

CUTTLEFISH

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Dave Freer



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Summary: In an alternate 1976 dominated by coal power and the British Empire, Clara Calland and her mother, an important scientist, embark on a treacherous journey toward freedom in Westralia aboard a smugglers' submarine, the *Cuttlefish*, pursued by Menshevik spies and Imperial soldiers.

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*To my beloved Goddaughters, Emily and Teagan.
May your stars always burn bright and cast a wide and beautiful light.*

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

No book is ever just poured out of an author. *Cuttlefish* is no different in that respect anyway. It owes its existence to my agent, Mike Kabongo, and to my editor, Lou Anders. Lou is the kind of editor most new authors dream they'll get when they venture into being published, and I'm glad it's happened to me at last.

The *Cuttlefish* is the submarine you get when a scientist spends too much time talking to an inventor about ways to do things in a coal-powered universe. I love talking to a guy who doesn't say "You can't do that," but helps me think of ways that allow me to do it plausibly. Thank you, Peter.

And always, this book would not be without Barbara.

CHAPTER 1

It was after midnight, and London's lights shimmered on the waters that had once been her streets. Something dark moved down there, in the murky depths. Bubbles of smoke belched up in its wake. No one was likely to notice. The still, warm air already reeked of coal smoke, and the rotting ooze lying down on the drowned street that had once been Landsdown Way bubbled anyway.

The dark shadow crept onwards into Wandsworth Canal, and down into Nine Elms Waterway, and then slipped through the rotting concrete teeth into the deep channel.

Like the rest of the crew of the *Cuttlefish*, Tim Barnabas let out a sigh of relief. He knew all about the dangers of the Stockwell tube run—dead trees, fallen masonry, and, of course, the chance of detection in the relatively shallow waters of London's street-canals. Even though the submarines of the Underpeople did this run often, it was still the most risky part of their journey.

“Up snuiver, Seaman,” said Captain Malkis. “Let's breathe before we head down-channel.”

Tim worked the brass crank with a will, sending the breathing pipe to the surface of the Thames.

He swallowed hard to sort out the effect of the pressure change on his ears.

And then an explosion rocked the *Cuttlefish*. Rang the sub like a bell. Tim could hear nothing. But he saw Captain Malkis push the dive levers to full.

A blast of water sprayed out of the snuiver outlet, soaking them

all, before the cutoff valve closed it off. The *Cuttlefish* settled onto the bottom of the dredged channel. No one moved or spoke. Tim's ears still rang, but he could hear sounds again, and saw the captain signal to the Marconi man hunched protectively over the dials and valves of his wireless set. The Marconi operator nodded, wound his spooler, and sent an aerial wire up to the surface.

Tim watched the man's face in the dim glow of the battery lights. His expression grew increasingly bleak. He flicked the dial expertly to another frequency. Then the Marconi operator pulled the headphones off. "I got the Clapham Common sender first. Transmission cut out after an SOS. I picked up Parson's Green. They weren't even sending coded messages. Just reports that Stockwell's been blown, and Clapham had reported that they were under attack by men of the Royal Inniskillen Fusiliers, before they went off air, Captain. And I picked up a signal on the Royal Navy calling channel. The HMS *Mornington* and the HMS *Torquay* are ordered to start laying dropping mines in the Thames Channel from Blackfriars Point to Rotherhithe Bay. The captain of the *Mornington* was getting mighty shirty about the operation not running according to orders, and him still being below Plumstead Shoal and not on station."

Captain Malkis's face showed no trace of expression. They all knew that the Inniskillens were Duke Malcolm's special troops. As the chief of Imperial Intelligence, the duke had made them into a regiment to be feared. "Get the aerial and the snuiver down, crewmen." He turned to the engine-room speaker tube. "Chief Engineer. I'll have all the power that you can give us. Mr. Mate." He turned to First Mate Werner. "You work out our time to the mouth of the Lea. We'll see how they like risking their ships in the Cannington shallows."

"Captain . . . should we not go back?" asked the first mate, his voice cracking, his heavy Dutch accent even thicker than usual.

"No, Mr. Mate," said Malkis. "It's us . . . or rather our passenger, that they're after. It's just as well that we set our departure forward as soon as the Callands arrived."

Tim cranked the snuiver in. He could feel the heavy, slow thump of the *Cuttlefish's* engines picking up speed. The breathing pipe clicked home. "Snuiver down, Captain," he said, trying to keep his voice as controlled as the ship's master. It quavered slightly. But he didn't scream. He didn't say, "My mam. I need to go back to the tunnels to see if she's all right," although those were the words that wanted out, and his fear dried his mouth and made it hard to speak.

"Good lad, Barnabas," said the captain, as if this was something that happened every day. "Get down to Chief Barstone in the engine room. He'll have work for an extra greaser if he's going to keep the engines running at this speed."

"Aye, aye, sir." Tim did his best to salute without bumping any of the brass instruments that protruded into the small bridge space.

He turned to leave. "Barnabas." The captain's voice halted him. "Sir." Tim halted.

"The Underpeople have more tunnels, and locks, and secret ways than the king's men know about, boy," the captain said, reaching out to squeeze his shoulder gently but firmly. "It's our home, our territory; we know it. It's not the first time Duke Malcolm's had a go at us. And it won't be the last. Now get along with you."

Tim swallowed. Nodded. He couldn't actually say anything, because his voice was too choked up. He turned away before the captain could see the tears starting, and hurried along the narrow gangway, and then down the ladder to the lower deck. At the base of it he nearly ran smash into something that had no place on a submarine.

A girl. A girl in a flouncy dress with silly little puff sleeves. Honestly! Where did she think she was? On a pleasure barge cruising along Pall Mall Canal?

"Hi, hold on," she said, grabbing his arm as he tried to squirm past. Her blue eyes were bright and wide with excitement, and one of her pale blonde plaits had come undone. She brushed the fine hair away from her eyes, "What's going on?" she asked, smiling at him.

"I'm busy," he said gruffly, hoping that he'd wiped all trace of the tears away. "Got to get to the engine room."

"Oh, it's so important that you are," she said, teasingly. "Just tell me what the bang was?"

"The Inniskillens blowing up my home," he said fiercely as he pulled his arm free and blundered on, blinded by the tears again, down the passage.



Clara Calland stared after him. She nearly ran after him too, to ask him what he meant. But . . . horrible snotty London boy. He'd looked nice, with a bit of a grin on his brownish face, when she'd seen him earlier, bringing their two small valises to the cabin. And he'd helped to carry Mother's book trunk. When you considered the size of the cabin, maybe it was just as well they'd had to leave everything behind.

She considered going up the ladder to find someone else to ask. But . . . it sounded like trouble. More trouble. She'd been so relieved when they had finally got out of the smelly, wet tunnels under London, and into this strange submarine. The whole idea just fascinated her. Of course, submarines were something she'd heard stories about, and hadn't ever expected to really experience. They were illegal, banned in all civilized countries. Yet . . . everyone knew they existed. One of the girls from school, one of the Cashel sisters, claimed that she'd once seen one in Tralee Bay. Which was possible . . . anything could happen down in Kerry. It was crock full of rebels, down there, like Cork used to be before most of the city got drowned. She swallowed. Daddy had once let slip that his trips away had taken him to Kerry. She'd said that she hoped he was safe from those rebel scum. He'd just tousled her hair and laughed. That was before the men from Scotland Yard had come and taken him to the New East Barracks military prison, to be detained indefinitely at His Majesty's pleasure.

She stared blindly down the narrow little passage. She didn't want to be here. She wanted her old, familiar life back again. Mother and Dad together again, home and school and . . .

That was where it broke down. Clara, who always tried to be honest with herself, had to admit that she did not want her school life back. Nor did she want to go back to the tall, cold house on Redmond Street that they'd been living in when her life had suddenly turned upside down.

So, instead, she went back through the narrow little steel door and climbed up onto her bunk in their broom-cupboard-sized cabin. On the bed below, her mother was asleep, the deep sleep of absolute exhaustion, and, Clara realised, of relief.

Clara lay down on the thin horse-hair mattress and thought back about just how they'd ended up here. Parts of it cut at her like a knife.