

Chapter 19

Away

Instantly Snipe was awake. His howls rang across the night. He strained to pull against the rope, in a fury to be free. Grimy Nick hollered himself into wakefulness and pummelled his fists against the hatch. Across the fields all the backyard animals sent up their clamour. Lights blazed across the water.

Jim sprinted on steadily, head down, dodging between bushes and trees. He could hear his own breathing, and the flapping of his boot soles. Brambles tore at his breeches and his jacket. An overhanging branch snapped at his cap and held it trapped, and Jim had to run back and tear it free. He loped on, his chest tight and bursting, his legs as heavy as lead weights. He had no idea where he was going.

He heard rustling in the undergrowth behind him and knew that he was being followed. The rustling became a snuffling and panting. It was a dog. Jim's leg hurt so much now that he couldn't run any further. In total weariness he flung himself down, head-first, covered his face with his hands, and waited for Snipe to spring.

He was aware that everything had gone silent again, as if the world had sunk back into sleep. At last he made himself turn his head. The dog was not Snipe at all, but a small terrier. He licked Jim's outstretched hand and ran away again through a hedge. There wasn't a sound. If Snipe still howled, he couldn't be heard from here. If Nick still hammered and swore then the noise he made was lost in the night.

'What if they're dead, bruvver?' the voice crept into his head. 'What if old Nick's suffocating down there in the hold? What if Snipe's strangled himself on that rope?' He sat up, drenched with cold sweat. 'What if you've killed them?'

He trusted himself to stand up. There wasn't a sound. He whistled softly for the dog, who padded back through the hedge to him, ran up and then danced away. He was alone again, and this time it was the silence that made him afraid. He crawled into the hedge, hoping to sleep, but the silence boomed around him.

'Now you've done it,' the little voice whispered. 'You've left your master to suffocate, and you've strangled his dog on the rope. You've killed them both, you have. Now you're for it, Jim.'