Prologue - New Bond Street 2015

The boy moves back into the shadow of the doorway. The traffic and street noise is still a little unsettling, but except for the occasional curious gaze from a passerby, he doesn't seem to have attracted much attention. Creeping forward again to the shop door, he watches the man in the building opposite.

'I think this is the item you were looking for, sir.' The assistant places the box on the counter and smiles, holding out a pair of white cotton gloves. 'If you wouldn't mind?'

The man at the window nods. He glances across the street and wonders if the child is still there. He half-smiles and moves back to the counter. 'Of course.' Pulling on the gloves, he peers at the writing across the top of the flat white box:

Bonhams Auctioneers
Item 35 - Assorted unpublished letters
- Dickens, Charles (unsigned) 1.

Breathing slowly and taking the most extraordinary care, he opens the protective cover, gently folds back the layer of tissue paper and picks up the letter. For a long moment he simply looks at it. Then with a quick glance up at the assistant, he begins to read.

The young woman takes a few steps to one side, so as not to crowd the customer as he peruses the document. She makes a quiet show of busying herself rearranging pamphlets on the countertop. Nevertheless, she can't resist casting a quick look in his direction and for the second time, raises an eyebrow at his rather unusual garb - black cloak, matching felt hat, high leather boots - it certainly adds a touch of eccentricity. She wonders if he's famous.

'You're sure it's genuine?' the man asks, a moment later.

'Oh yes,' says the assistant. 'The handwriting and paper have been analyzed. There's no doubt.'

He places the letter back into its box, covers it over with the tissue paper and takes off the white gloves. 'And the contents of the letter have not been copied at all?'

'The contents?'

'My apologies, I mean to say, the actual wording of the letter. Has it been copied?'

The young woman appears puzzled for a moment - she's only been in this department a month and isn't sure what the procedure is. 'Oh, I suppose it has. There's a photograph of the letter in our brochure, and I'm sure we'll have a note of the actual text of the document...somewhere...'

'A photograph? Of course, of course, how stupid of me.' He frowns and seems lost in thought for a second, then nods to himself. 'It is no matter. And the auction is this afternoon?'

'Yes. Two o'clock.'

'Thank you for your time.' He lifts his hat cordially, then turns and strides back to the main entrance.

As the stranger walks briskly down the street, the boy in the doorway across the road moves away from his hiding place. He keeps well back, and begins to follow...
Chapter 1 - Cheap Syde, 385 Years Earlier

'Master Fennel!
Something wet and heavy lands with a thump on his chest. If Tom hadn't been fully awake before, he certainly is now. He sits up and blinks. The heavy wet thing falls into his lap and he sees that it's a faded brown leather boot, plastered with mud. 'Oh no,' he murmurs. 'Savidge.'

'Master Fennel. Mar-Stah-Fen-Nel.' The voice is beginning to sound more than a little irritated. A shaft of light from the half-open shutters slides across the floor and over the counterpane, highlighting the faded pattern. Tom jumps out of bed and picking up the boot, walks over the bare floorboards to the window. Pulling his nightshirt down to a respectable length, he heaves the shutters fully open, flooding the small attic room with light. The sun is above the skyline already. Tom leans over the windowsill, blinking in the sudden brightness.

Savidge stands directly beneath the overhanging window, glaring upwards. His face is rather more beetroot-coloured than usual and he is balancing quite gracefully on one foot in a manner Tom would have admired if Savidge had been anyone else. As it is, Savidge is not a person to be admired at any time of day, and as Savidge is fond of saying, 'Savidge is as Savidge does' (whatever that means). Tom judges that this is not a time for compliments. This is a time for good manners.

'Good morning, Mister Savidge, sir.'

'Well, hey and a ho, the sleeping 'ave arisen,' Savidge announces with a loud burp. 'And excuse I,' he continues 'for 'aving deigned to cast a boot in your general direction. Pleasant dream?' He draws a wide, leering smile then drops the hint of joviality and demands 'What of the clock do you s'ppose this hour might be, sir?'

Tom leans forward and cranes his neck in the direction of the church tower whose gleaming white clock-face peeks between the houses at the end of the lane. 'Er, two minutes after seven, I believe, Mister Savidge sir,' he says with a hopeful grin.

'Don't you smile that cunnin' little smile at me, Master Fennel,' barks Savidge. 'I'll not be for taming today. You sort your body and 'ead together and show some liveliness afore I take a leather to your backside. And throw down my boot, if it ain't too much trouble,'

Tom drops the muddied boot into Savidge's outstretched hand. Savidge catches it and swings himself around into a position that allows him to lean against the wall of the house in order to replace the aforementioned item. Then, stamping both feet on the ground as if to verify that he is once more fully dressed, Savidge cocks his head to one side. Without looking up, he shouts 'Still there?'

Tom quickly pulls his head inside the room and runs to the dresser by his bed. Lifting the jug out of the bowl, he pours a small amount of water, takes a deep breath and with a quick movement, splashes his face and neck. Grabbing a cloth from the hook by the door, he scrubs himself dry.

Less than a minute later, he's snatched up the old leather satchel he always carries and is through the door to the street where he finds Savidge glaring down at him from the top seat of the cart. 'Well, good day to you, sir' he says, wiping a stubbly chin with the mucky sleeve of his topcoat. 'Thought we’d lost ye to the world.' The man gestures for Tom to climb aboard the cart and barely has he done so than it begins to lurch away up the lane.

Across the way, watching from a darkened room above the cobbler's shop, a man leans forward and gently opens the casement. The bowed windows and jettied structure of the upper storey allow him to peer along the narrow thoroughfare and watch Savidge's cart as it trundles up the cobbled street. When the lopsided vehicle eventually disappears around the corner, the man pulls the window shut and turns his attention to the fair-haired girl pushing
open the door to the house that Tom has just vacated. He watches for a few minutes. When she comes out again, he waits for a moment, then hurries down the stairs.

Savidge says nothing as the cart sways through the busy streets and alleyways of Cheap Syde. Tom gazes around as marketeers plying their wares, call out to passersby 'Eight apples a penny,' 'Get 'em hot, freshly baked, all golden brown,' 'Fresh milk, from the cow to your door.' Tom smiles at the baker’s wife, Mistress Price, as she clutches a basket to her side and waves a loaf in the face of a passing labourer. 'Don’t ye know a good feast when ye see it Mister Whiteman?' The man grunts a reply and shoos her away. Mistress Price catches Tom’s eye and winks. 'How’s your mammy, my lad?'

'She is well, thank you,' calls Tom as the cart clatters past and turns another corner.

Tom knows better than to ask where they are headed. Besides, he doesn't want to remind Savidge that he's overslept. His employer, however, seems intent on driving - he whips the poor horse frequently, and snarls and burps alternately as the cart trundles along.

The cart rattles through the narrow streets turning this way and that, avoiding the worst parts of the road where rubbish and human waste have been carelessly thrown from windows and doors during the night. At Bellyns Gate, Savidge suddenly pulls hard to the left and squeezes the trap down a narrow passage between a tavern and a row of dilapidated dwelling houses. The cart's wheels scrape against the tavern wall on one side as the lane becomes narrower. Savidge reigns in the horse.

Tom sniffs the air. A cool summer breeze wafts through his hair, but the stench of the Thames in his nostrils forces him to turn his face away from the direction of the river in the hope of avoiding the ghastly aroma.

'Don't you be goin' nowhere, boy,' says Savidge over his shoulder, before clambering down. Tom watches him walk over to a doorway where a barefoot boy is sitting on a step polishing boots. Savidge gives the lad a kick, pushes past him and bangs on the door.

After a moment, the door swings open and a head peers out. The head is attached to a long scrawny neck that widens out into an equally scrawny body. A hand slides up and scratches an ear. Then the head turns right, left, then up and down, perusing his visitor, the cart, and Tom, before the young man rolls his shoulders forward as if to suggest the examination is over and business may now commence.

'Spectin’ you an hour ago,' he grumbles. Savidge makes a dismissive noise and follows him into the house. As the door slams shut, the boy on the step looks up and stares at Tom. Tom smiles. The boy continues to stare, a vacant expression on his face.

'Hello. D'you live here?' asks Tom.

The boy stares at him for a little while longer before giving a shake of the head. He goes back to cleaning the large black boots on his lap.

Tom is used to waiting around for Savidge, so it is no trouble to him to occupy his time. He reaches into his bag and pulls out the stick man he made a few days earlier, during another such waiting period. He stands the wooden puppet on the side of the cart and walks it along the edge, making grumping noises in the manner of Savidge.

'Hmph Harr, Oi’m a silly man, Oi am...' he says. He walks the puppet back again and notices the boy on the step is watching. Tom holds the toy out to him. 'You can have it if you like. I can easy make another.'

The boy stares for a moment then with a quick glance to make certain the door to the house is still shut, he jumps up and scurries over to the front of the cart, his face level with the edge of Savidge's seat.

'Here,' says Tom, holding it out. Gingerly, the boy reaches out a hand and cautiously pokes the puppet, as if it might bite him. He grins, then grabbing it, runs back to the step, pushing the toy into a hole under the stone steps. He looks up at Tom again. His smile has gone, but Tom knows he's made a friend.
A few minutes later, Savidge appears in the doorway, thrusting a piece of paper into one of the large pockets of his coat. He rubs his face, kicks the small boy again and ambles back to the cart. Heaving himself up onto the seat, he cuffs Tom across the back of the head with a mucky hand and mutters something about moving. The words are almost incomprehensible, but Tom knows what to do - he climbs down over the back of the cart and runs the short distance to the end of the lane. Waving at Savidge that all's clear, he moves out of the way as the cart begins to edge backwards out of the alley. A moment later they're heading towards Savidge's yard.

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The man with the beard gathers up the four volumes he's been examining for the past half hour, and makes his way back along the narrow passage of dusty bookshelves to the front of the shop. Placing the books on the table, he peers down at the proprietor over the top of his eye-glasses.

'Oh, sir, beggin' your pardon,' says the little woman on the high stool. 'All at sevens and eights this mornin' I am, all at sevens and eights.' She beams up at him, her three prominent front teeth sticking up like tiny gravestones in the burial ground that is her unfortunate mouth.

The man smiles benignly and takes a step backwards, the better to remove himself from her breath. 'Indeed, Mistress Moses, I am at pains to disturb you, engrossed as you are in what I assume is Carew's Second Edition...? However...' He waves a reproving finger at her.

The old woman blushes, stammers and in her confusion, drops the book she's holding. 'Oh, sir, do you know, I was not even thinking, sir, not even thinking.' She scrambles around under the table, retrieving the book of poems.

'Then you have not forgotten when that particular volume is to be published?'

The little woman gazes up at him with a shamefaced half smile. 'Oh sir, I do believe this one will be available twelve years hence, if I'm not mistaken.' Then as an afterthought, adds 'As you did tell me so yourself, sir.' She gives him another toothy grin.

'Then you are aware of the moratorium I place on such volumes?'

Mistress Moses thinks for a moment. 'Oh, well, ah, sir...' she tries.

'What I mean is, as I have clearly stated to your husband on several occasions, this book,' he taps the edge of the volume with a long finger. 'This book and others like it, cannot ever be passed on to members of the mere public. For obvious reasons.'

'Yes, sir, I do know that sir,' she says, 'and I am humbly sorry, so I am. My dear 'usband, er Mister Moses, will no doubt put me over his knee and give me what for when he learns of my indes...inders...indstid...when he finds out, Mister Deacon, sir.'

Martin Deacon shudders and shakes his head in an effort to clear the bizarre image from his mind. 'I don't think that will be required, but I would be obliged if in future you might refrain from reading such volumes in full view of the general community.' He waves a hand at the two pairs of narrow casements where passersby could observe, if they stood very close to one of the small diamond-shaped panes, Mistress Moses and her book. (Deacon is aware, of course, that even the most keen-eyed onlooker would be hard pressed to discern the title of the volume she has been perusing through the grimy window, but this small fact is not the point).

'Of course, sir.' She pauses, as if awaiting further reprisals. When none arrive, she coughs and gathers up the books on the table, making a note of each title in a thick ledger. 'On approval, as usual, sir?' she asks, without looking up.

'As usual, Mistress Moses.' Deacon watches her illegible scrawl as it scratches its way across the page, then raising his head, looks out of the window. He gazes up at the wooden sign swinging at right-angles above the shop, stating the legend:
He idly wonders if it's worth his trouble enquiring after the health of Mister Moses, and when that same gentleman might be expected to return to the proprietor's chair, but as this would merely give the man's wife another reason to breathe on him, he puts the idea out of his head.

Bidding a good day to the little woman, Deacon is about to step out into the street once more, when a thought occurs to him. 'By the by, Mistress Moses, what happened to that boy? The one who used to run errands and so forth for your husband?'

'Dead, sir,' she replies. 'The fever. Two months past.'

'Ah, that's a shame,' Deacon says. 'I have use for an honest lad.' He sighs, wondering exactly what 'the fever' means. These days it seems the phrase is a catch-all for every illness, from smallpox to the plague. Oh, well...

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On Boo Lane, Savidge heaves the cart into a sharp turning, under a rickety archway and through into the courtyard that houses his business emporium. Reining in the horse, the big man clambers down and ambles across the cluttered space into the building laughingly referred to as 'the office'. The shambolic structure fills one side of the yard and slants at such a crooked angle that imminent collapse is always a strong possibility. Tom unfastens the horse and leads the animal into the stable at the other side of the yard.

The office is constructed from various items Savidge has collected over the years and consists mainly of rotten wood, and extremely rotten wood. It is rectangular and wide enough to hold a table, three chairs and a bookcase, as well as various tools and sundry objects that Savidge is certain are bound to come in handy, eventually. Outside is a rough fence with a gateless opening large enough to allow the cart access. Above this aperture, in a crude attempt at creating an archway (and likewise constructed of rotten wood) is a badly-painted sign that reads:

_Ambrose Savidge - Antyquities and Artifacts_

Tom isn't sure what either of these things are, but he does know that the nature of his employer's business tends to involve doing things that aren't necessarily legal.

Pulling out a few handfuls of hay from the wooden rack above him, Tom scatters it around the stable and gives the animal a pat on its nose. Then, knowing Savidge will be wondering where he's got to, he walks across the yard.

Though the sun is high in the sky, the office, as always, is dark and damp. Savidge has lit the lamp that stands on the bookcase and the sooty aroma fills Tom's nostrils as he closes the door behind him. On the table lies the sheet of paper from Savidge's pocket. It shows some kind of plan drawn in pencil. Savidge lifts down a bottle of port from the bookcase, helping himself to a generous measure, which he pours into a pewter tankard. He looks up as Tom sits down on one of the other chairs.

'Did I say you could avail yourself of my chair? Did I, Master Fennel?' he grunts. 'Cos I certain don't recall that partic'lar phrase passin' my lips.'

Tom stands up again. 'Sorry Mister Savidge.'

Savidge waves a hand, signifying it doesn't matter. Tom sits down again. Savidge is peering at the plan in front of him, screwing up his big, watery eyes as if this will somehow improve his vision. He leans forward til his nose is only inches from the paper, then mutters about the
poor quality of the document. Finally, he turns the whole thing around and pushes it across to the boy. Eyes ain't what they used to be. See that, can yer, Master Fennel?' He points a grubby finger at something in the middle of the plan.

Tom leans forward to look. 'Yes,' he says. 'I think so.'

Savidge slams a hand onto the table, making Tom jump. 'Well? What'n it bleedin' say, then?'

'Oh,' Tom leans forward again. 'The street name? I think it's...Church Square.'

Savidge's face creases in a puzzled frown. He sits back in his chair and seems to be ruminating on something, then 'Oh, yes. Course, I know it, off thingby street round the corner from...Chauncery Lane? Yes, I do know it, indeed, I do.' He gazes across at Tom. A grunt, then 'Suppose you'n be wantin' somethin' to eat, for all the hard work you ain't done, eh?'

Tom nods. He hasn't eaten since the previous evening and his stomach is doing a fair job of letting him know how empty it is.

'Right, then,' says Savidge. 'Nag's Head, at the double.' He stands up and marches out, with Tom close at his heels.

The Nag's Head is near Blacke Fryers, a markedly foul-smelling district, and is as run-down a public house as Tom has ever seen. It isn't Savidge's usual haunt, but Tom thinks this might be due to his employer's habit of not paying his debts, rather than a simple change of scenery. He sits down on an upturned barrel near the doorway, while Savidge ventures inside. Several minutes pass before the man emerges with a tankard in one hand and a plate in the other. He hands the plate to Tom and wanders back inside.

Tom looks doubtfully at the contents of his plate. He is almost sure that it is actual food, but precisely which category it might fall into, he wouldn't care to consider. He searches through his satchel in the vain hope there may be something more appetizing in amongst his pencils, notebooks and bits of string. Nothing. Reluctantly, he turns his attention back to the sorry-looking mess on his plate. By the time he's finished eating, Savidge has returned with two tankards of beer. He gives one to Tom and sits down next to him on the barrel.

'Goin' up to Spittle Feyldes after to pick up somethin', then we'll be doin' that other thing tonight.'

Tom groans inwardly. That means he won't be home until after midnight, or later. He knows his mother will worry, even though she well knows what Savidge is like. 'What is the other thing, Mister Savidge?' he asks.

Savidge shakes his head. 'Don't matter what it is, do it? Just a job, same as everything else, s'far as you're concerned.' He drinks greedily from the mug and wipes his mouth on the lapel of his coat. He sniffs. 'Pickin' up a few books an' things, that's all.'

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By the time Sarah has finished her deliveries for Mistress Price, the sun is low on the horizon and the streets around Cheap Syde are becoming gloomy. In the small house next to the baker's, Sarah's mother is lighting the candles. The woman looks up as Sarah places her bonnet carefully on the table, and smiles as the girl extracts a small loaf from the front pocket of her apron.

'Oh, thankyou, sweetheart,' says Mistress Fennel, taking the bread. 'You're back early - must've been quick on your feet today?'

Sarah nods and smiles. She forms her fingers into a shape and gives her mother a questioning look.

'No, 'fraid I don't know where your brother is. I called 'im afore I went to the market this mornin', but I ain't seen him since. 'Spect he'll be along presently.'

Sarah moves her fingers into another shape and bares her teeth.
'Yes, well, that Savidge has a lot to answer for I'll be bound, but he's always brought Tom home by midnight. S'ppose we ought to be grateful he brings 'im home at all.' She pulls the child to her and holds her close, gazing down at her daughter's clear green eyes. 'Oh my dear, don't know what I'd do without the pair of you...' She plants a kiss on the top of Sarah's head then waves her away. 'Let's see what we've got in the pantry, eh?'

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The house on Church Square is set back from the other houses, with short, well-kept lawns on either side of the path. Savidge has brought along an oil lamp, but even so, it is too dark to see very much. Tom, however, knows the routine. Whenever they 'visit' people at this time of night, Savidge concocts some fairy-tale for Tom's benefit as to why they oughtn't to just knock at the door - usually it's something like: the master of the house, who's terribly ill and can't be disturbed, has left instructions that Savidge should nevertheless continue with the business of his visit. Then he and Tom have to find a side entrance, which of course is also locked, and Savidge goes through the pretense of wondering how to get the door open. Naturally, he is always surprised to suddenly find some small device about his person that enables them to gain access (Savidge will, of course apologize to his host at some point in the future for any damage caused by this irregular means of entry).

Given that they both know exactly what's going to happen, it has always been a puzzle to Tom that Savidge continues this rigmarole of pretence - the man must surely know it's a pointless charade? Tom wonders if it might be a means of his employer satisfying himself that, should difficulties arise, he cannot be accused of leading his young protégé astray. On the other hand, thinking about it now, perhaps it has more to do with ensuring that he, Tom, would be unable to give specific details about Savidge's plans to anyone else (should anyone else ever ask).

There are many habits of Savidge's that could be thought of as odd, muses Tom, as they make their way up the path to the front door, and he's often pondered on what the cause of this particular one might be. The way he looks at Tom sometimes is a little disconcerting - a long, almost mournful stare - as if the man is attempting to convey some thought or feeling to the boy with his eyes. Or perhaps he has something to say but doesn't know how to say it? Tom's usual conclusion is that Savidge is guilty of some transgression that gives him cause to worry that the boy might take revenge on him.

To begin with, when Tom found himself dragged out of full-time study into a life of long hours and little reward, he'd told himself Savidge had taken him on as a service to his partner, Tom's father, who, the man claimed, had let Savidge down badly on some business deal. Tom has begun to realize, however, that this cannot be the case, as his father would never have got involved in the sort of business that Savidge refers to as 'an honest day's work'.

A tap on the shoulder interrupts Tom's thoughts as Savidge points to the front door where they now stand. 'Tch, will yer look at that!' he mutters, holding the lamp up to the door. 'Locked.' Savidge grumbles about his client having made an appointment at a ridiculous hour and now it appears the household is fast asleep. 'Oh, well, we'll just 'ave to find some other way in, eh lad?' He closes the metal gate on the lamp so there's only a faint light emitting from the device.

Having levered open a side door, Savidge's usual make-believe mutterings continue until they're inside the house. The darkness crowds in on them as they begin to work their way through the lower floor to wherever it is they're headed. A house of this size, thinks Tom, as they creep along the passage from the scullery, must surely have servants. They'd be the last to retire of an evening and would probably be the most likely to hear intruders. He wonders
what will happen if they're caught. This thought reminds him of an incident when the parish constables caught a man breaking into a house on Moregate. The man claimed he was only trying to feed his family, but a week later they heard the poor soul had been hanged at Tyburn.

Savidge leads the way into a room near the back of the building. The large door creaks open and they find themselves in darkness. Savidge fiddles around with the lamp, turning up the wick to give them as much light as was possible. A moment later, the glistening flame illuminates the room. Tom gazes around at the tall dark shelving and the decorated leather spines of the books that reflect the lamplight in the darkness. Tom has never seen so many books - they line the walls and fill almost every available space, crammed together in an unending row of words.

Savidge pulls a piece of paper from his pocket and hands it to Tom. 'There yer go, get to work and find these.'

Tom peers at the list, trying to make out the lettering. Most of the two dozen or so names are ones Tom hasn't heard of, but one or two are vaguely familiar. Underneath the last name, in large urgent lettering, are the words:

New Bookes Onlie! Any Titles!

Poor lighting and pressure of time won't allow him to examine publishing details, so Tom isn't sure how he's supposed to know if a book is new or not. He decides to take only those that have clean covers and are in very good condition. He scans the spines of the books nearest to him and begins to work his way along the shelves. Luckily, someone has placed them in alphabetical order of author, so it doesn't take long to find the first one: Thomas Dekker.

The next name on the list doesn't seem to be there, but the one after that is an author Tom has heard of - Ben Jonson. He finds two stage plays that have blue covers and hands them to Savidge, who is watching him carefully. Eleven more books are quickly located and make their way into the sack. Glancing back at the paper, he has another look for titles by the remaining writers, thinking these ones might have been moved, or misplaced, or be kept separately from the rest. Then he notices one section of shelving is different from the other shelves. In the dim light, he can see that the wood is darker, older maybe, but there's also something odd about the way these books are lined up - not in neat lines like the others, but all higgledy-piggledy. Pulling one out indiscriminately, Tom runs his fingers over the green leather cover and gazes at the title. Then, looking along the spines of the books next to the space where this one belongs, he realizes what the problem is - all the volumes in this section are in a completely random order.

'Come on, boy, 'urry up!' Savidge grunts at him, prompting Tom to drop the book he's holding into the sack. Savidge gives him the bag and lamp to hold, and then he gently tips two chairs over onto the floor, followed by a small table and a statue. He looks around, pulls a few books from the shelves and drops them here and there on the ground as if they've been thrown down in a hurry. Then, working his way around the room, he slides his fingers along the edges of the bookshelves, tapping the wood here and there. He does the same thing around the edges of the mantelpiece and the windowsill. Finally, he seems satisfied and nods to Tom.

Two minutes later they're back outside and heading for the cart. Tom wonders why the books they've taken are so important - it certainly isn't the sort of thing they'd usually be
interested in. Perhaps these ones are particularly valuable, or rare? Whatever it is, Tom knows they'll fetch a good price, as Savidge is definitely not a man to waste his time on tat.

Clambering back into the cart, they stow their plunder in a metal trunk in the back, but neither Tom nor his employer notice the shadowy form watching them from the corner. As the vehicle lurches up the lane away from the square, the figure steps out of the gloom and makes a signal with a gloved hand. A jet-black coach pulled by two grey mares rolls out of a side street. A moment later the carriage sets off, quietly tailing Tom, Savidge and their illicit goods along the dark lane.