated like that, and I only hope we don't meet up with any more trouble on this trip. Quite apart from anything else, it's a wretched waste of time!"

"But Papa -" Arie began.

"No, son," Hendrik stopped him briskly, putting an arm round Arie's shoulders in compensation, "not now. Let's go down to your mother and eat what she's made for us. You wouldn't want to keep her waiting now, would you?" Giving Arie a quick squeeze, he turned quickly to the stairwell and started down, allowing his son no chance to respond.

Arie bit back the sullen retort he was about to make, but only because he knew it would inevitably create a wretched atmosphere. And he hated that, especially when his mother was hurt by it, which she would be. He was sure of that. What he couldn't understand, though, was why his father was so lacking in curiosity himself. Arie knew the men had humiliated his father, so why was he just prepared to forget about it? Hendrik Kornet didn't usually react so dramatically to jibes about his church and faith, so the senior Customs officer had clearly disturbed him deeply. Given this fact, Arie found it even stranger that Papa should be so determined to put it behind him.

Shrugging to himself, he slid down the stairs into the warmth and soft light of the *roef*, leaving the unsettling events of the day behind him.

The meal was already on the table, steaming gently from the earthenware bowls clustered on the worn, chequered oil cloth. A gas lamp which hung from the middle of the ceiling hissed noisily, giving a burst of bright light that extended across the table but not much further. The only other light glowed from the dial on the radio which was

keeping them company from the top of the dresser.

All five Kornets set about spooning vegetables onto their plates to accompany the slices of spicy sausage that Marijke had previously dished up. The bowls passed from one to another with quiet murmurs while the family's ears were trained towards the measured and well-modulated voice speaking to them from the radio.

This was a time of day when silence was tacitly accepted by every member of the family. No one spoke while the news was on, for this was their only real contact with the world beyond the banks of the waterways.

The newsreader spoke with calm authority about an agreement that Mr Kennedy in the United States had made with Mr Macmillan in England to sell the British some new nuclear missiles called Polaris or something, and that these would be fitted to submarines. Arie thought that the radio presenter made it sound terribly normal and comfortable, more like selling sacks of tea or flour than weapons that could kill millions of people. Apparently, the deal would help to keep Europe safe, and Mr Kennedy was even going to ask General de Gaulle in France if he wanted some of these Polaris things too.

It was only a couple of months ago that everyone was holding their breath about the goings on in Cuba. Arie had heard plenty about that; how President Krustchev in Russia had sneaked in behind Mr Kennedy's back and actually tried to set up a nuclear missile base on Cuba. Right in America's backyard, they were all saying. Now it seemed this agreement with England was the subsequent result.

Hendrik and Marijke never had much to say about grand international affairs. They were so isolated in their watery world that such things concerned other people and didn't involve them at all. Even so, they listened very attentively; almost as though the news was a favourite series they wanted to keep up with. The girls listened closely as well, but for them too, these were just stories about big important people whose faces they could only imagine as black and white images from the occasional newspapers they bought.

To Arie, though, it was the nourishment he needed to keep his hold on reality. He drank it in, thirsty for knowledge of the world he wanted so desperately to be part of. The radio was his lifeline.

The newsreader then went on to talk about some national events. There'd been a fire in a Rotterdam warehouse with two people sadly killed. Then there was something about how the Royal family were going to cope with Christmas since they had only just buried Queen Wilhelmina. The first, and probably last funeral where everything and everyone was dressed in white, thought Arie. It was what the old queen had wanted, they said, and because she was so well loved, they'd done it. Anyway, whatever the reason, it was a nice idea. Much better than having everyone miserable in black.

The weather forecast was for more of the same - cold, cold and still more cold, with only snow expected to add variety. It was definitely getting worse, so that was the only certainty. Arie had a bad feeling that this winter was going to be both long and severe, and the forecasters were doing nothing to dispel his pessimism. He shivered at the thought. His room in the *vooronder* was cold enough now as it was. If things got any worse, he'd have to move back into the *roef* with the rest of the family.

With the newscast over, the girls stacked up the plates and took them to the tiny kitchen. The dishes would remain there over night and be washed in a bowl outside in the morning. For the rest of the evening, they could play card games or go for a walk if they wanted. Marijke settled down in the only comfortable chair next to the stove and took some knitting out of a bag she kept under the cushion. With her eyes down, she was effectively out of contact and closed for the day.

Anneke and Jannie retrieved their magazine and, shiny heads together, they paged through the fashion plates, debating the virtues of different hairstyles, bags and shoes. Hendrik pulled an old wooden stool closer to the stove and taking his Bible from the dresser opened it where the

marker lay and started reading, a look of immense peace and tranquillity settling across his features.

Arie watched his family for a few moments, marvelling at the simple peace they found in this mundane, routine existence. Sighing quietly, he decided to go for a walk along the quay, maybe even into the city, and then go to bed. His mind was too busy for reading, so perhaps a bit of exercise would relax him more. Getting up, he went to his parents and kissed them both gently. They each looked up briefly and smiled, and then went back to their respective occupations. He then ruffled both the girls' hair, which made them squeal mildly, but otherwise they ignored him. So, largely unnoticed, he climbed the stairs to the wheelhouse and shoved his arms into his heavy old duffle coat. Pulling a hat over his ears and gloves over his wrists, he pushed open the door and went out into the darkness of the night.

The quay gleamed with ice as Arie stepped carefully off the side of the barge. The cold wrapped itself round him like a blanket, numbing his cheeks with the intensity of the chill. It seemed worse at the back of his neck, though, so he pulled the hood of his duffle coat over his head and buttoned the flap across under his chin. Treading his way carefully along the narrow path, he found an opening with a few steps that took him up onto the main road leading towards the city centre.

The streetlights splashed soft yellow pools of brightness on the slippery surface of the paving stones, but beyond them, all was dark. Arie shivered as he walked. There was an undercurrent of menace creeping out of the shadows around him. Cars passed occasionally, cutting the silence with the sound of their wheels crackling through the icy puddles on the road.

In the air there was a heavy smell of something rotten. Arie squeezed his nostrils together to block it out. He knew that this was the stench from the flax mills that discharged their waste into the canals, and poor Ghent was famous for it. He was glad it wasn't summer when the heat would likely make the air unbearable. Crossing a bridge to the other side

of the harbour, he headed into the city away from the water and the smell of festering decay.

At first, the street he walked along was lined with sad looking terraces, fronted by equally sad looking shops. In the reflection of the street lamps, he saw the dirty yellow bricks, and grubby net curtains of these dreary rows of houses. The atmosphere was so different from Dutch towns. Arie decided his own country was a much more cheerful place to live in with its focus on warmth, cleanliness and cosiness. The outskirts of Belgian towns often seemed horribly depressing and he wondered how people could bear to live in such dreary and shabby surroundings.

Things began to change though, and as he trudged towards the city centre, the buildings seemed to grow in stature, and the facades became more elegant. Before he knew it, he had entered the old part of Ghent and was struck by its beauty. Crossing a bridge over the Leie river, which ran through and round the heart of the city, Arie gazed in fascination at the stateliness and charm before him.

Ancient houses seemed to stoop gently, leaning against each other for support and indulgently tolerating the water lapping round their footings. Bridges arched gracefully over the water and as well as the rows of barges, small pleasure-boats and punts were moored up to the sides, for all the world like a Venice of the North. He was captivated.

His parents had told him that he'd been born in Maastricht, which was apparently a very fine and historic place too, and they sometimes joked that his love of beautiful buildings was because he'd started life in such noble surroundings. Still, he'd not been there since, at least not since he'd been old enough to know where he was, but it was true that he was always aware of historic places and liked the old architecture much more than the new stuff that was being built now. Everything new was so bland, dull and square, and it seemed to Arie that no one wanted to make things look attractive any more.

As he meandered round the cobbled lanes lit softly by the tall streetlamps, he saw the ancient cathedral with its

soaring tower, the proud Flemish town houses with their ornate frontages and the noble city hall. It was like finding treasure after the gruelling day they'd had, and Arie grinned, absurdly pleased to have seen all this beauty by himself. Being so cold, there weren't many people about, but those he did see glanced at him curiously, and he realised he must look a little strange all alone with his ridiculous smile. He sighed with pleasure and his breath made small clouds before him, but he no longer noticed the falling temperatures.

Eventually satisfied with his visual feast, Arie set off back towards the harbour and quay where the *Rival* lay. He definitely felt ready for a good night's sleep now. Whistling jauntily, he started on his way, but after a few minutes walk, it struck him that he had no idea how long he'd been out so he stopped under a street lamp to look at his watch. He still wasn't really used to having one. He'd only got it for his birthday the previous June, and he wasn't allowed to take it to school either, so it was still quite a novelty. Peering closely at its face, made yellow under the lamplight, Arie saw with shock he'd been gone for nearly two hours. It was only 8.30 but even so, he was sure his parents would be worried. Breaking into a run, he sped his way back through the dim and freezing streets, gasping as the cold robbed him of breath.

Marijke glanced anxiously towards the clock on the dresser. Arie had been gone a long time. He often took himself off for walks when they moored up but he was usually back in an hour or so. It had been about 6.30 when he went out and now it was getting on for two hours later.

Hendrik caught her gaze and smiled reassuringly. "Don't worry, dear, he's probably wandering round the city and forgotten the time. You know what he's like with old buildings. He'll spend hours gaping at them." He chuckled at the thought and shook his head in bemusement. Where the boy had got this craving for the world of cities and history he really didn't know because, despite

their jokes about his place of birth, there was nothing in his background to account for such a passion.

Marijke looked at him in concern. "You know he won't ever be a skipper, don't you Hendrik?" She looked around their tiny home. The girls had already cleaned their teeth and gone off to bed, even though it was still early. There was nothing else for them to do. She sighed, then articulated slowly: "Arie will never be satisfied with this life. He's too hungry for the world."

"I know that my *schat*." Hendrik could only agree. He wasn't blind to his son's lack of interest in the only life he had ever known himself. He regretted it, but was philosophical all the same. "Maybe he'll change his mind when he's older and sees how his fine cities and people are really full of cheating, sin and greed."

Marijke nodded "Yes, but he's so full of curiosity, and he wants to know so much about life on the land."

"It's not all it's cracked up to be, if you ask me, but he has to find that out for himself. Anyway, if he doesn't want to be a skipper, then I'll have to sell the barge when the time comes." Hendrik patted her knee, raising his voice slightly to make sure she could hear. "Don't fret, though, love, he'll be back soon."

Arie slowed to a walk as he came to the last bridge over the harbour where the boat was moored. He trod more carefully now as the pavement was even more slippery on the stretch over the water itself. As he crossed over, he could see the *Rival* as a long dark mass with only the *vooronder* lit by one of the streetlights. It was a nice shape, he reflected. He leant against the railings for a moment to look at it. Not often conscious of the barge itself, he was aware that it was called a Luxe Motor, and that it had very good proportions with its wheelhouse sitting before the *roef* and its long lean lines.

As he watched, he noticed something moving on the gunwales where nothing should have been at all. Looking more intently into the darkness, he could see that the thing

was moving towards the hatch to his room in the *vooronder*, and then suddenly, the pool of light fell on the shape, revealing it to be human. Arie's mouth went dry, and he gasped. Under his stunned gaze, the hatch opened and the shape disappeared inside.

Shock turned to excitement as Arie wondered what to do. Who could it be? And why were they creeping about so stealthily? For that matter, where had the person come from? And how had he or she got on board without being heard? He pondered about whether to alert his parents, but something told him not to. Almost bursting with suspense, he finished crossing the bridge and then ran quickly back to the barge. As he approached their mooring, he decided to say a quick goodnight to his mother and father, apologise for being late and then head off to his room. He wanted desperately to find out what was going on, and he wanted to do it without any interference from anyone else. This was going to be his adventure, and his alone.

Climbing nimbly back on board, Arie slipped through the wheelhouse door, and out of his coat and boots before stepping down the short flight into the *roef*. Both his parents looked up as he slid through the sliding door that was now drawn across the bottom of the stairs. Anxious frowns transformed to wide smiles as they saw him glowing with health and comfortingly whole.

"I'm so sorry I'm late, Mama," he burst out, stumbling against the table in his eagerness to reach his mother and apologise before she could scold him. He knelt down next to her chair and looked up at her, both excitement and remorse evident in his earnest expression. "It was so beautiful in Ghent, I just forgot the time, truly. There are so many gorgeous buildings and it's not like anywhere at home, I just had to keep looking. You weren't too worried were you, my Mama?" his eyes pleaded forgiveness, which Marijke could not resist.

Glancing over his head, she caught her husband's eye. He smiled and gave a brief nod, closing his eyes in bless-

ing. Returning her gaze to Arie, she looked at him slowly and shook her head. Then, pulling him into her arms, she gave him a quick hard hug. He knew then that she had been terribly worried, and guilt washed over him. She must have been terrified she'd lost him, just like his brother before him, but she would never tell him so; never put that burden on him, which of course just made him feel even more ashamed.

"Just so long as you're safe now, my precious boy," she whispered into his hair, then straightening up, she regarded him fondly and, speaking slowly to keep her voice clear, she said. "You'd best get off to bed now before the decks are too icy. Snuggle down as quickly as possible. Put your flannel pyjamas on and wear your socks and gloves. You'll feel the cold less if your wrists and feet are warm." She paused, tired of the effort, but when Arie eagerly turned to leave, she finished with a brisk reminder: "Don't forget to clean your teeth before you go, now!"

His face puckered with frustration. Why did he always have to clean his teeth? The toothpaste always left a horrid powdery taste in his mouth. Besides, he couldn't wait to escape to his room. Still, he knew he wouldn't get away without doing it, so grinning sheepishly at Marijke, he headed for the kitchen where he could brush them over the sink. Passing his father, he leaned over to peck him on the cheek. Hendrik looked up and winked conspiratorially. For a moment, Arie froze. How could his father know why he was in such a hurry? Then he relaxed with relief. Of course Papa was just sympathising about the teeth cleaning. He shrugged, grinning ruefully, and slipped into the kitchen.

Grasping the big handle on the tap at the back of the stone sink, he pumped it up and down to draw water from the big tanks below the decks. He filled a glass and then reached up to fetch his toothbrush and the toothpaste from an earthenware pot on the small shelf that ran high up round the entire wall of the tiny kitchen. The family's toiletries were all kept up here, sharing space with other small containers filled with herbs and other cooking condi-

ments. They were kept in place by a thin brass rod that was fixed a few centimetres above the edge of the shelf, and prevented things from falling off when the barge rolled in heavy waters. The trouble was it was so effective that Arie couldn't lift his toothbrush out of the pot. He just wasn't quite tall enough to reach it easily, and it seemed especially difficult this time. All he wanted was to get off to his room, and everything was conspiring against him. Giving up in annoyance, he sneaked a glance back into the main cabin. Sure that his parents weren't really paying attention, he noisily swilled his mouth out with water and spat it back out in the glass before pouring the contents carefully into the drain of the sink. Marijke didn't actually like them to do this, but in the current weather conditions, there was no way he was going to make an extra trip outside just to throw a cupful of water into the canal.

Having audibly if not physically gone through the motions, he hurried back through the cabin, calling a cheery goodnight as he went.

"One moment, Arie," called his father. "I'll just watch you along the gunwales."

Following his son into the wheelhouse, Hendrik helped Arie on with his duffle coat, gloves and scarf. Once his boots were secure, he opened the door, ready to step out along the side of the barge.

"Okay, Arie, just remember now..."

"Yes, Papa, I know. One hand for the ship! I won't forget! Goodnight, then. See you tomorrow."

"Goodnight, my boy. Sleep well." And he closed the door behind his son.

The freezing air hit Arie again like the slap of a wave, but he trod his way carefully along the side of the boat, keeping one hand on the hold. That was always safety rule number one. They had all had it drilled into them and it had saved them from falling many a time during rough or icy weather. About half way along the gunwales, Arie looked back to the wheelhouse. He could just make out the shape of his father's head in the front window. True to his word,

Hendrik Kornet was watching to make sure his son reached the *vooronder* safe and sound.

By the time he reached the foredeck, Arie was tip-toeing in order not to alarm his visitor, assuming of course the intruder was still there. His heart was pounding in his chest as he turned and waved a final goodnight to his father. Gratified to see an answering wave, he was also suddenly terrified at the prospect of going down into the *vooronder* alone. He had a sudden urge to dash back into the *roef*, tell his parents what he'd seen and beg his father to come with him. But then the excitement took over again, and with a stealth he didn't know he possessed, he took a deep breath. Leaning down, he pushed back the sliding hatch and opened the small doors that gave access to his room.

He was instantly alarmed when he saw that his trusty old torch was no longer hanging in its place on a hook at the top of the step ladder. Peering into the darkness, though, he saw a circle of light wavering erratically in the far corner of the room below. It looked as if the torch was shivering, but he quickly understood that it was the hand holding it that was shaking. Curiously, this sign of vulnerability gave Arie the impetus he needed, and he climbed quickly down, leaving the entrance open just in case.

"Okay," he spoke out, instantly mortified when his voice ended in a broken squeak.

"Okay," he tried again, this time with more dignity, "I know you're in here, so you'd better tell me what you want."

He hoped he sounded more confident than he actually felt. The pool of light shook wildly again but there was no other response. Feeling altogether braver now, firstly because the torch thankfully remained on, and secondly because he hadn't been answered, let alone attacked, Arie turned back to close the doors and slide the hatch back into position. When he'd finished, he stayed at the bottom of the ladder and tried again.

"You know, you're lucky I haven't told anyone you're

here, or you'd be in big trouble, but, you'd better tell me, 'cos if you don't, I might still. Tell someone, that is. So there!" He finished his pompous little speech with a rush, not knowing how much he sounded like the twelve-year-old that he really was.

The next moment, though, he was jumping back in startled revulsion. The torch seemed to have turned itself upwards and was now illuminating a face of such ghastly pallor and horror that the terrified Arie wanted to turn tail and shoot straight back out of his hatch. But like a rabbit caught in a headlight, he remained rooted to the spot, staring in awful fascination as the ghoul began to speak.

"Can you speak English?" it asked in that language, but so heavily accented he did not recognise it at first. "I hope it, for I not understand anything you say in your language."

"Oooh errr, hmmm, yes, I do speak *some* English," Arie offered, caught off guard by this unexpected request. He'd started proper English lessons at school last term, but he already knew quite a lot anyway from listening to the BBC on the radio.

"What I wanted to know is who you are and what you are doing here," he repeated, slowly enunciating the unfamiliar words and speaking a bit too loud as if talking to his mother. He stood with his back pressed against the steps of the ladder. Adrenalin had overtaken the muscles in his legs, and they now refused to obey him. Then the ghoul answered, sounding surprisingly normal.

"My name is Dmitri and I am Russian seaman out of Moscow. I am here... well... it is long story, but I hope you help me and not give me to p-police. If they find me, then is b-better that I jump in water here... now."

The ghoul's disembodied face then began to shudder violently emitting a loud clattering sound. Arie thought the noise was some kind of death rattle until he it dawned on him it was Dmitri the Face's teeth. Whether he was trembling from fear or cold, Arie wasn't quite sure, but in a moment of clear perception he knew that the owner of the teeth was probably a lot more afraid of him than the other

way round. Unlocking himself from the steps, he took a step towards the light.

He faltered as he moved towards his intruder. What if the Russian man was armed? As just a face floating in the darkness, he looked creepy but not very dangerous, so you couldn't really tell.

"Um... if I help you, do you promise not to hurt me?" he asked.

"I... not... hurt you," Dmitri's teeth chattered between his words, and then he asked suddenly "Have you the d-d-dry clothes?" He gave the word 'clothes' two syllables, which confused Arie for a moment, so he didn't answer straight away. Drawing closer, he began to see that there was more to Dmitri than just a head. There was a heaving, shuddering heap below the face that appeared to be a pair of legs folded up close against his chest with arms wrapped round his knees, and one hand desperately clutching the torch. He was holding it upwards which accounted for the spectral appearance of his face, and judging by the sheen on his skin and hair, he was very, very wet. And cold.

And worse still, he stank. Wrinkling up his nose, Arie recognised the smell of the polluted water that oozed rankly out of the textile mills that surrounded Ghent.

His fear turned to concern. Dmitri didn't look like a man at all. He was just a boy, probably still a teenager. Through the ghostly light thrown by the torch, he saw the thin pallid face with deep shadows under wide pleading eyes. Damp tendrils of dark hair clung to his forehead and he was visibly shaking. Arie's concern turned to courage.

"Yes, I've got some dry clothes and if you give me back my torch, I'll get them for you. You look very cold, I must say." He frowned at Dmitri a moment. "Are you sure you aren't going to die on me?"

"Sorry?" Dmitri looked puzzled.

"What I mean is, are you ill? Or are you just cold?" Arie peered at Dmitri anxiously. "I don't think I can help you if you're dying, you see," he added reasonably.

Dmitri laughed shakily. "I am not d-dying, n-no. I am just outside l-long time. From p-place called S-slooskil. I am h-holding on to rope steps hanging from your b-boat."

"From where?" Arie frowned, realisation hovering somewhere close by. "You mean Sluiskil! But why? That's a really long way! How did you manage it? That's crazy!" He was so shocked that it took him a moment to ask the most obvious question. "And how come no one saw you at the Customs, at the border? They searched us inside out!"

"If you stop talking one m-moment, I t-tell you. But first, may I have the d-dry clothes. Please?"

"Oh, yes. Sorry. I forgot. Here, give me the light." Arie stretched out his hand and took the heavy rubberised torch from Dmitri's shuddering hand. The movement released a strong whiff of the cloying stench of the canal. Arie grimaced "You know you don't smell very nice, either. You should throw those clothes away now."

"I know it. I think water h-here is very dirty. I hope I not get s-sick."

"Hmmm, me too," agreed Arie unsympathetically. He wasn't quite sure even now what he was going to do about this visitor of his, but it would be much more complicated if Dmitri fell ill.

Then, he turned to the box bed beside him and bending down, he pulled a drawer out from under it. With the help of the torchlight, he dug around and pulled out a woollen vest, some underwear and socks, some flannel pyjama bottoms and an old cast off sweater of his father's. He made a heap on the bed and turned to Dmitri.

"Sorry it's just old stuff, but I don't have much here. My mother's got most of my clothes for washing."

"Please not to worry. I will be happy just to be dry!" Dmitri said with some feeling as he struggled to his feet. He immediately started peeling off his sodden shirt and trousers. Arie looked on in distaste as he saw how thin the young stowaway was. After being at boarding school, he was quite used to seeing his friends in various stages of undress, so it didn't occur to him to look away, but even so,

he wasn't used to seeing anyone quite as malnourished as this Russian seaman. It wasn't a pretty sight.

"Why are you so horribly thin?" He blurted out, not realising that compassion could also be cruelly harsh. His companion didn't seem to be hurt though and responded with the same honesty.

"I do not eat many times since I come here," Dmitri confessed. "I am very hungry now. Do you have something I can eat?" He asked hopefully.

"No, not really, I'm sorry. All I've got are a few cookies I brought home with me from school. Do you want one of those?"

"Yes. I mean, yes, please. How many do you have? Can I eat all?" he asked anxiously.

Once again, Arie dug around in his drawer and from the back, pulled a cardboard box which rattled reassuringly. He and Dmitri peered eagerly inside and were both relieved to find there were six chocolate chip biscuits. A bit soft but still quite edible and, anyway, Arie was sure that Dmitri wasn't about to start complaining.

He handed the box over with just the slightest twinge of regret. They were his secret store, so he felt very virtuous about parting with them so selflessly. All the same, he hoped Dmitri wouldn't actually eat all of them. Watching the young Russian wolf down the first three, however, he resigned himself to their loss. Instead, he started questioning his visitor.

"So, what are you doing here and why are you in trouble with the police? Oooh, I get it!" he pounced excitedly, as the thought suddenly occurred to him. "Are you the reason our ship was searched today?"

Dmitri gave him a long and serious look.

"If I tell you, you will have much danger. Do you want that? I think it is better if I say nothing and then I cannot cause you harm."

Arie stared back at him. A feeling of brand new maturity washed over him like a wave of warmth. He made his decision fully conscious of its weight.

"Dmitri, I think it's too late for that, don't you?" He paused. "If they - whoever they are - find you here, I will be in trouble anyway. In that case, I think it's actually much better if you tell me, so I can work out some way to get us both out of it. Don't you?" he repeated.

Dmitri sighed. His shivering had stilled to an occasional shudder, but even so, he looked small and defenceless despite being obviously several years older than his new saviour. Still, his first words took Arie by surprise.

"What is your name?" Dmitri asked.

"My name?"

"Yes. If I am going to tell you my story, then is right that I know your name, no?"

"Oh yes, of course. I'm Arie. Arie Kornet. My father owns this barge and I go to the skippers' school in Vreeswijk in Holland. It's the holidays now. That's why I'm here."

"Okay Arie, I know nothing about Holland, or, how you say, skippers' school? I escaped here from France, but it is very long story. If we can get into your bed to keep warm, I explain everything. If I know where to begin." He frowned. "It is very difficult, you see."

"Yes, alright," Arie concurred, slightly bewildered by the speed with which he had gained an overnight guest in place of a dangerous villain. "I'll give you something for a pillow and you can get in that end." He pointed to the foot of his box bed as he bundled up his coat into a cushion-shaped size. Dmitri pulled the sheets out from under the end of the mattress and crawled inside, gratefully accepting his 'pillow'. He breathed out with contentment.

Arie found his pyjamas under his bedding and, taking off his trousers quickly, he replaced them with the soft flannel bottoms. Then climbing into his end of the bed, he drew off his top clothes and put on the pyjama jacket, snuggling quickly down under the thick blankets.

Keeping the torch light on, he rested it between his raised knees and said to Dmitri, "Right, then. Tell me everything."