



IT WAS NEARLY eleven o'clock before the girls in room ten stopped talking and three of them fell asleep. Fliss lay absolutely still, listening to their breathing, and almost drifted off herself. When she realized what was happening she shook her head, blinked rapidly and looked at her watch.

Twenty-three twenty. Ten minutes to zero. Now that it was nearly time she didn't fancy it one bit. The cold, dark landing. The door of the linen cupboard, upon which the number thirteen might at this very moment be materializing. The prospect of footfalls on the stair.

And I was the one who suggested it, she reminded herself. I must have been crazy.

Well, anyway, it was too late now. It was her plan and she was stuck with it. She squinted at her watch again. Twenty-three twenty-seven. Three minutes to zero. What she'd do was, she'd listen for the others arriving. One of the others, at least. She didn't want to be the first. She knew that if she opened the door and found herself alone on the landing, just a metre or so from that creepy cupboard, she'd have the door shut and be back under the covers so quick her feet wouldn't touch the floor.

Listen. A creak somewhere. Somewhere a tick. The house, settling. Twenty-three twenty-nine,

and no footsteps. Perhaps nobody'll turn up. Maybe they've fallen asleep. I nearly did. And if they have, it's off. There's no way I'm watching alone. No way. Please God, let them be asleep.

Zero hour, and listen – somebody's coming. Somebody's right outside the door, breathing. Waiting. And there – there goes a whisper, so there's two of them at least and they're whispering about me – asking where I am.

Asleep, that's where I am, so leave me. Let me sleep. There's three of you. You don't need me. You don't need me, do you? Do you?

Twenty-three thirty-one. Zero plus one. They're listening at the door, and they know you're not asleep. They can hear you breathing

– looking at your watch. They can hear your heart.

My idea. My plan. My own stupid fault in other words. OK, OK. I'm coming. Here I come.

She got out of bed, tiptoed across the sandy carpet and stood with her ear to the door, listening to the sounds of stealthy movement beyond. Behind her, the three girls slept on. She twisted the knob and eased the door open. It squeaked, and somebody outside went, 'Sssh!' She looked across. Three pale figures were watching her from the bathroom doorway.

'Where the heck have you been?' hissed Lisa, as Fliss joined them. 'We've been here ages.'

'Sorry. I think I must have dropped off to sleep. Is anything happening?'

She looked towards the cupboard but there was no number. Trot shook his head. 'Nothing yet. Look, let's get inside and close the door except for a crack to look through. And no more talking, right?'

They stood on the cold plastic tiles, peering over one another's shoulders. The rain which had threatened earlier was now falling. Cloud hid the moon, so that the windows on the half-landings gave almost no light. Fliss shivered, wishing she had her dressing-gown and slippers, or better still, that she was where they were, in her bedroom at home.

Somewhere a clock chimed. 'What time's that?' whispered Gary. 'I forgot my flipping watch.'

Fliss looked at hers. 'Twenty-three forty-five – quarter to twelve.'

'Good grief, is that all? It feels like we've been here for ever.' He withdrew from the doorway and walked up and down, hugging himself and shivering. Trot and Lisa drew back too, leaving Fliss to watch.

Nothing happened. After a while she said, 'Hey, how about somebody else taking a turn here? I need to get warm too.'

'I'll do it,' volunteered Lisa. Fliss went and stood on one leg beside the bath, resting a cold foot on its rim in order to massage some warmth into it. After a while she

swapped over and rubbed the other foot.

Presently they heard the distant chimes again. Midnight. They looked at one another and drifted towards the door. As they did so, Lisa let out a stifled cry and pointed. 'Look.' They looked. The cupboard was room thirteen.

'Oh, wow,' moaned Gary. 'It's real. I thought it was a dream, but it's real.'

'You scared then?' Trot's words carried a challenge, but his voice came out a croak.

'I told you, didn't I?' breathed Fliss. 'I told you it wasn't a dream.'

'Oh, Fliss,' whimpered Lisa. 'Oh, my God, what am I doing here?' Fliss put an arm round her friend and squeezed. 'It's OK, Lisa. Take it easy.'

It's just a door with a number on it, right? We don't have to go in there or anything. We don't even have to go near it, for goodness sake.' She looked at the others. 'What now?'

'Listen!' Trot was watching the stairs. 'I think someone's coming.'

'Oh, no!' Gary crammed all of his fingers in his mouth and stood, gazing at the stair-top and shaking his head.

There came the unmistakable sound of footfalls slowly ascending, and a pale shape came into view. Trot grabbed Fliss's arm. 'It's Ellie-May.'

'Sssh!'

'But shouldn't we try to stop her? Look where she's going for heaven's sake.'

'No!' Fliss shook her head. 'She's asleep, I think – sleepwalking, and you're not supposed to wake sleepwalkers. We'll watch what happens and tell the teachers in the morning.'

Lisa looked at her. 'That was part of the plan, was it?'

'Yes.' It wasn't, of course. She hadn't even considered what they might do if events reached this stage. She only knew she couldn't leave this bathroom right now to save her life. Hers, or anybody else's.

They watched. Ellie-May crossed the landing to the cupboard door and reached for the knob. She hesitated for a moment with her hand on it, then twisted and pushed. The watchers peered intently as the door swung inward, but from where

they were they couldn't see anything beyond it except darkness. They watched Ellie-May walk into that darkness and close the door.

'Phew!' Gary moved from the door again, shaking his head. 'I don't get it, Trot. What does she do in there?'

The other boy shrugged. 'I don't know, do I?'

'Does anybody fancy having a look?' whispered Lisa.

Gary looked at her. 'Do you?' She shook her head.

'I think we should wait here till she comes out,' said Fliss.

They waited. Half-past twelve came, and a quarter to one. They didn't take turns now but huddled together, watching the door through eyes that burned, while their feet

grew numb. From time to time, faint sounds reached them from beyond the door: sounds which might have made them shiver, even if they had not been cold. It was almost a quarter-past one when the noises ceased, and a few minutes after that when the door opened and Ellie-May reappeared. They watched as she closed the door, crossed the landing and slipped away down the stairs.

'Well,' breathed Gary, 'what now?'

'I vote we go get old Hepworth,' said Trot, 'and let him have a look in that cupboard.'

'No.' Fliss shook her head. 'What if Ellie-May wasn't sleepwalking at all? What if she's been up to something in there – something she shouldn't? We don't know, do we? If

we fetch Mr Hepworth we could land her in serious trouble.'

Lisa gazed at her friend. 'Ellie-May's always getting other kids in trouble,' she said. 'I don't think we should worry too much about that.'

Gary nodded. 'I'm with Lisa,' he said.

'Me too,' growled Trot. 'There's something weird going on here, Fliss. We can't keep it to ourselves. Not when Ellie-May might be in danger.'

Fliss nodded. 'OK. I wasn't suggesting we keep it to ourselves indefinitely – just till morning. I'll have a word with Ellie-May before breakfast. Tell her we saw her. Ask her what she was doing. Then, if she doesn't come up with a satis-

factory explanation we bring in the teachers. How's that?'

Gary shrugged. 'Sounds fair enough to me. Give her a chance to explain.'

'All right,' said Lisa.

'OK,' sighed Trot. 'I'm too shattered to argue anyway.'

They left the bathroom and tiptoed away to their beds, but dawn was breaking over the sea before any one of them slept.