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BEYOND THE DOOR

A Shiny eBook

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With grateful thanks to everyone who has helped to see this dream realised - my parents, grandparents, countless English teachers and many friends, especially Stephen Wigner, who have all freely given their time to read numerous drafts along the way.

Chapter 1

It was midnight on Friday 25th July when the train finally pulled up alongside the platform of the old East Anglian station. The air was still damp from the rain-storm that had just passed, and the sky was filled with the ethereal light from the full-moon, casting a heavenly glow over the whole of the small village and the surrounding fields. The train journey had been a long and arduous one, and had drained the life from the passengers. One of the doors of the train opened, and two boys and a girl stepped out, dragging overweight suitcases behind them. The smaller of the two boys slammed the train door shut, and they made their way towards a crumbling shelter. The train slowly pulled out of Tendringham station, and immediately passed beneath a bridge, and continued on its way to the harbour.

The children sat down on the cold, red British Rail bench, and looked around them. The station was extremely small, consisting of a crumbling shelter, in which they were sitting, a car-park, a ticket machine and not a lot else. They were sitting on the platform opposite the village, but there did not appear to be a footbridge to carry them safely over the double tracks of the railway line. Claire was rather nervous about this - how would they get across to the other platform without being knocked down by a train? Their grandad should have been waiting for them on the platform, but it did not look as if he had arrived yet. Ian, becoming increasingly bored, started picking at the rotten walls of the shelter, slowly pulling out fragments of the dark, damp wood.

Stephen looked around him again. His mum had said that Grandad would be waiting for them at the station, and it was unlike him to be late. Stephen and his brother and sister were used to travelling by train from Reigate where they lived to see their grandparents in Ipswich. However, this was the first time they had visited them in their summer house. The place should have been friendly enough, but it was sending shivers down his spine nonetheless. Suddenly, from the long grass behind him, Stephen heard a rustling noise. He turned round, just in time to see a rabbit running quickly in the opposite direction. Stephen felt that there was something not quite right about this place. There was a sense of decay in the air. Maybe it was just the rotting wood, but Stephen was still not sure. He walked to the end of the platform, where there was a peculiar iron object. It looked as if it might have been an old farming tool at one time, but it had been left to rust away, rendering it completely useless. He tapped the object with a stick, and it released a cloud of metallic dust onto the platform.

The station covered a reasonably large plot of land, most of which had been allowed to grow wild. The track was located at the bottom of a cutting, with banks rising up on both sides. Behind the shelter, the steeply sloping bank rose up to a peak, its face covered with an abundance of wild grasses. On the peak itself there stood a wire fence, separating the station grounds from the fields beyond. On the other side of the track, the bank sloped less steeply. The area nearest to the track had been given over to be used as a car park. The section nearest the ticket machine, below the driveway feeding the station from the road above, had been recently tarmaced, while the rest had a loose gravel covering. On either side of the driveway the land was covered with plum trees, which had yet to fruit. Below the trees the grass had been allowed to grow long. At the far side of this embankment, a hedge marked the boundary of the station grounds, with a road on the other side.

Stephen heard a vehicle coming up the road, so he looked over towards the narrow lane. As it passed the entrance to the station, Stephen saw that it was a rather old, red Transit van. On the side, in large white letters was written "P. Taylor - Fresh Fruit and Veg." The van was so old that the white paint of the letters was beginning to peel off. The van drove off into the darkness, leaving a cloud of exhaust fumes behind it. However, when it had got about a hundred yards down the road, it slowed down, and pulled to a halt outside a house. One of the doors opened and slammed shut, and Stephen could hear two men talking, although the precise words remained inaudible. Stephen walked back to join the others under the shelter.

Stephen was the eldest of the three children. He was about average height for his fourteen years, and was rather broad, especially across the shoulders. He had short blond hair, which contrasted with his black eye-brows, suggesting that one day his hair would darken. He was an intelligent boy, who had always achieved good academic results at the grammar school which he attended in his home town of Reigate in Surrey. He had an inquisitive mind, and was always on the look-out for mysterious goings on which he could look into. He enjoyed sport, including football and cricket, although his particular favourites were swimming and sailing.

Ian was two years younger than his brother, and was also an intelligent boy, but was also a rather shy and nervous individual. He was tall for his age, was very skinny and had dark brown hair. Unlike his brother, he was not particularly active, preferring to sit inside and read a good book, than continually exploring and adventuring like his older brother. He was always fearful of the consequences of his actions, and of being caught doing something he should not have been doing, whereas Stephen often acted first and thought later, which had landed him in trouble on more than a few occasions.

Claire was the youngest of the three children, and was only nine years old. She was short for her age, and rather overweight. Claire had shoulder length brown hair. She tended to keep herself to herself and preferred to do her own thing rather than join in with her brothers.

The three children had been waiting at the station for twenty minutes, when a large white car pulled into the car park, its headlights illuminating the emptiness of the place. A tall man wearing dark clothes and a hat hopped out of the car, and made his way over towards the platform. He waited on the edge, looking at a small white box on the platform opposite him, which was emitting a small beam of red light. He stepped back a bit, just as a huge freight train rushed through the station on its way to the harbour further down the line. When the train had passed, the beam of light changed to green, and the man carefully walked across the lines. For the first time Claire noticed that there were boards between the lines to allow passengers to walk across from one platform to the other. The man casually strolled across to the bundle of children in the shelter.

“Hello, you three. Nice to see you again,” the man said. “Sorry I’m a bit late, I lost my gate key and couldn’t get out. Anyway, I’m here now. Let’s get you three home and into bed - it’s late. You two go and get in the back of the car, and Stephen, you can help me put the cases in the boot.”

The cases were picked up, and the bundle of children separated to cross the line. The light was green, and the children very carefully walked across the railway line, gingerly placing their feet onto the rotting boards.

“Why didn’t they build a foot-bridge, Grandad?” Claire asked.

“There was no need, as so few trains come out this far. You’ll soon get used to crossing over the lines though, so don’t worry.”

The car pulled out of the station, and out onto the road. There were no street lamps, and the road was in complete darkness. The only hint of light came from the moon, which appeared to have taken up residence behind a cloud.

Shortly after leaving the station, they drove past the house which the van had parked outside, and saw two men loading large crates into the back.

“I wonder what on earth James is up to at this time of night?” the children’s grandfather remarked. “It’s rather late for him to receive a delivery!”

“Those boxes are going the wrong way for a delivery,” Stephen thought to himself, his inquisitive nature showing itself once again. “If he was having boxes delivered, they’d be taking them out of the van - they’re loading those into the van!”

As they drove to the house, Stephen couldn’t help wondering what he had let himself in for. At the moment the village seemed so dull and boring, and the house hadn’t even got a television, as his grandparents had decided they didn’t want electricity in the house as it would “spoil the fun.” To make matters worse, Stephen had been told by his parents not to expect any other children to be around.

After about five minutes, the car pulled to a stop in front of a gate. There was absolutely nothing around, except for a few sheep and trees in the vast green fields which surrounded the road. Stephen’s grandad got out of the car, and unlocked and opened the gate. He tied the gate to a post at the side of the road, and got back into the car and drove through. Then he got out of the car, shut, and locked the gate again. The car moved slowly up the hill and onto a dirt track. Backing onto the track was an untidy row of small wooden houses, some with cars parked outside, and some without.

“Isn’t it rather a hassle having to unlock that gate all the time, Grandad?” asked Stephen.

“Well, it can be, but it is necessary. When the houses are empty in the winter, it reduces crime to a certain extent, and in the summer, it prevents hordes of day-trippers coming along and parking on our land. They can be a real nuisance if the gate is not locked.”

A few minutes later, the white car pulled up onto a strip of grass outside a red-painted wooden house. They all got out of the car and went into the house with their suitcases.

The next morning, Stephen was the first up. He got out of his bunk, and walked out into the living room of the primitive bungalow. The tide was right up to the grass bank, and there was no sand in view. It was a peaceful morning, with very little wind. There was no sound apart from the lapping of the water around the green bank. The water was almost as flat as glass, and Stephen could hear the bells from the clock tower on the other bank of the river chiming eight o'clock. The sun had risen about three hours previously, and the day was beginning to warm into a pleasant July day. Some people were already up. There were a few people splashing about in the water enjoying an early morning swim, and a couple of boats were attempting to sail backwards and forwards among the moored yachts, but not getting very far because of the lack of wind. The birds were starting to call, and a lady was hanging up her washing on a line that stretched between two bungalows, the pulleys squeaking as she pulled the line along to the next free space. On the bank next to the line, a man was working on a long, thin wooden boat with a screwdriver. For a few moments the peace was broken by the throbbing engine of a large container vessel, transporting goods from the harbour up the river to an inland quay. The water was ruffled as the waves created by the boat gently rocked the moored yachts one by one until the wash finally reached the shore, where it broke with a gentle "ssh," "ssh." Stephen was joined in the living room by his sister, who stood quietly beside him, looking out of the French windows at the tranquil scene.

"It's nice here isn't it, Stephen?"

"It's beautiful, absolutely beautiful," replied Stephen.

A lady with greying hair, wearing a blue dressing gown came out of a door leading on to the living room, and joined Stephen and Claire.

"Morning, you two. Are you going to come for a swim with me before breakfast?"

"Oh, are we allowed to, Grandma? I'd love to!" replied Claire.

"Will the water be cold, Grandma?" asked Stephen.

"No, it's really warm at the moment, just like a bath," answered Stephen's grandma.

"Oh, all right then. I'll go and see if Ian wants to come."

"Okay. I'll see you in the water in a minute, and then when we come in, we can all have breakfast," Stephen's grandma said as he walked out to get Ian.

"Are you going to come for a swim with us, Ian? It's a really nice morning, and the tide is up very high," Stephen told his brother.

"Go away, I'm tired!" Ian replied.

"Oh come on, Ian, stop whinging!" Stephen said as he dragged his brother out of his bed.

A few minutes later, they were all splashing around in the river. The estuary was full of boats of all shapes and sizes, tied onto different coloured mooring buoys. Stephen swam around them, admiring them all. One in particular caught his attention. It was a long way out, but he was a proficient swimmer so he decided to swim out to it to have a closer look. He swam round it once, which took him quite a long time as it was so large. It was a huge blue yacht, easily the largest there. It looked very old and had a tall mast, as well as an enormous bowsprit which pointed out from the front of it. Painted in neat, curly letters on the back of it was the name "Giojoso". It was a fabulous craft, and must have cost a lot of money, Stephen thought. When he had swum all the way around the boat, he slowly made his way back to the others.

After breakfast, Stephen and Ian went for a walk. Behind the houses was a large field that appeared to be lying fallow, as it seemed that grass, clover and thistles were the only plants growing in it. On the verge next to where Stephen's grandad had parked the car the previous night was a large wooden stake with a tap perched on the side of it, quite near the top. Underneath this was a rotten wooden pallet that had had plastic pallets placed on top of it, so no-one would have to bother repairing it properly. Next to the tap there was an ancient mangle and a wooden table.

The boys turned left out of the house, and walked along the dust track, the glorious hot summer sun beating down on their backs.

The houses backing onto the track were all different shapes and sizes. Some were big, new structures, and others were old, small structures that looked as if they would fall over if you touched them. The houses did not have back gardens or patios of any kind; their back doors opened straight onto a verge about three feet wide. Beyond this was a dusty track, followed by another verge, and then a green field. Soon the dirt track ended, and gave way to a grassy, green area of land, still with cars parked along it, and houses backing onto it. Before the dirt track had ended, another track led off to the right, and up to a skip. Next to the skip was a large earth mound, which separated it from the field on the right; a ditch and some trees separated it from the field on the left. The grassy track then climbed up along the top of the cliffs, and when Stephen looked, he could see that the track was going to get much steeper.

Most of the houses backing onto the grassy track had fenced-off back gardens, some only with grass growing, while others had all kinds of colourful exotic flowers growing in borders along the side of the house.

When Stephen and Ian headed up the hill, they saw what appeared to be a large, crumbling grey house perched high on the edge of the cliff, surrounded by trees and bushes. It looked like a big, grey mass of concrete that had simply been dumped on the edge of the cliff. All that was visible was a flight of stairs, and the top of the broken down walls, which peered ominously down from the top of the tree covered cliff-top.

Soon the houses ended, and the car track gave way to a footpath. This path was very narrow, and proceeded quite steeply up the cliff. On Stephen and Ian's right, there was a huge field filled with acres of thistles and weeds. On their left, at the edge of the cliff, was a large, dense area of thick brambles, a few unripe blackberries hanging from their prickly branches, and a vast amount of bracken. Soon they came to a clearing on the edge of the cliff, which was free from brambles and bracken. The boys stood on the edge of the cliff and looked out over the river.

There were a few people walking along the beach, enjoying the sunny morning and the glorious scenery. The tide had turned, and a huge expanse of golden sand was revealed, which reflected the sunlight as if it were made of thousands of golden coins. A man was walking to a white dinghy leaning against the orange sand-stone cliff. Stephen watched him for a few minutes, and then ran to catch up with Ian who had already started off up the cliff again.

The two boys were almost at the top of the cliff, and the brambles were growing up again on their left. Stephen turned around to look back to where they had come from. It looked overwhelmingly beautiful in the daylight. The green fields stretched as far as the eye could see, as did the river, which wound its way through the countryside between the East Anglian fields. On the south bank of the river, a few miles out of Tendringham, Stephen could see a large black barn, with a few new untreated yellow planks glowing in the sunlight. The other bank of the river, about two miles away, was dominated by an enormous building with a huge clock tower in the centre, flanked on either side by long, low sections of the building, its multitude of windows reflecting the light towards Stephen like sheets of pure silver. Behind the building, and on all sides of it were more fields, each with its own individual colour and shade. There were several yellow fields, and lots of different shades of green. There was even a field covered with a blanket of blue, standing out from the countryside like the Cyclops' single eye.

Looking away from the river, Stephen could see more fields and a few pink warehouses, standing out from the beautiful countryside like a row of ugly, dirty thumbs. There was a great deal of action in what seemed to be a car park, and this again was surrounded by green land, which looked like it was full of bramble bushes.

Following the flow of the river to the east, Stephen could make out a number of large, round tanks and several cranes busy unloading the ships in the harbour, their yellow steel arms hissing and grunting under the enormous weight of the crates they were placing onto waiting trains and lorries. In the harbour itself, a flotilla of large yachts and small dinghies were sailing backwards and forwards, totally ignoring the racket of the harbour terminal announcer, telling people to start boarding the waiting passenger ferries. Stephen heard the long, low horn of another massive ferry arriving in the harbour laden with people who had ventured from Scandinavia to spend their holidays in England, eagerly awaiting the moment when the boat would dock in the harbour, and they could drive off the boat to gain their first glimpse of England from the dry land. The boat's prow pushed the water away from its hull with incredible ease, creating a tremendous wash for the sailing boats to ride gently over.

Away over the hills in the village, Stephen could see a train pulling a single, solitary carriage through the countryside towards the harbour and the historic small town beyond, its giant metallic arms over-head collecting the power from the lines to drive the train. Stephen was beginning to lose the feeling of dread he had originally had upon arriving in Tendringham.

Stephen and Ian continued on their way up along the cliff top path, and soon arrived on the top of the cliff. They decided to take a closer look at the grey house they had seen when walking up the cliff, but discovered that the ugly building was surrounded by plants and trees, their leaves and branches tightly interwoven. After a few minutes of searching, the two boys found a hole in the hedge, and walked through into the garden of the house. The soil felt cool and damp, and was littered with tiny pieces of rotten twigs, and old, dead leaves. The trees cast an eerie shadow over the ground, their branches overhead locked together, and preventing all but the smallest rays of sunlight from passing through into the secret world. The land on which the house stood was completely surrounded by dense shrubs, with the exception of the side of the garden closest to the cliffs. Closer inspection revealed that there had once been a dense hedge here, but that it had fallen off the edge of the cliff as a result of excessive erosion which the cliffs were subjected to every winter. A gravel driveway behind the grey building led to the house, however it was now little more than a border full of thistles and nettles. Very little appeared to grow under the trees, and it was strangely silent - no noise was capable of penetrating the growth which surrounded the house, not even the song of the birds could be heard. It was like a separate world, the trees and bushes separating reality from fantasy, stopping the truth of the real world trickling through into the darkness the boys had found.

When Stephen and Ian had walked through into the garden, they gained their first real glimpse of the house. It looked like it had been derelict for many years, and its single decaying floor was in a terrible state. There was no glass left in the windows, and when the boys looked through into the house they could see that the ceiling was falling through, and there were enormous gaping holes in the floor, waiting to swallow up anyone who dared to enter. It appeared that the house was once more than a bungalow, as an old, rotting flight of stairs climbed steeply through the ceiling and through the low canopy of the trees, to be seen for miles around. Most of its garden appeared to have fallen off the edge of the cliff years before, and what was left of it was as derelict and uncared for as the house itself. The patio was riddled with holes, and the apple trees were dying. At the front of the house, the heavy wooden door was falling off its hinges, a pathetic clue to the house's former grandness. In front of the door was a huge timber structure with vines and fig trees growing all over its rotten beams, covering its structure like a huge, ugly spider's web. Beside the gaping hole from which the door was hanging was a faded sign which read "The Coign - Market Garden. Please ring bell and wait for service." Around the other side of the house, beneath floor level, was a dark hole, which dropped sharply down into an underground cavern, its dark interior made even darker by the piles of coal and soot which covered the ground. Suddenly, the peace was shattered with a delighted scream from behind them, which took the brothers both by surprise. They turned around, and saw a girl scabbling round in the dirt, while a boy stood by watching her!

Chapter 2

“I’ve found something!” the girl exclaimed. “Look! It looks like this is it! There’s a hole here, and it’s not a rabbit hole, because it’s surrounded by concrete.”

“Oh, great!” the boy said. “Let’s have a closer look.” Stephen and Ian stood back, and watched while the boy and the girl scraped away the thin layer of earth which covered the concrete. The boy looked about the same age as Stephen, and the girl looked as though she was about the same age as Ian, maybe a bit younger. They were both quite tall, with fair hair and freckled faces.

After a while, the two children had revealed a fairly large piece of concrete, with a small, ragged hole in the centre. The girl moved onto the concrete, and looked down the hole.

“It’s rather dark down there!” she told the boy, still trying to reveal more of the concrete from underneath the soil.

“Can you see anything?” he asked.

“No, not really. It’s too dark,” she responded.

“Take the torch, then.”

The boy threw the girl the torch that he had in his hand, which she caught. As she moved closer to the hole, the concrete started to crack and fall in! The girl tried to stagger back to the safety of the solid ground, but didn’t manage to in time. There was a scream and a thud, as she fell through the concrete, and landed somewhere underground. Stephen and Ian ran to the mouth of the hole and stood next to the other boy. There were no screams of pain coming from the hole, but the boys did not know whether this was good or bad. The mystery boy shouted down the hole to the girl.

“Are you all right, Jennie?”

Some shouts rose to the surface from the girl in the hole. “Of course I’m all right, stupid! Have you ever known me not to be all right? I’m going to see if I can manage to get out of this hole. There’s a tunnel which runs in the direction of the house. I’ll see where it goes.”

“All right, but be careful. If you can’t find a way out, I’ll go and get the rope out of the tree.” With that, the boy turned to Stephen and Ian. “Hello, I haven’t seen you in Tendringham before. Who are you?”

“I’m Stephen Bennet, and this is my brother Ian. We’re staying with our grandparents on the beach. Do you live here?” replied Stephen.

“Well sort of. We do in the summer holidays, but the rest of the time we live in Chelmsford. I’m Paul Southgate, by the way. Are you staying here all summer?”

“Yes, I hope so, unless we have to go back home for some unknown reason. Is that your sister down there?”

“Oh, yes, sorry. That’s my sister, Jennifer. Most people call her Jennie.”

“Is she all right?”

“Yes, I think so. She’s just trying to see if she can get herself out. If not, we’ve got a rope in that tree down there.” Paul pointed to a large oak tree in the field behind their grandma and grandad’s house.

The boys’ conversation was cut short when they heard a scrabbling noise coming from the cavern under the house. “Is that you, Jennie?” asked Paul. Jennie replied by showing her coal-stained face through the door to the cellar.

“It’s amazing down there!” said Jennie. “There are loads of tunnels and boxes and things all over the place. You should come down and have a look. It should be much easier to get down this way. Come on, come and have a look!”

The boys went over and looked through the door into the coal cellar. The tiny doorway was at the top of the underground room, fairly close to the ceiling. The room was very dark, and there were huge piles of coal and soot lying randomly over the floor. The cavern did not appear to occupy the whole area underneath the house, only a small fraction of it, as it was much smaller than the enormous floor above, and there were none of the huge gaping holes which the boys had seen in some parts of the derelict house’s huge floor area.

“Jennie, this is Stephen, and his brother Ian.”

“Oh right, hello.”

The light from Jennie’s torch illuminated the dark cellar, enabling the boys to see into its dirty depths more clearly. The floor of the underground room was more or less level, with the exception of a narrow

path which ran across the floor, and sloped steeply downwards. The beginning of this path was immediately below the hole in the wall, and at the far end of the room, at the other end of the path there was another doorway, larger than the one leading into the cellar. It was about the same size as most household doorways, but the door it held looked much thicker and heavier, and had a very small rhombus-shaped window which contained darkened glass near the top of it. The door had been pushed slightly open, suggesting that this was how Jennie had entered the room after she fell through the hole in the garden.

“That door was locked from the other side, but there was a massive key in the lock, so I turned it so that I could come through. It was a great relief when I realised the tunnel did lead into this coal cellar, otherwise I really would have been stuck,” Jennie commented.

The rest of the dark room had a fairly flat floor with high islands raised above its surface at intervals. Rising out of the tops of these islands were large, concrete posts which appeared to be supporting the floor of the room above. The ceiling of the cellar was covered in new concrete and shiny metal sheets, which suggested someone had repaired it fairly recently.

Slowly Stephen dropped himself through the low door into the cellar. There was a drop of about four feet down onto the beginning of the path the other side of the hole. Stephen was followed by Paul, who was just as eager as Stephen to explore the newly-discovered underground world. Ian, however, was not so sure about investigating the dark, dirty basement room.

“Stephen, do you really think this is a sensible idea? Grandma won’t be very pleased if we get our clothes dirty. Besides, someone must own this house.”

“Don’t worry, Ian,” Paul reassured him. “No-one has been near this house for years.”

Ian reluctantly dropped himself down into the basement room, carefully dusting his clothes down when he reached the ground.

As they walked across to the door on the opposite side of the room, they continued their introductions and got to know each other a bit better.

When they reached the doorway, Jennie slowly pushed the heavy door open, and the boys got their first glance of what lay beyond the door. At first all they saw was a very long, low corridor that ran through the earth, but as they looked more closely they could see that the walls and ceiling had been reinforced with concrete. At intervals along the wall there were cutaways, in which huge boxes had been placed. There were more of these boxes lying around in the middle of the corridor, as all the cutaways appeared to be full.

The corridor seemed to stretch for a long way to the south - Jennie shone the torch down the tunnel, and the beam did not hit a wall within the distance that the torch could illuminate. To the north the tunnel stopped about where Stephen thought the cliff-face was. The tunnel was perfectly straight, and was only broken by the hole in the patio above, which Jennie had fallen through previously. The children’s torch cast just enough light for them to be able to see around themselves more clearly, and enabled them to take in their surroundings.

The door the children had come through was in the west side of the wall, and directly opposite this door, another smaller passage led away in the direction of the village.

“What shall we do now?” asked Ian.

“Let’s explore one of the tunnels, and see where it goes,” suggested Stephen. Everyone, except Ian, whom the others ignored, mumbled their approval to this idea, and they started deciding among themselves which way they thought they should go. Soon, it was decided that they should set off along the tunnel which led in the direction of the village.

As they slowly walked along the passageway, Stephen realised how cold and damp the corridor was. It was almost as cold as some Troglodyte caves he had visited when he had been in France. In France, the caves had been used for mushroom growing and for storing wine, and he wondered what these tunnels were being used for. Stephen looked around him to see if he could find one of the large boxes which he could open. He thought that this might give him some clue as to what the tunnels were being used for. However, he soon realised that the boxes which had filled the floor of the other passageway were no-where to be seen in this passageway. Eventually he found a box, which he opened. He was none the wiser, however, since the box he had selected was empty.

They had now been walking along the underground corridor for about five minutes, and it was getting

very dark. There was no reinforcing concrete holding the walls in place as there had been in the previous walkway, and the walls of this corridor were made simply of the sandstone out of which the corridor had been dug. They deduced that the previous tunnel was a main routeway and storage chamber, and that this one was just a minor routeway, but what were they all for?

Along both sides of the passage which the children were walking down, more tunnels were turning off at intervals, but they decided to keep walking straight ahead. There would be plenty of time later on in the holidays to explore the other tunnels. In addition to the passages leading off to the side, there were occasionally even some iron ladders leading upwards, some leading to trapdoors, although the majority appeared to have been blocked off years ago.

It soon became evident that the caves could do with some cats to clear vermin, as the children saw several mice or rats running along in the darkness, just in front of them.

Stephen realised that whatever the use of the tunnels was, they were still being used, as a couple of the trap-doors in the ceiling of the passageway had been newly painted - there was still a smell of fresh paint in the still, stale air. He deduced that whatever was going on involved numerous people. Smuggling crossed his mind, but surely all that had stopped years ago, especially now that anyone could cross into Europe to get as much cheap alcohol as they could take home with them without the Customs and Excise people being able to confiscate it.

After the children had been walking for about ten minutes, the tunnel opened up into a large underground chamber, filled with more of the large boxes they had seen earlier on. The chamber was very dark and damp, and appeared to be hollowed out of rock. In the walls were some small alcoves which each held a candlestick, presumably so that they could be lit to provide light when people were in the cavern.

“Shall we look in one of the boxes?” asked Stephen. “Maybe we might get some clue as to what these chambers are for.”

“That’s a good idea,” replied Paul. “Which one shall we look in? How about one of these over here?”

“Hang on, I think someone’s coming down the tunnel. Yes, I can hear voices! What shall we do?” asked Jennie.

“Quick, hide behind that pile of boxes. Go on, and I’ll pull some boxes up to go along the side so we won’t be seen. Come on, quickly, or we will be seen!”

As the others quickly ran behind a pile of boxes that were piled right up to the ceiling, Stephen pulled a couple of stacked crates alongside the others. They were heavy, and it took him a great deal of effort just to push them across the floor. Once they were in place beside the others, he quickly and nimbly jumped over the boxes he had just moved, and hid with his friends. Just as he disappeared behind the boxes, two men entered the room. They were talking, and the children managed to hear most of their conversation as they walked down the tunnel and into the cavern.

“... so I’ll be at the foot of the cliffs in the boat at high tide on the night of Sunday 3rd. That’s a week tomorrow. It’ll be quite a high tide, so we should be able to get the boat right up to the bottom of the cliffs.”

“What time’s high tide that night, Ben?”

“It’ll be up at about two so make sure your lads have got all the winching apparatus set up by about half one. That’ll allow a bit of time just in case we arrive early. It’ll only be a small quantity of goods, as the main delivery in August will be on Friday 22nd. I don’t know exactly what I will be bringing yet, as Ted hasn’t told me. It’s probably best if you speak to Ted yourself, after all, you know what he’s like! I’d hate to get in trouble for passing on the wrong message!”

“He always seems to tell me the wrong number of boxes, nowadays! It’s very strange, but I’m always expecting more than you actually bring!”

“Yes, it’s odd that! Maybe Roy is trying to rip Ted off, and so charges him for more crates than he actually gives me to deliver! “

“I doubt it! Somehow I can’t imagine anyone ever going against Ted. Not if they value their life anyway!”

“I want to get rid of some of these full crates tomorrow, so I’ve arranged that Ted will bring the van round at about two o’clock to load up. I thought that’d give you plenty of time to shut up shop, and get rid of any unwanted customers. Remember, any snoops you find I want locked up in the Black Boy chamber.

Let me know if you find any, as Ted wants to deal with them himself.”

“Right, okay Ben. Which crates do you want me to give to Ted tomorrow? He can probably take about fifteen I should think without too much suspicion.”

“Right, well, Ted reckons we can get rid of a fair bit of this stuff in Nottingham at the moment. We haven’t delivered up there for quite a while, and I believe he’s got a few people he needs to settle up with. This pile looks fine here. I’ll take this lot. How many are there, J?”

“Thirteen.”

“Right, we’ll take the two next to those then as well. Did you put these crates here, because I can’t remember doing it?”

Stephen could feel his heart beating in his throat.

“I didn’t. It was probably Will. He’s always moving the stuff about. Says we shouldn’t leave it in such a mess or we’ll never find anything.”

Stephen’s heart returned to its proper place.

“Put a blue cross on the crates in that pile then. Hopefully you’ll remember then which stuff it is I want you to take.”

The two men walked over towards the crates behind which the children were hiding. They had never felt so much fear in all their lives before. The other side of the pile, one of the men was marking the boxes. These crates offered a fair amount of protection, though, as they were stacked right up to the ceiling. The other man was down by Stephen’s side, marking the boxes which Stephen had moved. The only things that prevented him from being seen were the two crates, which formed a four foot wall between the two of them. If the man just so much as glanced over the top of the crates, the children would be seen instantly. Suddenly Paul moved, and caused Ian to hit his elbow against the crates.

“Oww!”

“Sssh!”

“What was that, J. Did you do that?”

“No, it wasn’t me.”

The children’s hearts raced.

“It must have been one of those stupid rats. We’re going to have to do something about all the vermin down here. It makes it unbearable.”

After a few minutes of complete fear on the children’s part, the two men decided to go, and left the room talking. The children waited a few minutes to make sure that they would not come back, and then carefully climbed out from behind the boxes.

“Phew, that was a bit of a close shave! I hope that doesn’t happen again!” Paul commented. “Did you recognise those two men, Jennie?”

“Yes, one was Ben, that man who lives next door to Captain Cassidy.”

“For your benefit, Captain Cassidy was the headmaster of the local school, the school we used to go to, and he’s also the harbour master. His son Tom’s one of our friends,” said Paul. “The other one was James, the village shopkeeper.”

“Yes, I know. He’s a nice man, but I wonder what he’s doing getting mixed up in all this lot?” asked Jennie. “Have you two been to the village shop yet?”

“No, but our grandma has told us all about James.”

“Ah, right. What do you think we should do now?” asked Paul.

“Get out of here for a start,” said Ian.

“No, I suggest we open one of the crates. We were going to but we got interrupted by those two men. I think it’ll help us to understand what’s going on. If it is smuggling, we’ll need to tell the police, but first we need to find out if that’s what they are doing. Then we’ll need some proof. Which chest do you suggest we look in?” asked Stephen.

“I think we should look in one of the chests they’re going to take away tomorrow. It’ll be our last chance to see what they’re going to get rid of,” said Paul.

“How about this one here? It’s firmly nailed shut, so we’ll need something to open it with. Has anyone got anything we can use?” asked Stephen.

“I’m afraid I don’t normally carry the sort of equipment I might need to open smugglers’ crates around with me,” said Ian.

“Well has anyone else got anything?”

The others all shook their heads.

“Right, in that case we’ll need to use something that we can find in here. Get looking everyone,” Stephen commanded.

After a few minutes, Jennie, who was the only one who could see, since she had the only torch, found a crow-bar.

“Is this the sort of thing you mean, Stephen?”

“Well, I suppose that’ll do. Bring it here. That’s probably down here to open the crates anyway. The smugglers must have to open the crates themselves.”

Jennie gave Stephen the crow-bar, and he inserted it between two of the planks in one of the crates. He pulled down for all he was worth, and his efforts were rewarded with a splintering sound, and the two pieces of wood fell off the crate, revealing a large, clear plastic sack filled with hundreds of smaller bags, each containing a white powder.

“Does anyone know what this is?” Stephen asked.

“Well, something tells me that James is not smuggling in sherbet to sell to the village children,” Paul replied. “I think that’s some kind of drug. We’ve been told about this sort of thing in P.S.E. at school.”

“Smuggling! Well I never!” Stephen exclaimed.

“It looks like they’ve got quite a large operation here as well, if they deliver as far away as Nottingham!” Paul pointed out.

“What do you think we should do now?” asked Jennie.

“Firstly, I think we should go up to the village tomorrow, and see what they do. Then, I think we should come down here next Sunday night, and watch them then as well.”

“That’s a good idea!” agreed Paul. “What does everyone else think?”

“I think it’s a good idea as well,” said Jennie.

“What if we get caught?” asked Ian. “You heard what they said they’d do with any snoopers.”

“You’re not scared are you, Ian?”

“No, of course I’m not!”

“We won’t get caught, because I have the perfect hiding place!” said Paul.

“Where’s that?” asked Jennie.

“We can spend the night on David’s yacht, and watch from there! It’s the perfect spot! We’ll be on the water, and directly opposite the cliffs! It’s only Saturday today, so we’ve got over a week to arrange it.”

“Sounds good,” agreed Stephen.

“It might work,” Ian added reluctantly.

“There’s one slight problem,” said Jennie. “How do we manage to persuade everyone to let us stay on David’s yacht. They’ll never let us!”

“Don’t worry, I’ll think of a way,” replied Paul.