

‘That’ll keep them busy for a moment,’ said George in a satisfied tone. She raced back across the room and rolled back the corner of the hearth rug, revealing more of the stone floor. Then she leapt nimbly up on to the chair and pressed on one of the wooden panels. It slid smoothly sideways, and George reached inside and pulled on a hidden lever.

There was a deep clunk, and one of the stones that made up the floor tilted on its side. All three children gasped in amazement. ‘Get your bags!’ George told them, sliding the panel back into place and jumping back down from the chair. On one side of the stone were ancient stairs leading down into the darkness.

‘What’s down there?’ said Maddy, torn between anxiety and excitement.

‘Our escape route,’ George told her. ‘Always have an escape plan.’

‘I’ve got a torch!’ said Fran, rummaging in her backpack and pulling out a small orange flashlight she’d brought with her.

‘That’s not a torch,’ said George with a smile, reaching into one of the side pockets of her own rucksack.

‘*That’s* a torch,’ she went on, displaying a large, silver cylinder. She pushed a button, and a bright beam illuminated the stone stairs. ‘Quick!’ George led the way downwards. Without thinking they followed, Fran giving Gilbert an encouraging pat.

When they reached the bottom of the stone staircase, George pulled on a wire set into the wall, and the entrance behind them swung smoothly and quietly closed on some hidden mechanism. ‘And this is a little addition,’ she said with a smile, pressing a button. There was a swish and a clunk from somewhere above.

‘What was that?’ asked Fran.

‘Electromagnet,’ the professor explained. ‘It’s pulled the rug back into place, hiding the entrance. Bit of a dead giveaway, otherwise. They’ll never work out where we’ve gone.’

‘This is utterly, completely brilliant!’ said Maddy, her voice echoing back strangely from the walls of the secret passageway.

‘We found this a long, long time ago,’ said George over her shoulder, leading them at a fast pace away

from Kirrin Cottage. The tunnel was high enough to stand up in, although at times it was so narrow that they had to squeeze sideways. 'I've made a few improvements over the years. Like I said, it's always good to have an escape plan, especially with the work I do. This used to lead to a farmhouse, but we can't go appearing at the back of someone's wardrobe in the middle of the night. Luckily, I added another exit a few years back. Here, this way!'

She flashed her torch on to the left-hand wall, revealing an archway lined with modern-looking metal beams. Another set of newer-looking stairs led upwards. The children followed George up, and she tugged a lever set into the wall. Above them, a hatchway opened, and they climbed out into the fresh air. At least, it was fresher than the air in the tunnel. They were in the corner of a large barn, filled with cows sleeping placidly in stalls.

'Pee-yew!' said Tom in a loud whisper. 'It *stinks!*'

'Good clean farmyard smell,' George told him. 'Come on! Don't wake them.' They crept between the cows and out of the barn right at the edge of a