

The Murrian

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FOREWORD

Nothing is quite what it seems in Cornwall. Scratch the surface, and you'll find myths come swarming out of even the most innocent-looking hill or pool or lonely coastal path.

Myths of the fierce giants who once strode thunderously across the landscape – Cormoran, Bolster, and especially the terrifying Ralph of Portreath, who plundered passing ships and ate their crews at leisure in his cave.

Stories of the little people – the playful pixies who keep forever those who trespass in their secret gardens; the malevolent spriggans who guard buried treasures; and the ugly tappers who live deep in the abandoned tin mines underground.

Stories of the smugglers and their secret coves, and the ruthless wreckers who waved false lights to lure ships onto the rocks.

Tales of haunted pubs, and castles, and dark moorland roads, where the ghosts' bones rattle as they gallop past you on headless horses.

Tales of mermaids who came ashore, and love-struck sailors gone under the waves, and legends of the sunken land of Lyonesse below the sea, whose church bells still ring out when the weather is stormy and wild.

Chapter One

WORRYING WITCHERY

Ben was staring in astonishment out of his bedroom window at Aunt Gwen's garden. All sorts of things were *moving* about down there, which had no right to be moving at all! Some dead flower heads, for example, were making their way across the little lawn. A piece of bread thrown out for the birds was heading off in the same direction. Most disturbingly of all, a pair of gardening gloves, like disembodied hands, were scuttling along behind, as if trying to catch up.

As he watched, Aunt Gwen's grey-haired head emerged from the cottage door below.

"You little devils!" she exclaimed, snatching up the gardening gloves. Then she returned inside.

Ben Swift was ten, and Claire, his sister, had just had her thirteenth birthday. Their usual summer family holiday had been cancelled because the Swift family home had fallen victim to water. Oxbury's generally peaceful river had risen in revolt, and flooded the flabbergasted suburbs beside it. So Mum and Dad were spending *their* holidays slopping out mud.

Aunt Gwen had heard the bad news, and offered to have Ben and Claire for a week, down in Antmouth.

They had only met Aunt Gwen (who was actually their father's aunt, and so, strictly speaking, *Great* Aunt Gwen) once before, at a family wedding.

Ben had been too young to remember it, but Claire said that Aunt Gwen had brought along a small harp, and sung a weird song in a strange language. Claire had tried to frighten Ben all the way down to Cornwall in the car by making out that Aunt Gwen was a witch.

“Think about it, Ben. Old woman. Lives alone in a cottage. Probably has a black cat. Eats little boys...”

“I’m ten, Claire, not five. Old women don’t eat little boys.”

She turned to Dad, who was driving.

“And, Dad, tell Ben what a strange place Antmouth is! You remember - you used to tell us stories about Antmouth when we were little. About how it was haunted by the ghosts of old smugglers, and full of peculiar people.”

Dad chuckled.

“Oh, I used to make it all up, Claire!”

Ben went downstairs. Aunt Gwen was just showing Claire the gardening gloves.

“You can’t put anything down outside, unless it’s really quite heavy! Anything light, and it’s off in seconds!”

Then she caught sight of Ben cautiously descending the twisted little staircase, hanging onto the ship’s rope, which took the place of a banister rail.

“Ah, good morning Ben!”

“Hi!”

“I was just saying to Claire, why don’t you take a walk along the cliff path after breakfast? I’ve got to go and get some shopping, but there’s no reason why you shouldn’t start exploring straight away!”

Ben had planned to spend the morning on Dad’s laptop, which he’d lent to him, completing the next level of *Mutant Marauders*. Gigantic mutant insects had to be outwitted and defeated with flamethrowers and explosives. He said nothing. When Aunt Gwen had gone out shopping, perhaps he would sneak back in. But then, if she *was* a witch, perhaps she’d know.

Just then, Aunt Gwen took off one of her slippers, leapt towards the door, and gave the stone floor a great ‘thwack’. Both Ben and Claire were startled.

“One of the brutes trying to come in!” she explained cheerfully.

Ben thought he would privately ring Dad and ask him to come back and get them.

Claire said “*What* brutes, Aunt Gwen?”

“Come and look,” she replied.

She opened the door, and pointed to the garden path. At first, the children couldn’t see anything, but then Claire exclaimed.

“Ants! Hundreds of them!”

“That’s right,” Aunt Gwen affirmed. “Antmouth’s plague. We get them every summer, and they’re just at their worst now.”

Now Ben saw them too.

“They’re huge!”

“That’s right. They’re a particular ant that’s only found around here. They’re called smuggler ants, because they’ll carry off anything you leave lying around, just like real smugglers. The story goes that they came to shore here about two hundred years ago from a South American ship that was wrecked on Hell’s Teeth.”

“Hell’s teeth?” Ben said

“They’re jagged rocks just offshore. They’ve been the death of many a sailor!”

“Ugh!” Claire exclaimed. One of the ants had crawled onto her foot.

“Don’t worry – they don’t bite! They’re just a nuisance.”

She brushed the ant off Claire’s foot, and led the way back into her kitchen. Its ceiling was lined with lots of pans dangling from hooks. Any draught set them knocking into each other with a soft clanking sound, as if knights in armour were creeping about. Steam was rising from a pot on the stove.

“My special porridge!” Aunt Gwen said, lifting the lid from the pot. “Just perfect. Now, sit down and I’ll serve up.”

Claire and Ben shared a look. Porridge! Hadn’t Mum and Dad mentioned to Aunt Gwen that they only liked Crispy Poppersnaps?

But the porridge was actually all right, once a small lake of golden syrup had been made in the middle of one’s serving. Ben even had a second helping.

“Good!” said Aunt Gwen, taking away the empty bowls. “Now, I’m off to the shops in five minutes, so get ready to go off exploring! You turn right at

the garden gate and go towards the harbour until you see the sign for the cliff path. Don't go near the edge or fall down any abandoned tin mines!"

Aunt Gwen bustled about getting her coat on and getting her shopping bag, whistling loudly and tunelessly like a kettle, or a referee.

"I think she *is* a witch!" Ben said to Claire, as they shut the cottage door behind them and set off. "A nice one though!" he added, and they both smiled.

Chapter Two

SOMETHING FISHY IN THE FOG

Up on the cliffs, billowing clouds of cold, damp fog drifted up from the sea below, and droplets of water formed on their foreheads and trickled down

their noses. Although they could hear waves crashing onto the rocks, they only caught occasional glimpses of the sea through the mist.

“Look!” Claire exclaimed, pointing. “There’s an arch!”

Ben looked. At the end of a headland, a huge rocky arch stood, with waves surging through the gap.

“That’s exactly what we were doing in Geography last term!” Claire said. “Stacks, and arches, and other stuff that you find along a coastline.”

But Ben wasn’t listening. He was staring at the base of the arch. Surely there was a head, bobbing about in the rough water? The head was quite near the rocks, and, as he watched, a figure emerged from the sea and pulled itself up onto the land. Then the fog descended again.

“Did you see that?” he said to Claire.

“What?”

“Someone came out of the water, down by that arch thing.”

“What? Are you sure? The sea looked pretty rough out there.”

“I’m sure.”

“Perhaps it was a seal?”

“I don’t think so. I’m sure I saw hair.”

They stood for a while, watching. But the fog stayed stubbornly thick, and they gave up after a couple of minutes.

“Maybe it was a mermaid!” Claire said.

A little further on they came to some steps, which took them down to a small shingle cove. There were all kinds of objects washed up there, transformed by the sea. Shining jewels of coloured glass; fragments of cloth,

bleached and brittle, like cardboard; and plastic containers filled with water, sand, and tiny, darting sea-creatures.

Ben found something that might once have been an old coin, worn into a smooth yellow disk. Perhaps it was gold! He cupped it in his hands and cackled like an old miser.

“Ha! Ha! My little beauty!”

He slipped it into his pocket, and wandered down right to the edge of the sea, where he amused himself by venturing out onto the wet sand as each wave receded, and then dashing back up to the dry shingle as the next one came in. Soon enough, the inevitable happened.

“Oh no!” he muttered, looking down at his soaking trainers.

Just then, a sound made him turn to face the sea. It was a kind of low, moaning call, quite faint. Ben kept listening, but the sound was not repeated, and he became unsure if he’d heard anything in the first place. He strained his eyes to see if there was anything out there, but the fog was too thick. As he peered into it, across the rolling approaches of the waves, a very strong feeling started to creep over him that he was being *watched*. He suddenly felt cold all over, and looked around for Claire. She had gone! He called out, panicking.

“Claire? Where are you?”

“I’m here, what is it?” she called back, emerging from the mist. As she got closer, she noticed Ben looked a little wild-eyed.

“What’s the matter? You look as if you’ve seen a ghost!” she said.

“It’s nothing, I suppose,” he replied, hugging his body with his arms to get warmed up. “I just thought I heard a weird sort of call from out in the sea.”

Claire shuddered, as if Ben’s coldness had transferred itself to her.

“Come on,” she said. “Let’s go back to Aunt Gwen’s. I think we’ve seen enough of the coast path for now, don’t you?”

They got back to the cottage to find Aunt Gwen unpacking her shopping bag. They’d just got their jackets off when the phone went. It was a huge old-fashioned phone whose ring made you jump in the air wondering if there was a fire. Aunt Gwen picked it up.

“Ah, Michael! So you’ve had a safe drive home? How is the mopping up going on?” Aunt Gwen shouted into the phone. She was of that generation who believed long-distance conversations needed a raised voice to carry the distance. Evidently it was Ben and Claire’s father on the other end of the line. The children helped themselves to some juice from Aunt Gwen’s ancient fridge while they waited to speak to him. In the meantime they were treated to one side of the conversation.

“Yes, yes...no... oh, yes... I know. Well, it all comes of building new houses on the floodplains of rivers, doesn’t it! Anyone could have told them what would happen. Anyway – I’ll pass you over to Ben here. Bye for now! What’s that? No – not yet – they don’t know about that, yet!”

Claire’s ears pricked up. *What* didn’t they know about yet? She listened impatiently while Ben talked, and then took the phone herself.

“Hi Dad! How’s it going?”

“Oh – not too bad, I suppose. We’ve had all the downstairs carpets taken away now, and they’ve put in big things called dehumidifiers to dry everything out.”

“Where’s the furniture?”

“Mostly upstairs. How are things there?”

“Fine. We went to the sea, but it was foggy. What did you say to Aunt Gwen we didn’t know about yet?”

“Ah – just a little surprise. Someone else is coming to stay there with you.”

“What?” She glanced over her shoulder to check that Aunt Gwen wasn’t listening. “Where will they sleep?” she hissed. “There’s only three tiny bedrooms. *Don’t* say Ben and I are going to have to share!”

“No, no. Don’t worry, they’ll just sleep downstairs.”

“What, in the sitting room?”

Dad chuckled, irritatingly.

“Either there or in the kitchen!”

“That’s ridiculous!”

“Well, wait and see. They should be arriving this morning, I believe.”

Just then, the doorbell rang. Like the phone, it was loud, and suggested an emergency of some sort. Claire observed through the kitchen doorway a heavily built old man in a tweed jacket going into the sitting room with Aunt Gwen. Ben followed them in. The man was carrying a large box. Presumably he was the new arrival. It was going to be very crowded in this tiny cottage with a big tweedy fellow occupying the sitting room or the kitchen!

Claire chatted a bit more to Dad, then put the phone down and went to see what was going on.

Chapter Three

AN AUNT ADMIRER AND AN ANT ADMIRER

“Hello Claire,” Aunt Gwen said. “This is Bobby Rudgard.”

He was wearing, Claire now observed, a brightly spotted yellow bow tie, and a vivid blue waistcoat. Her heart sank. Large, eccentric, and living in their midst! She mustered a smile, and decided, in a spontaneous burst of maturity and considerateness that would have made her parents proud, to make a generous offer.

“Pleased to meet you Mr Rudgard. Are you sure you wouldn’t prefer to be in a bedroom while you’re here?”

Bobby Rudgard laughed, his face turning so red that he could easily have stopped traffic with it.

“What? I’m not sleepy, thank you Claire. Perhaps I look sleepy, do I, Gwen?”

“No. A bit out of breath perhaps from your walk from the station though!”

“Not at all, not at all. Now! Do you all want to see a bit more of your new arrival?”

Bobby Rudgard looked at them with a quizzical lift of his eyebrows. Claire wondered what on earth he meant. Was he going to strip off? An image of a walrus in yellow spotted boxer shorts popped into her mind.

But the others were looking expectantly at the box he had brought. Bobby Rudgard reached down and fumbled with a catch, and suddenly Claire realised what was going on. How could she have been so stupid? It was a *cat box!* *This* was the new arrival who would sleep downstairs!

A little black kitten with one white paw looked timidly out of the opened box. It mewed once, and Aunt Gwen swept it up in her arms with a cry of delight.

“Oh! You’re a beauty, aren’t you, Merlin! What do you think Ben? Claire?”

It was generally agreed that Merlin was a very fine kitten indeed. Aunt Gwen passed him to Ben, and reached behind her sofa to pull out a cat basket, which had been hidden there.

“I wanted this to be a surprise for you,” she said. “My last black cat died in the winter. He’ll be hunting ghost mice now, along with the other three black Merlins I’ve had since I was a little girl.”

“This is your *fifth* cat called Merlin?”

“That’s right – although I suspect it’s the same one that keeps coming back. He didn’t have a white paw last time though.”

“If he’s got nine lives, he can come back four more times!” Bobby Rudgard suggested.

“Ah – but I’d have to live to about a hundred and twenty to look after the last one!” Aunt Gwen pointed out.

“You could live that long if you had someone around to make life easier for you!” Bobby Rudgard said, with something like a twinkle in his old eyes.

“Well, I think I can manage on my own for now, Bobby, since I’ve got this far.”

“Oh, well, don’t forget the offer’s there!” Bobby said, standing up. “Anyway – I’m off to The Smuggler for my pint of medicine.”

“Your three or four pints of medicine, more like!” Aunt Gwen said. “One day you’ll take so much of that medicine that you *will* have to go to the doctor.”

“Humph! When a man’s disappointed in love, he has to seek solace somewhere.”

“Oh, away with you, you old rogue!” Aunt Gwen laughed. “Go and court one of the other old ladies, there’s plenty of choice here in Antmouth!”

“You’re right, but, do you know what?” he said, turning to the children.
“Your Aunt Gwen is the cat’s whiskers around here!”

He winked at them, planted a quick kiss on Aunt Gwen’s cheek before she could take a side step, and went out of the door.

“He seems very fond of you, Aunt Gwen!” Claire observed, taking her turn at holding Merlin.

“Bobby Rudgard just wants someone to bring him breakfast in bed, the old villain!” Aunt Gwen replied. “But it was kind of him to fetch Merlin from the railway station.”

“Where has Merlin come from?”

“From Glastonbury. There are some people there who I can rely on to find me a gifted cat, when I lose one of my darlings.”

“What do you mean by a *gifted* cat, Aunt Gwen?” Claire asked.

“Oh – one that will understand what’s said to him. I couldn’t just have an ordinary cat. That wouldn’t do at all!”

With that, Aunt Gwen took Merlin gently from Claire, and walked to the kitchen, murmuring to him.

After lunchtime, it started to rain heavily.

“Why don’t you visit the Insect Zoo?” Aunt Gwen proposed brightly.
“That’s a good spot for a rainy afternoon!”

Ben looked longingly at the laptop. It would be the perfect afternoon for trying to complete the next level of *Mutant Marauders*. Much more interesting than *real* insects!

But he had been brought up to be polite, and so had Claire, so they made their way down Aunt Gwen's small sloping garden to the harbour front, where the rain bounced off the cobblestones and only a bedraggled clutch of carping seabirds seemed to be out of doors. Two hundred metres away, at the harbour mouth, waves smacked angrily into the harbour wall, as if the sea was determined to break it down. Ben supposed that one day, far in the future, it would succeed. But for now the rusty fishing boats of the locals and the trim little yachts of the holidaymakers bobbed safely behind their protective barrier.

A few minutes later, they had paid their money to the bored girl chewing gum at the ticket desk, and were in sole occupation of Antmouth's Insect Zoo. It was illuminated by the lowest wattage bulbs that money could buy, smelled of a mixture of seaweed and old socks, and the din of the rain hitting the tin roof was like needles in the ears.

However, once you started to look around, it *was* quite interesting. There were tarantulas as big as your fist, all bristling hair and clutching legs. There was a beehive bisected down the middle, revealing a private world of honeycombs. Then, although not strictly insects, a magnificent collection of glistening orange and black slugs slithered stickily around a damp rocky sluggery. There were also lots of bluebottles buzzing about, but it was impossible to say if they were part of the display, or just sheltering from the rain. Claire knocked one off her sleeve, and squashed it on the floor. Then she looked around guiltily. A slug seemed to be staring at her in horror. Insect murderer on the loose!

“Hey! Come and look at this, Claire!” Ben called.

Claire wandered over, in her own good time. Ten year olds had to understand that teenagers would not respond instantly to their beck and call.

What had captured Ben’s interest was a huge glass tank swarming with ants. Nearby was a small tropical tree marooned on a little moated island. The branches of the tree overhung the tank, and tendrils snaked down into it. The ants were marching in lines along the branches and tendrils bearing bits of leaves back to the nest.

“Leaf-Cutter Ants”, Ben read from a notice.

They watched the teeming activity. If you picked on a particular ant, and followed its progress, it was very absorbing.

“Ingenious little fellows, aren’t they!” came a breathy voice startlingly close behind them. They whirled around, to see a white-coated stomach. Scanning their eyes upwards along a thin chest and a long neck, they eventually reached a man’s face, white and bony, topped by a bald head. His eyes bulged, magnified to insect proportions by thick spectacle lenses. The whole face shone with enthusiasm, like the moon on a clear night.

“Listen!” he said, flicking a switch on the wall. “I’ve devised a system of miniaturised microphones and transmitters so you can hear the ants talking!”

A sound like the chirruping of grasshoppers came suddenly out of a loudspeaker. It was an alarming, urgent sound.

“We don’t understand it yet, but it’s a language all right!” the man said eagerly. Then he pointed at the tree.

“They don’t eat the leaves, you know, they live on a special fungus that they cultivate in farms.”

“What do they need the leaves for, then?” Claire asked.

“They’re to fertilize the fungus farms. And you, young man, have you noticed there are different types of ant in there – soldiers and workers?”

Ben shook his head. He wished the man would go away. He felt trapped between him and the ant colony. It was like a nightmare where you’re the only one in the class and the teacher can concentrate entirely on you. Besides, the man smelled like a damp dog.

“Yes,” the man continued excitedly, “the soldiers guard the colony from enemies, while the workers cut the leaves and cultivate the fungus. And of course, serve the queen.”

“The queen? Where’s she?” Claire asked.

“Look, there – in the middle of the nest, in her royal chamber.”

“Ugh! She’s enormous!” Claire exclaimed.

“What are all those little creamy things around her?” Ben said. “Are they her eggs?”

“Not exactly eggs. They’re called cocoons.”

“But the baby ants are inside, ready to hatch out?”

“Yes, and a single queen can produce about fifteen million offspring – think of that! That’s like having the whole population of London for your children. Where are *you* from, by the way?”

“We’re from Oxbury,” Claire replied.

“Ah – here on holiday, I suppose?”

“Yes.”

“Staying in the Golden Hind, I dare say?”

“No, we’re...”

“At the caravan site at Hogshead Bay!”

“No, we’re staying with our Aunt Gwen. She lives here.”

“Ah – Gwendolyn Swift?”

“Yes – do you know her, then?”

“*Know* her, no. *Know of* her, yes.”

There was something about the man’s voice that suggested disapproval of Aunt Gwen. He still stood uncomfortably close behind them, as if unwilling to let them escape.

“Ants are wonderful creatures,” he said. “Strong, intelligent, organised. And they’ve been on the earth a lot longer than puny humans!” He spat out the word ‘humans’ with infinite contempt.

“Do you know,” he went on, “that when there is a nuclear war, or disastrous global warming, it will be the ants, not humans, who will survive!”

Suddenly, Ben couldn’t stand any more of this. He felt as if he were suffocating. He jostled the man out of his way with a muttered ‘excuse me!’ and escaped to clearer space. Claire edged quickly out of the trap too, but the man stepped swiftly towards them, again uncomfortably close. It was like being pursued by a giant bony spider. He transfixed them with a bug-eyed stare.

“The average temperature here in Cornwall in a hundred years time will be the same as it is now in the central Sahara desert! All of Antmouth will be

under water because of the melting of the Arctic ice. Only the high ground, up by the golf course and the Bosswood estate, will be above the waves. Humans will be long dead! Ants will be the masters then!”

This man was seriously strange. Claire looked at her watch in a desperate subterfuge.

“Ben!” she exclaimed, “It’s nearly three o’clock. Aunt Gwen said to be back no later than three!”

They retreated towards the door. The man in the white coat pursued them all the way.

“Come back to watch the ants, whenever you like! You won’t have to pay again, now I know you. Come as often as you want.”

They burst out through the doors into the open air and laughed with relief. Even being pelted with rain felt good after that experience.

“I wonder if there are any *normal* people in Antmouth!” Ben exclaimed.

Chapter Four

THE GHASTLY GOLFER

While Ben and Claire were divesting themselves of their dripping coats in the little hall of the cottage, Aunt Gwen emerged through a door that Ben had previously assumed was a cupboard door. But a little room was visible behind her for a moment, a room without a window, and cluttered, as far as he could see, with old books and charts. There was also a broom, leaning in a corner. Merlin came out of the room at Aunt Gwen's heels, and she shut the door quickly behind her.

"Well, you're back sooner than I expected!" she exclaimed. "Come and talk to me in the kitchen - I'm doing a stew for tonight's supper."

They followed Aunt Gwen into her kitchen, where there was a delicious smell of onions and herbs.

"How did you like the insect zoo?"

"Well, the insects were quite interesting," Claire said.

"But there was this weird man in a white coat..." Ben added.

"A tall thin fellow like a stick-insect, with thick glasses?"

"Yes."

"Humph! That's Spindle. He's one of Anthony Bosswood's minions!"

"What's a minion?" Ben enquired. "Is it a small onion?"

Aunt Gwen looked impressed. "That's a very sensible suggestion, Ben. And if all Bosswood's minions could be sliced up and fried, that would

be an excellent thing. No, a minion is just someone who always does exactly what their boss tells them to do. This Anthony Bosswood used to be a scientist. A genetic scientist, famous for his work with ants. Then - I don't know exactly what happened –he had to leave his university job in a hurry after some dreadful mistake. Spindle was his assistant apparently, and he came here with Bosswood. Anyway, he's the biggest, bossiest, boss in this town – or the whole county, for that matter. His father and his grandfather were just as bad. The whole wicked family has a history of bossing people around that goes back for centuries. I wouldn't be at all surprised if that's not why they got called 'Bosswood' in the first place!"

"Will we come across him?" Ben said.

"I doubt it, luckily for you. He lives in a great mansion in the middle of the Bosswood Estate. That's up on the hill above town. You don't want to go anywhere near that – especially at the end of the day when the light's fading. That whole area is full of ghosts!"

Aunt Gwen turned to stir her cooking pots. Claire and Ben shared a look behind her back. Did she think she could frighten them with her old tales? Not likely!

That night, in his sleep, Ben found himself crawling as fast as he could along an endless narrow tunnel. It was airless, there was no light, and the only sound apart from the thumping of his heart was a periodic tapping, as if someone or something was knocking on a door behind him. Each time he

heard it, it seemed a little closer and made him redouble his efforts to get away.

Finally, he could see a faint greenish glow up ahead. At first he was relieved, but then, silhouetted against the glow and scuttling swiftly towards him, came a huge ant as big as himself.

“Ugh! No!” Ben shouted, throwing off the duvet and sitting bolt upright in the little bedroom. He looked around, half-awake, wondering where he was.

He had forgotten to draw his curtains, and outside he could see the slate rooftops of Antmouth, silvered by the light of a full moon sailing above on a sea of wispy clouds.

“Oh... Antmouth...Aunt Gwen’s...” he thought with relief.

To try and shake off the nightmare, he got up and went to look out of the window. Beyond Aunt Gwen’s garden wall, a cobbled lane led up the hill from the harbour towards the town square. Standing at the top of the lane, just at the corner, was the figure of a man. He wore a polo-necked sweater pulled right up to his ears, and he had a bag of golf clubs on his back. His face was white in the moonlight. He appeared to catch sight of Ben, and a peculiar intense expression came into his widely-spaced eyes. Then his lips curled, and he bared his teeth in a dog-like snarl. Ben swished the curtains shut and jumped back into bed, pulling the duvet over his head.

It took Ben a long time to get back to sleep after that. It was much worse even than the nightmare he’d been having! But at last, the distant,

regular sound of the waves against the harbour wall lulled him back into a dreamless slumber.

In the morning, Claire looked out of *her* window to see a bright, sunny sky. She felt excited, and thought it would be fun to walk along the promenade, and explore the rock pools on the beach. She went downstairs. On the kitchen table, there was the kind of evidence that suggested Ben had recently breakfasted – scattered crumbs, dirty plates, and a small pool of milk. Just then, an exclamation of “*Yes!*” from the sitting room indicated that Ben was exterminating his way through a new level of *Mutant Marauders*.

Claire ate some cereal thoughtfully. In spite of Spindle’s weirdness, she found herself mulling over his remarks. If the climate changed, would ants really replace humans? Or might humans adapt in some way? Human beings were already changing. In old castles, the chairs and beds were smaller than modern ones, and she’d read that her generation was expected to live ten years longer than that of their grandparents. Could human beings eventually evolve into something else entirely? She imagined a girl called Claire far in the future, with wings, like a butterfly’s. Then she pictured a version of Ben three metres high. *That was scary!* Ben the mutant marauder.

Aunt Gwen came in through the back door.

“I’ve just been in the greenhouse!” she said, looking pleased with herself. “I’ve got a little secret project in there – I’ll show you later. What did you think you’d do this morning?”

Claire said she thought of going to the beach.

“Excellent idea. Don’t go beyond the main bit of the beach though – you can get trapped by the tide under the cliffs.”

Claire followed the noise of battle to its source in the little sitting room. Ben was hunched over Dad’s laptop, destroying armies of giant spiders with blasts from his flame-thrower tank. Merlin was watching the screen too, with his ears twitching.

“Do you want to come to the beach?” Claire said, in a quiet moment when only shattered corpses were visible in Ben’s gun-sight.

“Wow – yes! Okay. Just let me save this!”

Ben pushed a few keys and then switched off the laptop with a sigh of contentment. Not bad for a morning’s work!

Chapter Five

THE DISTANT DOME

A few minutes later the children emerged from the cottage. Antmouth was now wearing its friendliest face. The sea was calm, there were people strolling about, and there was the distant sound of an ice-cream van playing crackling distorted music. The air smelled fresh and salty. They walked along

the promenade, and as they passed the Insect Zoo, they looked intently out to sea in case Spindle was lurking nearby, ready to invite them in again.

“Is that an island out there?” Claire said, pointing.

Ben shaded his eyes and looked. Low fluffy clouds meandered across the sea, like grazing sheep. On the horizon there was a dark irregular shape.

“Yes, I think so.”

“I wonder if anyone lives on it,” Claire went on. She liked the idea of a mysterious island, just on the edge of sight.

But Ben’s attention had shifted to matters closer at hand. “Hey – this looks like a games arcade!”

Sure enough, after the Insect Zoo, the Finny Friends Fish Bar, the Antmouth Postcard Palace, and a couple of closed-up kiosks, the sounds of thumping music and electronic buzzing poured out of an opening beside the promenade.

“Have you got any money, Claire?”

“Yes, thank you.”

“Could I borrow two pounds?”

“Where’s *your* money?”

“I forgot to bring it.”

Claire gave Ben two pounds.

“I’m keeping tabs on this, you know.”

“Okay, see you!”

Ben shot off into the arcade. Claire glanced inside. She wasn’t interested in that kind of place. A couple of old men in baseball caps fed

coins into the greedy little mouths of a row of fruit machines, their eyes fixed on the rotating symbols. Further in, clustered around a car-racing simulator, a group of pale, thin youths hung around, arguing about something. It was depressing. She wandered over to the sea wall and looked at the waves surging onto the beach. The swooshing sound of water and rolling pebbles and the sparkling light and movement were hypnotic. Thank goodness you didn't have to pay to look at that!

“Got any more change?”

Ben was back. Surely he'd only just gone in there?

“What happened to the two pounds?” Claire enquired.

“I spent them.”

“Well, that's your lot then. Come on.”

Ben's eyes suddenly widened, and he pointed back along the promenade.

“Look – coming towards us!”

A familiar, white-coated figure was strolling along in their direction.

“Spindle!” Claire said. “Okay, don't even look that way. Let's carry on the way we were going.”

“This is awful,” Ben muttered. “Weirdos are all over this place, night and day!”

They carried on to the end of the beach, where there were tall cliffs, and the promenade ended at a wooden cabin. A sign read *Funicular Railway – to the Cliffs and Golf Course*.

Just then, with a grinding, rattling noise that echoed from the rocks, a kind of box-like railway carriage clanked towards them down a ravine that split the cliff.

“Wow! That’s steep!” Ben commented. “Shall we go up?”

“Have you got money for the fare?”

“Claire – you know I haven’t got any money. Could you lend me some?”

“It’s twenty-five pence for under sixteens it says on the notice. That’s two pounds twenty five you owe me!”

“All right.”

Ben looked back anxiously towards the beach and the promenade. Spindle, although distant, was still heading in their direction.

They peered into the wooden cabin. Illuminated fish tanks containing colourful tropical fish lined one of the inside walls, casting an underwater, greenish light. An old man with a face like a cod who has heard bad news was sitting on a stool.

“Two for the top?” he said mournfully, looking at the fish tanks.

“Yes please. Are they return tickets?” Claire asked.

The cod-faced man raised seawater eyes to her face.

“Oh yes. Or else you can walk back down into town by the road, past the Bosswood Estate. Take you half an hour.”

The carriage had arrived at the bottom now, and Claire noticed that ‘Old Billy’ was painted in orange on its green front. She and Ben climbed aboard. The man emerged from his cabin and pressed a button. The

carriage started to clank up the cliff. It was a little scary, going up something so steep. Soon the little cabin below was just the size of a matchbox, and they could see far out to sea, where the mysterious island looked closer than before.

At the top, Old Billy wobbled alarmingly over the edge of the cliff and came to a halt, shuddering with terror, at a wooden platform with rusty railings that you wouldn't want to lean on. The children got off quickly.

"Phew! It looks like going down would be even scarier than coming up!" Ben commented, looking over the railings.

"It's okay, we'll walk back anyway shall we?" Claire suggested. She turned to look inland. Across a lane, there was a golf course, open and treeless, dotted with sandy bunkers and brightly coloured flags fluttering in the breeze.

"What's that noise?" she said. Above the sound of the waves, and the shrieks of seagulls, there was a new high-pitched whining sound. Ben turned to look. There were groups of golfers here and there, but surely they weren't making that whining noise? In the distance, beyond the golf course was a hillside of beautiful trees. Strangely, in spite of the breeze, they were shrouded in a mist, which seemed to cling to their branches like a grey, tattered spider's web. Suddenly, as they watched, one of the trees swayed violently, then crashed to the ground with a far-off sound of cracking, tearing timber. Almost immediately, the high-pitched whining sound resumed.

"It must be chainsaws," Ben said.

“But why are they cutting down those lovely trees?” Claire said. She’d never seen them before, but she felt indignant that no one had consulted her.

“I think I can see a yellow bulldozer up there as well,” Ben said. The mist swirled, hiding and revealing the hillside from moment to moment. “And dozens of little people swarming about on the ground. It looks like the anthill we saw in the Insect Zoo!”

“What’s that thing higher up the hill, above the trees?” Claire said, pointing. The enveloping mist had parted for a moment, revealing an extraordinary sight.

“It looks like a giant golf ball!” Ben said.

It did look very like a golf ball, a circular white building with a dimpled surface. What on earth could it be? It must be enormous. The mist rose again around it, and it disappeared like a whale under the surface of the ocean.

“Hey, look! There’s a telescope thing here Claire. We can have a closer look with that.”

Ben went to look. It was coin-operated.

“Only ten pence, Claire. Have you got ten pence?”

Claire dug into her purse again.

“That’s two pounds thirty five.”

“Okay.”

He put the coin in, and the viewfinder cleared. He tried to swing it around to face inland, but it wouldn’t.

“It must be designed just to look along the coast,” he said, disappointed. “Well, never mind.”

He scanned the horizon and found the mysterious island. A frothy line of surf was breaking on its rocky shoreline. Then he swung the barrel downwards to point along the beach. He scanned the promenade, and picked out Spindle, standing outside the Insect Zoo as if looking for customers. Then, with a click, the viewfinder went blank. Ben’s ten pence-worth of Claire’s money was up.

As they made their way along the lane back towards Antmouth, a golf ball suddenly landed in front of them. It bounced high off the tarmac, and then rolled to a halt in a clump of grass at the foot of the wall.

Claire looked over the wall at the golf course, to see where it had come from. All the golfers were a long way off, and none were looking their way. Ben ran over and picked up the ball. It had a nice, heavy feeling.

“Is there anyone coming to look for this?” he asked Claire. He suddenly remembered the horrible golfer in the night. If he was coming their way, he’d leave the golf ball well alone!

“I can’t see anyone,” she replied.

“Good. I’ll keep it then.”

He popped it into his pocket.

Following the lane inland, they soon found themselves near the wooded hill, and the mist they had seen before closed in around them. It seemed thickest near the ground, and felt damp and strangely warm.

“Bother!” Claire said suddenly, putting her hands into the pockets of her denim jacket. “I must have put my sunglasses down in the funicular railway carriage.”

“Do you want to go back?” Ben said, hoping she wouldn’t.

“No. They’re only cheap ones, and I can go back and ask for them at the shed next time we’re on the beach.”

A little further on, the wooded slopes to their right bristled with painted signs that said *Bosswood Estate. Keep Out!* In large letters the colour of blood.

“What’s that peculiar shape on the signs, above the writing?” Ben said, pointing to one that was nearby.

Claire stared at the shape.

“It looks to me like it’s supposed to be a sort of ant figure, holding a sword...” she suggested after a moment, “...yes, definitely an ant...and it’s one of those old fashioned swords. A cutlass. Like pirates used.”

Out of the fog came eerie whining and grunting noises. Ben pretended to himself that they were the sounds of dinosaurs on the move in the primeval forest, although he knew that really it must be chainsaws and bulldozers at work further up the hill.

In the trees beside the road was a collection of old buildings – or a collection of stone walls, to be more accurate. Any roofs had long since collapsed. Some rotting beams of wood lay in big piles.

“What was all this, do you think?” Ben said, pointing.

“Maybe it’s one of the abandoned tin mines,” Claire replied. “That would explain the big piles of wood.”

She waited.

Ben tried to resist asking, but curiosity got the better of him. “All right Miss Clever-Clogs, why does it explain the piles of wood?”

“Pit props, I’d say. To keep the tunnels from caving in.”

Ben felt it was time to put Claire in her place, with a display of boldness.

“I’m going to have a closer look. You coming?”

“It’s trespassing.”

“I don’t care – are you scared?”

Claire said nothing.

“Do you think a lot of ants with swords will come out to attack us?”

Claire bristled.

“No.”

“Come on then.”

Ben led the way through some bracken to the first of the old walls, and peered around the corner.

“Hey! Look at this!” he called.

Claire joined him. There was a great gaping hole in the ground, surrounded by rubble and bits of machinery so rusted away that they looked as if they might dissolve into dust if you touched them. Ben looked gingerly over the edge.

“Ben! Be careful! I’m not coming to get you if you fall in there!”

“I *am* being careful! Wow! You can’t see the bottom. It’s really dark down there.”

He cupped his hands to his mouth, and called down into the shaft.

“Hello! Hello! Is there anybody down there?”

His voice reverberated in the pit. He pulled a scary face at Claire, and was just about to step back when they heard a tiny sound, far below, like a hammer striking a rock. It struck three times, and the echoes chased up out of the ground and died.

Claire went as pale as paper.

Ben had already jumped away from the edge of the hole. There was no way of pretending to be brave any more.

“That’ll teach you to call down strange holes in the ground!” Claire said, as they pushed hurriedly through the bracken back towards the road.

Ben nodded. “It was scary, but perhaps it was just a stone falling...”

Claire gave him a sceptical look.

“All right, it wasn’t,” he admitted. “It was three knocks. And I don’t want to know what made them!”

Then a deep rumbling sound came out of the hole behind them, and the ground shook slightly. It could have been an explosion of some sort down there, but to Ben’s imagination it seemed just as likely to be a monster waking up from slumber after he had disturbed it!

With a frightened glance at each other, the children ran until they regained the road, and walked quickly along it without wasting breath on speaking. Soon they were back down in the valley.

There was one more strange thing in store for them. They were just approaching the first of Antmouth's outlying cottages when Ben saw something small and white moving along the road in front of them.

"Look!" he exclaimed, pointing it out to Claire. "Isn't that another golf ball?"

They approached. It was indeed a golf ball, apparently rolling along into Antmouth on its own. It was a comical sight, but very unsettling. However, they bravely approached to within a metre or two, and the solution to the mystery made itself apparent.

"Smuggler ants!" Claire said. "They're carrying the golf ball!"

About a dozen or so of the powerful ants were bearing the golf ball along on their backs. Looking along the edge of the road, Ben now saw that there was in fact a line of smuggler ants moving along in both directions. It was obviously a well-established trail for them. A few were carrying bits of leaf or fragments of twigs. They watched them, fascinated, for a few minutes, and then carried on into Antmouth.

Chapter Six

PUSH – A PECULIAR PURVEYOR

By the time they reached the main square, the ornate town clock was striking four. They passed a pub, The Smuggler, which featured on its painted sign a bearded merman brandishing a cutlass.

“Look – like the ants on Bosswood’s signs!” Ben pointed out.

Outside the pub, four men were unloading golf clubs from a car. They all had high polo-necked shirts up to their ears, and diamond-patterned jumpers. One of them caught sight of the children, and pointed them out to the others, who stared. Why were the golfers so interested in them, Claire wondered. Both she and Ben quickened their pace.

As they turned out of the square and into a cobbled lane leading down towards the harbour, there was a swinging metal sign ahead advertising ice creams and lollies.

“Let’s get an ice cream,” Ben suggested. “Could you lend me the money for mine, just for now? Your hair looks really nice today, by the way.”

“Don’t bother trying compliments Ben, they’re not your style! I just want to be paid back. Hey, look at the sign above the shop!”

The sign, at first glance, simply read *Push Off*. However, on closer inspection the word *Licence* was written in smaller, fainter letters after *Off*. It was rather odd – perhaps deliberately so.

The interior of the shop was rather odd too. There was the usual stuff you might see in an off-licence – bottles of wine, cans of beer and so on. Then there was the usual stuff you expected to find in a newsagent – papers, magazines, sweets and so on. But there was also a whole wall devoted to less predictable items, such as hard hats, torches, rope ladders, picks and hammers, bells and whistles.

A bright yellow canary in a cage started to sing as soon as they entered the shop, but there was no one there to serve them, so they looked into the ice-cream freezer, and decided what they wanted.

“Well, my dears, ice-cream is it?” said a voice immediately behind them. A woman was emerging from a trap door in the floor. She was quite old, small, with neat grey hair in a bun. She wore jeans and a denim fisherman’s smock, from which she smacked a cloud of dust with her palm. “That’ll be one pound twenty please,” she said, glancing at what they’d chosen.

Claire handed over the money, and the woman rang up the amount on an ancient cash register, with little flags that popped up in a window to show the figures. She passed back Claire’s change.

“There you are, Claire, eighty pence change. Are you treating Ben to his?”

The children stared at her. Had they met her before? Claire felt on the verge of some new embarrassing mistake.

“Er – no,” she managed to say. “Have we...?”

“Met? No, but I know all about you from Gwendolyn – your Aunt Gwen. We’re great friends. I’m Jemima Push.”

They shook hands. Jemima had a smiling face and wrinkles around her eyes that suggested she smiled a good deal of the time.

“Now, have you been exploring Antmouth?”

“A little. We’ve been to the Insect Zoo, and we’ve just been up on Old Billy to the golf course on top of the cliffs.”

“Ah, yes. Bosswood’s end of town. There’s some interesting things to see along the shore on that side – but you’ve got to watch out for the tide.”

“What is there?”

“Well, the smugglers used to use that part of the coast. They used to land all kinds of things secretly at Crabsnapper Cove, and sneak them into Bosswood’s place – not this Bosswood of course – his ancestors were a bad lot too. Crabsnapper Cove is a wonderful place for flotsam and jetsam – all sorts of things seem to wash up there. Bosswood claims the cove is his, but it’s not. It’s public land. And of course, just beside Crabsnapper Cove, there’s the Wrecker’s Chair.”

“What’s that?”

“That’s a rocky point where the wreckers used to wait on a dark moonless night in bad weather. If they saw a ship, they’d wave a lamp around, trying to make it look as if it was on the deck of another boat. Then

the captain of the ship would be fooled into thinking that he was well away from the shore. After that, he'd very likely run into rocks further along the coast, at Black Rubbles, or Hell's Teeth, and other wreckers waiting there would row out and throw the crew in the sea and steal everything on board."

"That's horrible!" Claire said.

"Oh, yes," Jemima Push said with a nod and a grim smile, "there's plenty of horrible things happened in these parts. That's why there's so many ghosts!"

Ben glanced at Claire. He felt the hairs on the back of his neck prickling.

"Are there any ghosts underground?" he said, thinking of the tapping sound at the mineshaft.

"Oh yes – in the abandoned tin mines. Those used to be Bosswood family mines, and plenty of people died thanks to that family's wicked ways. They say that they are all waiting until the last of the Bosswood family is dead, and then they can rest. And there's not only ghosts. Down there is where the tappers live!"

"Tappers?" Claire said.

"Yes, tappers," Jemima Push confirmed. "In the old days, the miners often heard tapping sounds in the deep tunnels, and sometimes – just occasionally – they would catch a glimpse of a small figure hurrying away in the darkness. The legend was that there were little people who lived their whole lives underground, and as they grew older they'd grow smaller and smaller until they ended up as tiny murrians!"

“What are *murrians*?”

“Murrians? It’s an old Cornish word for ants.”

Ben glanced at his ice cream. He didn’t want it to start melting. He caught Claire’s eye, and they made their exit, thanking Jemima Push for all her information.

“Oh, you’re very welcome my dears! But remember, it’s not all sweetness and light here in Antmouth, although it looks an innocent place enough. Be careful where you go, and who you speak to! Be wary of the golfers, in particular! They’re a very strange lot.”

Ben was about to ask why, when there was the sound of three faint knocks from under the floor.

“Well, goodbye then!” Jemima Push said, holding the door open for them. As they went out, the three knocks were repeated, rather more loudly.

“I’ve never met so many weird people in one place!” Claire exclaimed when they were on the street.

She had hardly said the words when, rounding the next corner, they walked straight into the four golfers, hanging about with their bags of golf clubs over their shoulders. That was peculiar – why would they be carrying their clubs around town with them? What was even more peculiar was that they were completely silent, and gazed at Ben and Claire intently. Ben observed that all of them had the same widely-spaced eyes as the one who had frightened him in the night. Could they all be brothers? As if this wasn’t bad enough, the next thing that happened was that Spindle emerged from an alleyway, as if he had been waiting there especially. He was wearing his

white lab coat as usual, and carrying a notebook and pencil. He pointed at the children with the pencil, and spoke to the golfers.

“Gentlemen, these are the children who are staying with their Aunt, Gwendolyn Swift. They too are *Swifts!*”

The golfers stared even harder, their eyes seeming to grow bigger. None of them blinked – in fact, they barely seemed to have eyelids. It was unnerving.

“And, judging from their ice creams, they have been consorting with Jemima Push.”

He took a step towards them, as they hurried past.

“Mind the company you keep, children!” he hissed. “Antmouth is not what it seems!”

Ben and Claire had to push past the last of the golfers, who was standing in the middle of the pavement, right in their way. As they jostled past him, he bared his teeth and snarled, which was very unpleasant. He also had a strange seaweedy smell, as if he had recently been in the sea.

When they got to the end of the street, Ben glanced back, and the golfers were all still there, staring after them. Now the hairs on the back of his neck were prickling with good reason!

Chapter Seven

PUSH PROPOSES PUBLICITY

When they got back to Aunt Gwen's cottage, there was no sign of their relative. Ben announced that he was going to play *Mutant Marauders* for a while.

"It's not as weird in that game as it is out there in Antmouth!" he remarked.

Claire nodded. Really, someone should write a book about this place, she thought.

Merlin rubbed up against Claire's legs and mewed, then ran out of the back door, which was open. Claire followed him, and made her way up the sloping back garden. At the top was Aunt Gwen's greenhouse, and she could see Aunt Gwen inside, bent over some task.

She tapped on the glass door to get her attention and Aunt Gwen turned around and smiled, and motioned for her to come in. Claire did so, stepping over a thick line of white powder on the threshold, and noticing a display of framed certificates on the back wall. *Best Rose Hybrid, Antmouth Show* one of them said.

"Hello my dear!" Aunt Gwen said cheerfully. "Now – just shut that door quickly in case any of those little devils are out there. They seem to be able to jump over the ant powder I put down."

"Why do the ants want to get in here?" Claire asked.

"Well – they carry off my bulbs if I forget to put them up on the shelves. And also..." (here Aunt Gwen leaned confidentially towards Claire and lowered her voice) "...they might have got wind of my secret project!"

“What project is that?” Claire whispered, as if the ants might really overhear them.

Aunt Gwen waved her hand across a row of very exotic looking plants on a bench.

“Carnivores!” she said impressively.

“What...they’re...?”

“Insect-eaters! I started to grow them a couple of years ago, when I got bored with roses. I’m trying to create a new hybrid – a combination of existing plants into something new. Can you guess what?”

Claire shook her head.

“An ant-eating orchid! What about that! That’ll teach these smuggler ants a lesson they won’t forget!”

Claire pictured a vigorous and voracious plant chasing around the garden on its tendrils, snatching up helpless ants in its petals. But plants couldn’t do that. Not yet, anyway.

“Yes!” Aunt Gwen was going on excitedly. “They’ll emit a scent which will be irresistible to ants. The little devils will crawl up the stem to investigate, and get caught in the sticky nectar inside the bloom. Just like a Cobra Lily – that’s a plant from northern California. That would make Mr Bossy Bosswood the scientific genius sit up and choke on his tea! Outdone by an amateur in genetic engineering! My latest version is almost ready to bloom.”

After making a few appreciative remarks, Claire went back to the cottage. Ben was in the hall with his back to her. He was holding the door to

Aunt Gwen's little room half open, and he had his head stuck in there. He jumped guiltily when Claire cleared her throat, and shut the door.

"Nosy parker!" Claire remarked.

"It's full of all witchy stuff in there, Claire!" Ben said. "There's astrological charts..."

"Do you mean *astrological*?" Claire cut in, rather pleased by Ben's mistake.

"Probably. Charts, anyway, with stars and moons and crabs and weird signs. And there's books in Latin."

"How do *you* know?"

"Foreign, anyway. Could be Latin. And there's lots of little bottles with powder and bits of leaves and things..."

"None of this means she's a witch, Ben."

"You were telling me in the car that she *was* a witch."

"I was only teasing. Anyway – listen! She's coming in from the garden. You didn't mess about with anything in there did you?"

Ben shook his head and went to switch on his computer, giving Aunt Gwen a wary smile as she greeted him on her way to the kitchen.

That evening, they had a nice supper of fish and chips. Merlin had a little bit of fish in a saucer, but wasn't allowed chips. Aunt Gwen was delighted that they'd met her good friend, Jemima Push, and muttered crossly about Spindle and the golfing 'minions' as she called them.

“They’re all Bosswood’s people,” she said. “He has caravans for them up on his estate, and all they do is work for him, and play golf. They don’t mix with the rest of us here in Antmouth. It wouldn’t surprise me at all if Bosswood uses them as guinea pigs for his genetics experiments, they’re so peculiar!”

It didn’t make a lot of sense to Claire, and she decided it would be best not to worry. She would do her best to forget all about it before bedtime – she didn’t want to have nightmares.

But quite late in the evening, there were three taps on the door. Ben and Claire looked at each other with wide eyes.

“Whoever can that be at this time of night?” Aunt Gwen said, rocking forward, and then backward, and finally propelling herself upwards out of her deep comfortable armchair.

Ben and Claire listened anxiously from the fireside. Would it be tappers from the underground mines? Staring golfers? The creepy Spindle?

But the voice that came to their ears was the friendly one of Jemima Push – although what she had to say was disturbing.

“Another disappearance!” she said, as soon as she came in through the door. “I came straight to tell you!”

“That’s the third one this year!” replied Aunt Gwen. The two of them joined the children in the sitting room, and Jemima smiled at them and said hello.

“Gwendolyn,” she went on. “We’ve got to *do* something!”

“Who is it this time?”

“Mavis Hubbard’s oldest. Billy. His boat went missing this afternoon.”

“Do the coastguards know?”

Jemima made a scornful noise.

“Oh, yes. They say they’ll start a search as soon as it’s light. But we both know what use that will be! The coastguards won’t search the Bosswood Estate! Nor will the police! Bosswood’s got them all in his pocket!”

Aunt Gwen nodded thoughtfully.

“No – I’ve made my mind up, Gwen. The only way to put a stop to this business is to get the full glare of publicity onto it. In the morning I’m going to ring up the newspapers and tell them. They can’t ignore a story like this – three fishermen vanished in one year from the same town!”

Aunt Gwen glanced at Claire and Ben, who were sitting with their mouths open. She made a sign to Jemima Push, and they went into the kitchen, pulling the door closed behind them.

Claire stood up. She might just stand for a moment in the passageway outside the kitchen, to get a little air – and see what she could overhear! As she stood, something slipped out of her denim jacket pocket and fell to the floor with a thump. A golf ball! It rolled to a halt beside the hearth, where Merlin looked at it suspiciously.

“Ben! Did you put your golf ball in my pocket?”

“No – mine’s on the window sill – see!”

“That’s weird. Did one of those horrible golfers slip it into my pocket as we brushed past them?”

“I don’t know... but look! Look at Merlin!”

Merlin had left the golf ball by the hearth and was lying flat on the floor, stretching his paw as far under the settee as he could reach.

“He’s trying to get something...” Claire said.

With a final effort, Merlin dislodged something under the chair. It rolled into view. Yet another golf ball! The place was full of them! Merlin sniffed at his discovery and put his ear close to it. What was going on?

Chapter Eight

A SAUCEPAN SURPRISE FOR SPIES

The next day, Antmouth had new weather for them - fine and bright, with a blustery wind. The children thought they would do a little rock pool fishing, and headed towards Jemima Push’s shop to see if she sold nets. Seagulls were squawking and squabbling over who got to perch on which chimney, and Ben felt as if the worries of yesterday had blown away with the fog.

“Shall we get an ice cream?” he suggested.

“Have you got your money with you?” Claire replied.

“Ah...” Ben said. “No.”

“Which reminds me,” Claire went on, “you owe me two pounds seventy five from yesterday.”

“Okay,” Ben agreed cheerfully. He had privately worked it out the evening before at two pounds ninety five, but there was no point in telling Claire that. She should work harder at her maths.

“So, with another ice cream, that’ll be three pounds thirty five,” he said.

“Plus ten pence interest, because I have to carry my purse around everywhere so that you can buy things.”

“That’s not fair.”

“Take it or leave it.”

Well, it was still ten pence less than he really owed her, Ben thought.

“Okay.”

However, when they rounded the next corner, they met with a very unexpected and unwelcome sight. Jemima Push’s shop had a big red ‘Closed’ sign in its empty window. Golf equipment was being unloaded from a green van, and a painter on a ladder was just putting the finishing touches to a new sign. This announced in bold red letters on a bright green background: ‘Golfer’s Corner’.

“I wonder if Aunt Gwen knows about this,” Claire said.

They ran back to Aunt Gwen’s cottage to tell her.

“Jemima Push’s shop closed!” she said, her eyes widening. “I can’t believe it. She’s had that shop thirty years, and she was in this very house

last night and never said a word about closing. I'm going up there right now. Come on!"

Claire and Ben followed Aunt Gwen back to the scene of the crime.

"What do you think you're doing?" she addressed the sign painter.

"Where's Jemima Push?"

The sign painter finished off the letter he was doing, looked at it from a couple of angles with one eye closed, and then spoke slowly over his shoulder.

"Which of those there questions would you like me to answer first, missus?"

"Just explain what's going on here!"

He glanced down.

"Well, there seems to be an angry old woman and two children bothering a man who's just doing the job he's been paid for, that's what I reckon's going on."

"*Who's* paid you?"

"Well, I don't get paid until the job's finished, so nobody's paid me."

"Oh..." Aunt Gwen said, exasperated. She strode towards the green van, but before she could get there, it went roaring off with a puff of smoke from its exhaust.

"Oh!" she said, coughed, and stamped her foot. She returned to the sign painter, who was descending his ladder.

"You're not from Antmouth," she stated.

He nodded. "That's right. You can tell that straight away because all Antmouth people are barmy."

"You're a very rude person," Aunt Gwen chastised him.

"Ah – I'm only telling you what everyone in Cornwall says. Everyone knows there's something funny about Antmouth."

"Never mind that, just tell me who paid for this – I mean, who is *going* to pay for this!"

"Reckon you should ask that question up at the golf club, missus. That's where the phone call came from to do this job. Now if you'll excuse me, I've got another bit of work to do in a normal town a few miles away, and I want to get all packed up here."

With that, he started taking down his ladder, whistling loudly.

"I'll bet Bosswood's at the bottom of all this!" Aunt Gwen said to the children. "Come on!"

They almost had to run to keep up as she led the way back to her cottage. There, she rummaged around in a drawer in the kitchen, bringing out string, castanets, a mouth organ, a set of tarot cards, and a selection of dusty boiled sweets that looked as if she had put them there in her own childhood and forgotten about them.

"Ah – here it is!" she pronounced at last, holding up a key. "This is Jemima's spare door key – in case of emergencies. I'm going straight there to see what's up. You can stay here if you like, or go out if you prefer. I don't know what the world's coming to!"

She marched off, looking very agitated. Ben opened the fridge to get a drink of juice.

“Ben!” Claire called from the sitting room.

“What?”

“Come and look at this!”

Ben went through into the sitting room with his glass of orange juice. Claire pointed at Merlin’s cat basket. Gathered inside it, like eggs in a bird’s nest, were at least a dozen golf balls!

Merlin himself appeared at the door of the sitting room, and mewed a greeting to them. Then his ears pricked up, and he stalked over to his basket and put his face close to the balls, as if listening.

Ben’s attention was caught by a glimpse of movement outside the window. Silently, he waved to Claire to come over and look out. Loitering beyond the garden wall and swishing their clubs about was a group of four golfers. One of them was holding what looked like a mobile phone with a short aerial to his ear. He turned his head their way, and Claire pulled back quickly from the window.

Suddenly Claire was struck by an idea. It seemed a crazy idea, but then there were a lot of crazy things going on in Antmouth. She went into the kitchen and fetched a big saucepan. Then she put all the golf balls into the saucepan, and put the lid on it. Both Ben and Merlin stared at her.

“What are you doing, Claire?” Ben asked.

Claire simply put a finger to her lips, and indicated that Ben should look out of the window. She positioned herself also where she could see the

golfers, then held the lid of the saucepan firmly in place, and shook it as hard as she possibly could. The golf balls inside made the devil of a racket, causing Ben to put his fingers in his ears and Merlin to run out of the room. At the same time, the golfer with the walkie-talkie took it suddenly from his ear, and examined the instrument as if there was something wrong with it. Claire's crazy idea had turned out to be the truth!

Claire put her forefinger to her lips again in a sign to Ben not to speak. She fetched the notepad and pencil that were kept next to the telephone in the kitchen, and scribbled *I think the golf balls can hear us. I'm going to suggest going for a walk. You agree.*

She showed the note to Ben.

Ben nodded. He had seen how the golfer jumped at the noise. Already, an idea had come to him of who was behind the golf balls.

"Do you fancy wandering along the cliff path, Ben?" she said.

"Sure," Ben replied.

"Let's go out of the back door. We can go up the alley, and get onto the path that way."

"Okay!"

Claire put her finger to her lips again, went to the back door, and opened and closed it. Then she positioned herself cautiously near the window, so she could see what the golfers were doing. Just as she had expected, they were making their way towards the harbour, where the coast path began. She watched them until they were out of sight, then went out of the back door for real and emptied the saucepan of golf balls into the rubbish

bin. Merlin watched, looking a little disappointed, Claire thought. Then she and Ben slipped out of the front door and peered over the garden gate. The golfers were a hundred metres off, with their backs turned.

“Do you think they were just going to follow us?” Ben said, watching the golfers disappear onto the cliff path.

“Well – whatever they were going to do, we’ve given them the slip for now.”

“You know who might have made those golf balls, Claire?”

“Who? Bosswood, I suppose.”

“I think it might have been Spindle. Do you remember his miniature microphones at the Insect Zoo?”

“Oh – yes. For listening to the ants!”

“I’m frightened, Claire. Those golfers are creepy!”

Claire nodded.

“I’m scared too. We’d better tell Aunt Gwen about this.”

“But we don’t know where Jemima Push’s house is,” Ben said.

“Well, we’ll have to tell her later. Let’s go along the sea front in the opposite direction from those golfers, for now.”

Chapter Nine

A BEACHED BOAT

Once again, everything seemed normal on the surface. Ben glanced wistfully at the amusement arcade as they went by. The scene was just as before, with apparently the same old people at the fruit machines and the same bored youths, this time clustered around a pool table. On the beach itself, families and dog walkers and joggers were out enjoying themselves.

“What shall we do?” Ben said. Antmouth was proving more frightening than fun. He wished he was at home with Mum and Dad, helping to mop up the flooded house.

Claire shrugged her shoulders.

“We’d better stay out of the way. Let’s just walk along the shore.”

“We’d better stay well away from the golf course,” Ben said.

“Yes – but that reminds me, I could ask for my sunglasses at the shed at the bottom of the funicular railway.”

The cod-faced man was in his cabin as before. He didn’t hear them approach, and when they looked into his hut he had his face pressed up close

to his fish tanks, and was opening and closing his mouth like a fish himself. Ben cleared his throat, and the man jumped.

“We’re not so different,” he said when he had recovered from his surprise. His slow mournful voice seemed dredged up from the bottom of the sea.

“I beg your pardon?” Ben said.

“Humans and fish. We’re not so different. Humans came out of the sea, once. Mr Spindle told me all about it. That’s where all life started – in the old oceans. I’ve been helping Mr Spindle, you see. He’s a scientist.”

“How have you been helping Mr Spindle?” Claire asked innocently. The man seemed a bit simple-minded, and might let some secrets slip.

“Oh, he took some blood from me. It pricked a little, but it’s important work, he says. Two tickets for the top?”

“No, I just wondered if some sunglasses had been handed in? I think I left them on the train yesterday.”

The man reached for a cardboard box under the fish tanks. It was full of hats and gloves and scarves, and sitting at the top were Claire’s sunglasses.

“Here we are. Found them myself.”

“Thank you!”

They left and the man stayed in the doorway of his cabin, squinting into the daylight like a crab peering out of its shell.

At the foot of the cliffs beyond, the beach dwindled to nothing and they made their way across a jumble of flat rocks and tide pools. The wind had

dropped, and a few hundred metres out to sea, a thick curtain of fog had gathered, as if wondering whether or not to invade the shore. Antmouth's weather seemed exceptionally unpredictable.

A little further on, steps went up steeply, like a rocky staircase, to a broad ledge, half way up the cliffs. There were six or seven large looming stones up there, each as big as a car.

"I bet that's the Wrecker's Chair," Claire said.

"Let's climb up!" Ben said, and they scrambled up to the top of the steps. From this height they could see above the sea fog, which seemed to be affecting only the area around Antmouth. They looked at the view for a few minutes. There was a sailing boat out to sea, and Claire pointed along the coast to a group of rocks like jagged fangs sticking out of the water.

"I expect those are Hell's Teeth!" she said. "Just imagine trying to trick sailors into running into them!"

They descended, and scrambled across another area of flat rocks and tide pools until they reached a small deserted cove, hemmed in by cliffs. Already they felt as if Antmouth and all its activities was a long way off. There were no buildings visible up on the cliff tops.

"I wonder if this is Crabsnapper Cove," Ben said, "where Jemima said things were washed up. Let's see what we can find, shall we?"

They ranged along the shoreline. Of course there was seaweed, all black and rubbery and rather smelly. Then there was driftwood, smoothed into graceful curving shapes by the waves. There was something that looked like it might once have been a golf bag. Ben poked at the decomposing tube

of material with a stick, and a large crab scuttled out. Ben sprang back in alarm.

After a while, they reached the next headland, and again clambered over rocks to find themselves in another cove. It was larger than the first one, and felt even more isolated. There were some big rocks in the middle, curving pointed rocks like the ribs of some long-dead monster whose skeleton had been half-buried under the sand and shingle.

The fog was closer now, creeping towards them over the sea, which had become quite still. There were no seagulls. No sounds of traffic or human voices. Nothing. Except... what was that?

“Can you hear music, Claire?” Ben said. He spoke quietly, infected by the secretive atmosphere of the place. The music was tinny, indistinct. Claire nodded, and they moved forward cautiously. The music seemed to come from behind the rocks. It was classical music – violins and cellos – and sounded as if it was coming from a radio.

Ben expected to see perhaps a picnicker, or a beachcomber with a metal detector. But what they saw was a boat. A wooden fishing boat with a small cabin. It was right on the edge of the water, being pushed gently against the shelving shingle by the small waves. The music was coming from the boat, but there didn't appear to be anyone aboard.

Claire started forward to get a closer look, when Ben put a hand on her shoulder and pointed.

“Stop!” he hissed. “Stay behind the rocks here!”

Claire followed Ben's pointing finger. Out in the foggy waters, a head was bobbing on the surface. Then five, maybe six more surfaced, moving towards the shore.

"Where have they come from?" Claire said quietly.

The heads of the swimmers came onward and then figures emerged from the water. They were men, but their skins were as grey as the sea and the fog, and there was something strange about their necks, just under their ears.

"What have they got on their necks?" Ben whispered, horrified.

But Claire was too shocked to reply. She stared at the men's necks. They had lines running along below their ears. Slits – rows of slits, like the gills of fish. They were not human beings – or, at least, not entirely so!