



THEY GOT BACK in plenty of time for tea, which was eggs, chips and sausages, with swiss-roll and ice-cream for pudding. Afterwards everybody went upstairs to put on tracksuits and trainers. Mrs Marriott was taking them for a game of rounders on the sands. Lisa would be missing out, because of the apologies she had to write.

Gary Bazzard's room was one floor below Fliss's. Number seven. When she came down the stairs he was standing in the doorway showing something to a group of his friends, who were making admiring

noises. As Fliss passed he called out, 'How about this, Fliss?'

She glanced in his direction. He was holding up the biggest stick of rock she'd ever seen. She didn't like him much, and would have loved to walk on with her nose in the air, but the pink stick really was enormous: nearly a metre long and about four centimetres thick. She stopped. 'Where the heck did you get that from?' she asked, in what she hoped was a scornful voice.

'Shop on the quay. One pound fifty. No one saw me 'cause I stuck it down my jeans' leg.' His friends gasped and chuckled at his daring.

Fliss pulled a face. 'You're nuts. One pound fifty? I wouldn't give you fifty pence for it.'

'You wouldn't get chance.'

'It'll rot your teeth, so there.'

'You're only jealous.'

'I'm not. I hope Mr Hepworth catches you and hits you on the head with it.'

It was a good game of rounders. It was more fun than it might have been, because the tide was coming in and the strip of sand they were playing on grew narrower and narrower. People kept hitting the ball into the sea, and some of the fielders had to play barefoot so that they could retrieve it. Finally the pitch became so restricted that play was impossible. They wrapped up the game, retreated to the top of one of the concrete buttresses which protected the foot of the cliff and sat, watching the tide come in.

Cocoa and biscuits were served in the lounge at half-past eight. The children sat sipping and munching while twilight fell outside and Mrs Evans read them a story. Lisa came down with her written apologies. Mr Hepworth read them, nodded, and gave her back her torch. It was nine o'clock. Bedtime.

Fliss was tired, but she couldn't sleep. It was fun at first, lying in the dark, talking with Marie and the twins, but one by one they drifted off to sleep and she was left listening to the muffled noises that rose from the boys' room below. After a while these too stopped, and then there was only the occasional creak, and the rhythmic shush of the sea.

She lay staring at the ceiling, waiting for her eyes to get tired. If

the lids grew heavy enough they'd close, and then she'd drift off. She wouldn't even know she was lying in the dark, and when she woke up it would be morning and the first night – the worst night – would be over.

Phantom lights swam across her field of vision, lazily, like shoals of tiny fish. She watched them, but they failed to lull her, and presently it came to her that she would have to go to the bathroom.

She listened. If somebody else was awake somewhere it would be easier. A boy on the floor below perhaps, or one of the teachers. She looked at her watch. 23.56. Four minutes to midnight. Surely somebody was still about – the Wilkin-

sons, locking up for the night, or Mr Hepworth making a final patrol.

Silence. In all the world, only Fliss was awake. She listened to the steady breathing of the other three girls. Why couldn't one of them have been a snorer? If somebody had been snoring she could have given them a shake. A policeman going by outside would be better than nothing – his footsteps might make her feel safe. But there was no policeman. There wasn't even a car.

The bed creaked as she sat up and swung her legs out. She listened. Nothing. The steady breathing continued. She hadn't disturbed anybody. Perhaps she'd have to put the light on to find the door – that would wake them. But no. There was moonlight and the curtains

were thin and she could see quite clearly. It would be most unfair to wake them with the light.

She stood up and crept towards the door. There was sand in the carpet. A floorboard creaked and she paused, hopefully. One of the twins stirred, mumbling, and Fliss whispered, 'Maureen? Joanne?' but there was no response.

She opened the door a crack and looked out. The only illumination came from a small window on the half-landing below. It was minimal. She could make out the dark shapes of the doors but not the pattern on the carpet. The air had a musty smell and felt cold.

As she hesitated for a moment in the doorway, peering into the gloom and listening, she became

aware of a faint sound – the snuffling, grunting noise of somebody snoring beyond the door of room eleven. She found it oddly reassuring, and crossed the landing quickly in case it should stop.

Re-crossing a minute later with the hiss of the toilet cistern in her ears, she could still hear it. It seemed louder, and was accompanied now by a thin, whimpering noise, like crying. Fliss pulled a face. Somebody feeling homesick. Not Lisa, surely?

The idea that her friend might be in distress made her forget her fear for a moment. She took a couple of steps towards room eleven, unsure of what she intended to do. As she did so, she became aware that the noise was not coming from that

room at all, but from the one next to it – the cupboard. Her eyes flicked to its door. On it, visible in the midnight gloom, was the number thirteen.

She recoiled, covering her mouth with her hand. When she had asked Mrs Marriott what lay beyond that door, there had been no number on it. She knew there hadn't, yet there it was. Thirteen. And somebody was in there. Somebody, or some thing.

She backed away. The hissing of the cistern dwindled and ceased. The other sounds continued, and now the whimpering was more persistent, and the snuffling had a viscous quality to it, like a pig rooting in mud.

She retreated slowly, holding her breath. When she reached the doorway of her own room she backed through it, feeling for the doorknob and keeping her eyes fixed on the door of room thirteen. Once inside, she closed the door quickly, crossed to her bed and lay staring at the ceiling while spasms shook her body.

Much later, when the shivering had stopped and she was drifting to sleep, she thought she heard stealthy footsteps on the landing, but when she woke at seven with the sun in her face and her friends' excited chatter in her ears, she wondered whether she might have dreamed it all.