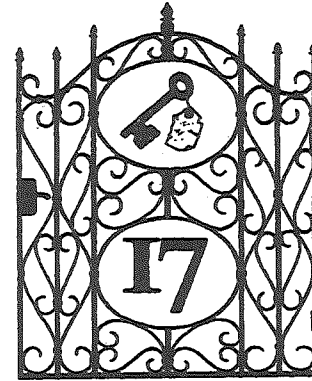


She rolled her head towards the wall, and the movement exposed the side of her neck. Fliss's eyes widened and she almost cried out. In the pale skin under Ellie-May's ear were two spots of dried blood.



As she stared at the marks on the sick girl's neck, Fliss heard footfalls on the stair. Mr Hepworth was on his way up with the key. She didn't know whether to rush out and drag him in now, or wait till he'd seen inside the cupboard. The cupboard, she decided. Once he'd had a look in there he surely wouldn't need any dragging.

She waited till he'd passed by, then left the room and followed him up. When she reached the top landing he was there, dangling a key on a piece of thick string. He said, 'Where've you been? I told you to wait here.'

'I had to go to the bathroom, Sir. I was scared to use this one.'

He looked at her and shook his head. 'Silly girl. Now watch.'

He inserted the key in the lock, twisted it and pulled. The door opened. Fliss saw darkness and hung back. The teacher beckoned. 'Come along,

Felicity – you're the one who thought we should look inside.' She moved forward and looked.

It was just a cupboard. A walk-in cupboard with a narrow gangway between tiers of shelving. Stacked neatly on the shelves were sheets, pillow-cases and towels. Two metres from the threshold, the gangway ended in a blank wall. There was nothing else.

'There you are, you see.' Mr Hepworth closed and re-locked the door. 'No bats, no monsters and no number thirteen. Does that make you feel better?'

Fliss shook her head. 'It's different at night, Sir. It changes. Could you keep the key and look tonight?'

'Certainly not!' He gave her an angry look. 'Now see here, Felicity – this nonsense has gone quite far enough. You asked me to come up here. I was busy, but I came. You asked me to fetch the key. I did. You've seen for yourself that this is just an ordinary cupboard. Either you had a nightmare in which it became something else, or this whole thing has been a silly prank dreamed up by Gary Bazzard. Either way, it stops right here. D'you understand?'

Fliss nodded, looking at the floor. There was an aching lump in her throat and she had to bite her lip to keep from crying. What about Ellie-May?

Those marks. What would he do if she mentioned them now? Go out of his tree, probably. Yet she must tell him. She must.

'Sir?'

'What is it now?' He was striding towards the stairs.

She trotted at his heels. 'Ellie-May's got blood on her neck, Sir. Dried blood.'

They began descending, rapidly. Without looking at her he said, 'Rubbish, Felicity Morgan! Absolute rubbish. One more word out of you, and you'll find yourself writing lines this evening while everybody else goes swimming. Right?'

Right. Miserably, she followed him down. Everybody was out on the pavement, waiting for them, hacking at the flagstones with the toes of their strong boots and scowling into the hallway. All except Ellie-May.

Hallway – Ellie-May – Bed – Dread.
Dead.



They walked through the old town, up the one hundred and ninety-nine steps and across the graveyard to the abbey. They were in their groups, so Fliss didn't get to talk to Lisa who, with Trot, was in Mrs Marriott's group. She talked to Gary, who these days always smelled of peppermint. She told him how she'd seen inside the cupboard, and that it was just a cupboard. She told him how sick Ellie-May looked, and about the blood on her neck. When she told him about the blood, his cheeks went pale and he whispered, 'Crikey – are you sure, Fliss?' She assured him she was, absolutely sure.

He told her he'd overheard Mrs Evans and Mr Hepworth talking. Mrs Wilkinson had been there too. They were discussing Ellie-May. Mrs Evans said she thought they should phone Ellie-May's parents. Mr Hepworth was in favour of waiting another day – it was probably just a touch of flu,

he said. Mrs Wilkinson mentioned homesickness and the change of water. It happened all the time, she assured them. Children were in and out of The Crow's Nest every week between Easter and October, and in nearly every group there was one child who grew pale and listless and lost its appetite through homesickness and the change of water.

'I didn't hear the end of it,' said Gary, 'but I think they decided to wait till tomorrow.'

Fliss scowled. 'Grown-ups are so stupid,' she muttered. 'They never believe anything you tell them. If Ellie-May goes in that cupboard again tonight it might be too late to call her parents.'

'What're we going to do? Shall I have a go at talking to old Hepworth?'

'No. I told you – he thinks the whole thing's a tale and that it was you who made it up.'

'Yeah,' sighed Gary. 'He would. I always get the blame for everything. It's the same at home.'

'When we're looking round the abbey,' said Fliss, 'they won't keep us in our groups. Let's talk to Trot and Lisa – see what they think.'

There wasn't much left of the abbey – just some crumbling sections of wall, very high in places, with tidy lawns between. There were a lot of sightseers though, including other school groups, and it was easy for Fliss and the other three to get

together behind a chunk of ancient masonry and talk. Fliss told Trot and Lisa her story, and they tossed ideas back and forth. In the end it came to this. None of the teachers would believe them, so they were on their own. They were all agreed that Ellie-May must not be allowed to enter the cupboard again, so they'd watch and if she came they'd stop her, by force if necessary.

'Right,' said Fliss. 'That's settled. Now, d'you think we can forget about Ellie-May and that ghastly cupboard, just for a few hours, and have some fun? We're supposed to be on holiday, you know.'

Gary pulled a wry face. 'It won't be easy, Fliss.'

Trot shrugged. 'I'm scared as a rat thinking about tonight, but what's the point? Fretting isn't going to make it go away, so we might as well enjoy ourselves while we can.'

'Trot's right,' said Lisa. 'We're on holiday. Let's at least explore some of these ruins before the teachers get bored and call us together.'

They split up and wandered about, gazing at the walls and the high, slender windows. Fliss tried to imagine what the place must have looked like long ago, with a roof, and stained glass, and flagstones where all this grass now grew, but it was impossible. Anyway, she told herself, I like it better as it is now. You can see the sky. There are birds,

and grass, and sunlight, and I don't like gloomy places.

She shivered.



They stayed an hour among the ruins, then assembled for the clifftop walk to Saltwick Bay. It was just after eleven o'clock. The sun, which had shone brightly as they left The Crow's Nest, was now a fuzzy pink ball. A cool breeze was coming off the sea, and the eastern horizon was hidden by mist.

Mr Hepworth gazed out to sea. 'This mist is known as a sea-fret,' he told them, 'and sea-frets are very common on this coast. You probably feel a bit chilled just now, but once we start walking you'll be all right.' He turned and pointed. 'That collection of buildings is the Coastguard Station. The path goes right past it, and that's where this morning's walk really begins. Who can tell us what coastguards do? Yes, Keith?'

'Guard the coast, Sir.'

'Well, yes. What sort of things do they look out for, d'you think?'

'Shipwrecks, Sir. People drowning and that.'

'That's right. Vessels or persons in trouble at sea – including those silly beggars who keep getting themselves washed out on lilos and old tyres. They also watch for people stuck or injured on cliffs, and for distress rockets and signs of foul weather. Right – let's go.'

They filed across the Abbey Plain and up past the Coastguard Station. The path was part of the Cleveland Way, and countless boots had churned it into sticky mud, permanent except in the longest dry spells. Because of this, duckboards had been laid down, so that most of the path between Whitby and Saltwick was under wooden slats.

'What a weird track,' said Maureen. 'It's like a raft that goes on for ever.'

'I hope it doesn't go on for ever,' her twin retorted. 'It kills your feet.'

It didn't go on for ever. They'd been walking twenty-five minutes, on the flat and over stiles, when the boards ended and they found themselves on a tarmac road which went through the middle of a caravan holiday camp. Just beyond the camp was a muddy pathway which led from the clifftop to the beach. Mr Hepworth lifted his hand.

'Right. This is Saltwick Bay.' He looked at his watch. 'It's twenty-five to twelve, and if it stays fine we'll be here till about half-past four, so there's plenty of time. We'll eat lunch at half-

past twelve. In the meantime you may paddle, play on the sand, look for fossils in the cliff-face or collect shells and pebbles on the beach. You are not, repeat not, to do any of the following: sit down in the surf and get your clothing wet. Attempt to climb the cliff. Throw stones or other hard missiles. Murder one another. Chuck your best friend into the sea. Utter shrieks, bellows or similar prehistoric noises, or find a tiny child with a sandcastle and flatten the sandcastle, the tiny child, or both. Is that clear?

It was.

The bay was sandy in some parts and rocky in others. Fliss and Lisa sat on a rock to remove their boots and socks, then ran down to the water's edge, where they rolled up their jeans and waited for a wavelet to wash over their feet.

'Ooh, it's freezing!' Fliss scampered clear and stood with her hands in her anorak pockets, curling her toes in the wet sand. Lisa gasped and screwed up her face but refused to budge. The wavelet spent itself and rushed back.

'Hey, that's weird!' She flung out her arms for balance. 'If you look down when the wave's going back you seem to be sliding backwards up the beach at terrific speed - like skiing in reverse. I nearly fell over.'

'I remember that from when I was little,' said

Fliss. 'It happened the first time I ever paddled. I howled, and it was ages before my mum could get me in the sea again.'

'There's something else as well,' laughed Lisa, as a second wavelet ran back. 'The water washes the sand away from under your heels. It's like a big hole opening up to swallow you. I bet that's why you were frightened. Come and have a go.'

They played along the edge of the sea till it was half-past twelve and Mrs Evans called them to come and eat lunch. They sat on rocks and munched, burying their feet in the dry sand for warmth.

'I'd no idea it was lunchtime,' said Fliss. 'We only seem to have been here about five minutes.'

'That's 'cause we're having fun,' Lisa replied. 'If it was maths, it'd seem like five hours.'

Grant Cooper and Robert Field had been looking for fossils along the foot of the cliff. They'd dug some out and brought them back in a polythene bag. Mr Hepworth tipped them on a flat rock and spread them out. Everybody gathered round, and the teacher picked out the best specimens.

'Look at this.' He held up a slender, cylindrical object which came to a point at one end. 'This is a belemnite. It lived in the sea millions of years ago and looked something like a squid.'

'It looks something like a bullet now,' observed Andrew Roberts. Mrs Evans gave him one of her looks.

'And this one's a gryphia, or devil's toenail, to give it its popular name. It looks similar to a mussel, but it too lived millions of years ago. And this,' he held up a thick disc with a curled pattern on it, 'is an ammonite. It looks snail-like, and you might think it slithered slowly along the seabed but it didn't. It swam, catching its food with its many tentacles.'

'How do they know, Sir?' asked Haley Denton.

'Know what, Haley?'

'That it swam about, Sir. There were no people then, and there are no ammonites or whatever now, so how do they know what it did?'

'Ah - good question, Haley. Well, one thing they do is look at creatures which are built in a similar way, and are alive today. There's a creature called the nautilus which is something like an ammonite. They know how it gets around, so they're pretty sure the ammonite got around in a similar way. D'you see?'

'Yes, Sir.'

When everything had been eaten and washed down with canned pop, the children went off in twos and threes to do whatever they felt like

doing. It was a quarter-past one. The mist had thickened, blotting out the sun, and the breeze gusted spitefully, sharp with blown sand. The holidaymakers had withdrawn to their caravans, so that the children of Bottomtop Middle had the beach to themselves. They went barefoot, but did not remove their anoraks.

Fliss and Lisa ranged far along the tideline, looking for shells and fancy pebbles. They found no shells, except some blue-black fragments of broken mussel which they spurned. There were plenty of pebbles though, and some were quite pretty, especially when wet. They picked up the best ones, putting them in the bags they'd saved from lunch. It was absorbing work, and when Fliss finally looked up she was amazed to see how far they'd come.

'Hey, look - we're miles from anyone else. The teachers look like dots.'

'That's just how I like them,' chuckled Lisa. 'We can't go any further, though - we've run out of beach.'

It was true. In front of them a great, dark headland jutted into the sea. Gulls skimmed screaming along the face of its cliff but the still air felt less cold.

'There's no wind here,' said Fliss. 'Let's stay for a bit. Look - the tide's swept all the rubbish into a

corner like Mrs Clarke at school. There might be something good.'

They waded through the flotsam with their heads down, turning it over with their feet, exclaiming from time to time as some new find came to light. A lobster pot smashed in a storm. A clump of orange line, hopelessly tangled. A dead gull.

Fliss worked steadily along the base of the cliff, seeking mermaids and Spanish gold. She heard the hiss of surf on sand, and glanced up to find she'd almost reached the sea. As she stood looking out, her eyes were drawn to a dark, spray-drenched rock, and to the bird which sat on it.

It was black, and it held out its ragged wings as though waiting for the wind to dry them. Fliss shivered as she gazed at it, feeling the magic drain out of the day. It reminded her of something. A witch perhaps, or a broken umbrella. Or the iron crow on the Gate of Fate.



When Fliss and Lisa got back, the teachers had already called everybody together for the return journey. It was only a quarter-past three, but the mist had thickened and there was a hint of drizzle in it. Some of the kids were sitting on rocks, drying their feet with gritty towels, pulling on socks and boots. Others stood waiting with their hoods up and bags of pebbles dangling at their sides. A small party, supervised by Mrs Evans, was picking up the last scraps of litter. Bottomtop Middle prided itself on the fact that whenever a group of its children vacated a site, they left no evidence that they had ever been there.

As they trudged up towards the path in the cliff, Fliss saw a large, slate-coloured pebble lying on the sand. Something about it appealed to her – its perfect oval shape perhaps, or its wonderful smoothness. She bent and picked it up. It was thick, and far heavier than she'd expected, and

when she tried to add it to the collection in her polythene bag, it wouldn't fit. She was cramming it in her anorak pocket when Mrs Evans, who was bringing up the rear, said, 'Felicity - you don't really want that, dear. It's far too big. You'll be crippled by the time you've carried it all the way back to Whitby, not to mention the fact that it'll probably tear your pocket. Throw it away.'

Fliss was a quiet girl who never argued with her teachers, and so she surprised herself as well as Mrs Evans when she said, 'I like it, Miss. I want to keep it.'

It was lucky for Fliss that Richard Varley chose that moment to leap on Barry Tune's back. As the two boys fell on to the sand, Mrs Evans called sharply and hurried to separate them, and by the time she had done so the line of children was toiling up the cliff path. She had to put on a spurt to catch up, and the pebble incident was forgotten.

The rest of the walk back was uneventful, except that it started to rain in earnest which made the duckboards slippery. Several children fell, to the delight of the rest, who laughed and cheered their classmates' misfortune.

By twenty to five they were back at The Crow's Nest, drenched and happy. They were sent to their rooms to change and to write up their journals. It

was during this interlude that Fliss and Lisa, Trot and Gary met briefly on the fourth-floor landing.

'We all set for tonight?' asked Fliss. She felt tense, and was amazed that for a few hours today she'd actually succeeded in forgetting about all of this.

The others nodded. 'Same time, same place,' said Trot. 'And let's hope nothing happens.'

'Any news of Ellie-May?' asked Lisa.

Gary shrugged. 'I saw Mrs Marriott going into her room as I came up. Maybe they'll call her parents to take her home or something.'

'Oh, I wish they would,' sighed Fliss. 'I'm fed up of feeling scared.'

Trot nodded. 'Me too.'

'We all are,' said Lisa. 'Who wouldn't be?'

After tea, everybody had to rest quietly for an hour in their rooms to let their food settle before Mrs Evans took them swimming. Fliss couldn't rest. There was something she had to do. She looked out of the window. Yes, old Sal was there as usual. Mumbling something about going to the toilet, Fliss left the room, slipped down the stairs and let herself out. It was still raining.

The old woman looked up as the girl reached the shelter. Fliss smiled. 'Hello.'

Sal nodded. 'Evenin'.'

Fliss blushed, looking down at her feet. She didn't know what to say.

'I - I'm staying at The Crow's Nest.'

'Aye, I know.'

'I've seen you lots of times. Through the window.'

The crone nodded. 'Windows is the eyes of a house.'

Fliss smiled. 'Yes. Eyes, watching the sea. Lucky old house.'

'Lucky?' Something rattled in Sal's throat. 'You're wrong, child. It's got the other eye, see. The eye that sleeps by day.'

'Oh, has it?' Fliss smiled, not sure whether she ought to. The eye that sleeps by day. Sounds barmy but then, so does room thirteen. Should she mention room thirteen to Sal? No. There wasn't time. It only needed a teacher to look in room ten and she'd be in more trouble. She looked at the old woman. 'I'd better get back. They'll be wondering -' She let the sentence hang, turned and ran through the rain with her head down.

Nobody had missed her, and when the swimming party set out twenty minutes later old Sal had gone. The rain-lashed streets were practically deserted, and when they got to the pool they found that they had it almost to themselves. They made the most of it, leaping and splashing

and whooping in the warm, clear water under Mrs Evans' watchful gaze. A puzzled frown settled for a moment on the teacher's face when she noticed four of the children standing by the steps at the shallow end, taking no part in the revelry. Odd, she mused. Very odd. You'd think they were non-swimmers or something, but they're not. Still, it's up to them, isn't it? Perhaps they're tired from the walk today. Her eyes moved on, and the frown dissolved.