

I

The sound came again, cutting through the night: a sharp, metallic tap that carried even to the first floor of the house where Sam lay sleeping. Ella stood over him and listened for it again but all she heard was rain spattering against the window. There was a storm coming—a fine start to the summer holidays—but that wasn't the problem.

The problem was being alone in the house at ten o'clock at night looking after Sam. She wished now that Fin hadn't slipped out to see Billy but it was her own fault: she'd insisted he go, telling him Mum and Dad would never know as long as he was back before they returned from the pub.

But that could be ages. Billy's parents had gone with them, which meant Mum and Mrs Meade would be yakking non-stop and Mr Meade would be trying to talk Dad into buying a new car from his showroom or joining the Save-the-Lighthouse project. They wouldn't leave the pub before eleven and Fin would take his time, especially as she'd promised him she was all right.

But she wasn't all right. She was terrified.

The sound came again, downstairs. She crept to the door. At least she hadn't undressed for bed. She'd been thinking of it but she was still in the jeans, T-shirt, and trainers she'd slopped around in

all day, and now she was glad of it. It made her feel less vulnerable—though only a little.

She glanced at Sam. He looked so peaceful as he slept. She didn't remember sleeping like that when she was three and now, at thirteen, she hardly slept at all. She was scared of the dark, scared of the noises she heard in this ancient house, and now, after Mr Fenner's lecture in assembly about the need to be vigilant with strangers, she was even scared someone was stalking her round the village, though she knew that must be ridiculous.

Tap! The sound came again. She knew she ought to go down and investigate. Fin would. He might be small for fifteen but he'd go straight down and look the thing in the face. She made herself walk to the head of the stairs. Below her, the hall stretched away in eerie stillness. The lights were on but the house felt oppressive.

There's nothing wrong, she told herself, and started to walk down the stairs. It's just a storm coming. But it was no use. Polvellan was a house that had always frightened her even though she'd lived here all her life. It wasn't just that it was such an old building. There was something else, something she didn't understand; she felt uneasy here even when the others were around.

Tap! The sound snapped in the night again. She opened her mouth to call out and ask if anyone were there, then closed it again. If somebody were in the house, the last thing she should do was give herself away. She thought of Sam and wondered whether to go back and guard him.

No, check the downstairs rooms first. Make yourself do it. Then go back to Sam.

She tiptoed to the foot of the stairs and looked about her. On the wall nearby was the photograph of Dad at the opening of his Newquay superstore. Next to it were the sketches he had made of the Pengrig lighthouse ten years ago before the cliff-falls made it an endangered building. She ran her eye nervously over them, then scanned the hall as far as the front door.

Tap! She gave a start and looked to the left. The noise had come from the sitting room. There was no doubt about it. She stared at the door; it was ajar and the lights inside the room were switched off. She reached for the telephone. Ring Billy. Get him to send Fin home.

But she drew her hand back. She had to master this. She had to check the noise out for herself. It was bound to be something simple. She walked to the sitting room door and gave it a push. It brushed over the carpet a few inches and stopped. She stared through the gap, then took a deep breath, pushed the door a little further, and craned her head round.

The old room looked dusky but reassuringly familiar. Behind the drawn curtains she could hear the rain lashing against the window; but at least there was no one here. She pushed the door fully open and switched on the light. The features of the room sprang into focus: the piano, the fireplace, the armchairs, the sofa, the music stand with her flute beside it. She walked into the room.

Tap! She jumped. It was the window. Someone must be out there, hidden by the curtains. She hurried to the phone, picked it up and started to dial 999; then put it down. This was stupid. The tap wasn't regular. It might not be a person at all; it might be

something trivial. What would Dad say if she called the police out for nothing? She strode to the window, pulled back the curtain, and burst out laughing.

It was nothing after all. A chain from one of the hanging baskets had broken loose and gusts were throwing it up at the window so that every so often the metal ring at the end struck the glass. Tap! There it was again. She chuckled and reached out to close the curtain; then froze in horror.

Reflected in the glass was a figure standing behind her in the doorway.

She whirled round. It was a man, a huge man built like a bear. He wore a black oilskin top and black waterproof trousers, all gleaming wet, and blue sailing shoes. The hood was up and fastened tight round the face, which was half-obscured by a scarf over the mouth and nose. She took a step back.

‘Don’t hurt me. Please don’t hurt me.’

The eyes stared darkly at her.

‘What do you want?’ she said.

‘You,’ came the answer.

The voice sounded young but she had no time to think. He took a step towards her. She turned and dashed towards the bookcase. There was only one thing she could do but she had to do it now. He leapt after her but she reached the bookcase first, released the catch to the hidden door and slipped through. As she pulled the door after her, she saw his hands clutching for the gap.

She slammed the door shut and leaned against the wall, breathing hard. She couldn’t stay here. He’d find the catch any moment and, besides, she had to reach Sam and get him out of the house. She hurried down the passage, feeling her way along the wall. It

was too dark to see clearly but she knew her way from the old days when Fin used to dare her to go in. He loved having a house with a secret passageway; she hated it but it might help now.

She was halfway through already. It only went as far as the kitchen and she would have to brave the house again soon but it might buy time. She looked for the taper of light along the floor that marked the secret door in the kitchen wall.

There it was, just ahead. She felt round the panelling and found the catch. Behind her came a crash, a sound of stumbling. He'd found his way into the passage. She let herself into the kitchen and closed the door behind her. With any luck he wouldn't find his way out this end and have to go back to the sitting room. That might give her a few more seconds.

She ran through the hall as lightly as she could and up to Sam's room. He was still sleeping. She put a hand over his mouth and shook him. He stirred and looked up at her.

'Sam,' she whispered. 'Get up, quick!'

'Ella?'

'Sam, quick! We've got to get out of the house. And you're not to speak. Not a word. OK? Come on.'

She pulled at his arm but he resisted, still engrossed in sleep.

'Sam, please.'

Somehow she pulled him out of bed.

'Teddy,' he said, looking round.

'I've got him.' She grabbed Teddy from the bed. 'Come on. And not a word. Not a single word.'

She took him by the hand and led him towards the door, but it was no good. Already she could hear

sounds at the foot of the stairs. She pulled Sam back to the bed and knelt down.

‘Sam, listen,’ she whispered. ‘I want you to do something for me. Something that’ll make me very proud of you. I want you to hide in your secret place and not come out till you hear Mummy or Daddy or Fin. Promise?’

‘What for?’

‘It’s a game. A really important game. I know you can do it for me. Please, Sam. Please do it for me. Go and hide in your secret place.’

Something in her face must have persuaded him because he turned without another word, opened the wall cupboard and crawled in to the back, then pulled the big box of toys across so that it hid everything except his face. She passed Teddy through to him.

‘Good boy,’ she whispered. ‘And if anyone opens the cupboard door, I want you to keep your head down so they can’t see you. It’ll be such a good game. When you hear Mummy or Daddy or Fin, then you can come out.’

‘Ella?’ His eyes were wide, unblinking. ‘Are you going away?’

She leaned into the cupboard and kissed him. ‘Just for a bit but I’ll be back soon. Now be a good boy and don’t make a sound.’

He said nothing but she felt his eyes on her face as she closed the cupboard. She stood up, stole over to the door and put her ear to it. No sound except the wind and the rain. She wondered whether she should try and hide somewhere herself.

No. If this monster searched the rooms for her, he might find Sam instead. She had to lead him away

from the house. He wanted her anyway. She shuddered at the thought of what that might mean.

She heard footsteps creeping along the landing. They stopped. She slid to the side of the door so that she would be behind it if it opened. There was a long silence. The door opened a fraction. She sensed a huge form behind it; she sensed eyes peering, ears straining. She held herself rigid. The door opened wider and the figure entered the room. The face was still hidden by the hood and scarf. He took a step forward and stood by the bed, staring towards the cupboard.

She jumped out and pushed him hard in the back. He fell over the bed but quickly recovered and turned. She raced through to the landing and tore down the stairs. Behind her came the pounding of footsteps. She reached the hall and charged towards the front door in the white-heat of terror.

A hand seized her shoulder. She squirmed free and darted back down the hall. Again the footsteps thundered after her. She reached the kitchen, threw herself at the back door and wrenched it open. The hand caught her T-shirt and tugged her back. She wriggled free a second time and stumbled into the garden.

She was screaming now, screaming at the top of her voice. She plunged over the grass, struggling blindly towards the gate. If she could just get to the Meades' house . . .

But it was no good. He was already racing round the drive to cut her off. He reached the gate well ahead of her and turned to face her. She stopped in the middle of the lawn, the rain driving into her face, and saw him close upon her again.

Desperately she looked around her, searching the garden for sanctuary, but all she saw was tawny shapes moving like reeds in the darkness. She turned and fled towards the stable, knowing nowhere else to go. The building rose before her but she ran round as far as she could before the hedge stopped her. From inside the stable came the sound of Biscuit snorting.

The figure appeared at the side of the building. He wasn't running now. He didn't need to run. They both knew she couldn't escape. She stood there, her back to the hedge, her face, hair, clothes drenched. The figure moved towards her.

'What do you want with me?' she said. Her voice was snuffed away in the wind. She shrieked: 'What do you want with me?' He didn't answer and simply moved closer. She stared in dread, in disbelief. This couldn't be happening. This didn't happen to people like her. It happened to other people.

But it was happening. Now. She had to escape. He mustn't catch her, touch her, hurt her. She feinted to the right and raced to the left, straining to get past him. He caught her by the waist and picked her up like a doll.

'Leave me alone!' she screamed. 'Leave me—'

He dropped her to the ground, rolled her onto her front and thrust a knee in her back. She felt her hands whisked behind her and bound, a gag slipped over her mouth, then she was jerked to her feet and pulled, half-stumbling, up the slope.

She moaned and retched, struggling to escape, but it was no good. Her arm was locked in a grip so savage she felt it would crush her. She had to do something. Anything. She let her knees buckle and flopped to the ground.

‘Get up!’ he said. She didn’t move. She couldn’t move. She was too terrified to move. He pushed her face into the grass and she felt the knee in her back again, and this time his whole weight. ‘Do that again,’ he said, ‘and I’ll break your spine.’

He yanked her to her feet, tugged her to the front door of the house and pushed something through the letterbox; then he turned and pulled her towards the gate. She followed meekly. She was no longer resisting. She was simply crying. Crying as the rain drove into her face, crying as the gate opened before her.

Crying as he took her away.