

# Chapter One

Friday 3:29 and 15 seconds...

My auntie lives alone in a little old house down a very narrow, wobbly dead-end street. The houses are only on one side because on the other is the forest. It's an unusual house on a hill which is on a hill! It has two sets of stairs, one going up to the bedrooms and the other going down to the kitchen, the bathroom and the garden, so when you go in at the front door, you go downstairs to the back door. The houses are numbered 1 to 51 but there's no number 13. (Spooky!) All these things make this street very, very interesting and the house very, very cool.

My auntie is lovely but pretty strict, especially with manners and stuff, though funnily enough not strict at all when it comes to having fun and getting messy! For me that makes *her* cool too.

My sisters and I, on the other hand, live in a large town in an average road which is normal and boring. There are no other children to play with either, which is also boring. The houses are all the same (boring). The neighbours are all the same (boring). Even the trees are boring, (too straight and not big enough to climb!) I don't know why we live there, but my parents definitely made a rubbish choice.

I have three sisters, all younger than myself. I like them a lot most of the time, but sometimes they are really good at getting right on my nerves! I shall give you a quick description, so you can picture them in your head. Tabitha is nine years old, skinny, with long brown hair past her shoulders and blue eyes. Her outstanding feature: a mega wide mouth! Odd, I know, but once we all decided to open our mouths as wide as we could and measure the diameter, (measurement from the top to the bottom). Tabitha's was massive! And she uses it well to scream a lot when she doesn't get her own way.

Then we have Rachael, seven years old, with long, thick, dark brown hair; too much hair my mum says. She has to wear it in plaits a lot because it gets into massive knots, and they take ages and a lot of screaming to get out. Her outstanding feature: her eyes! They are alien-massive and really blue.

Last of all is Martha, who is five years old and has a mass of brown curls. Lucky her! My hair is dead straight *and* flyaway, (nice!) She also has blue eyes; I'm the only one with green eyes like my auntie. Her outstanding feature; she is really cute, and she knows it! She uses her cuteness to get out of a lot of the trouble she causes. But still, she does give really good cuddles!

In this book I would like to tell you about one of the many adventures I had at my auntie's house. Of course if you're not interested, now would be a good time to put the book down or back on the shelf!

So, here we go!

Once upon a time (3.30pm to be precise), a long time ago (Friday just gone), a princess, (myself of course!) and my three sisters Tabitha (Tabs), Rachael (Ray-Ray) and Martha (Marf, we pronounce the -f) went to visit our fairy godmother Auntie Ruthy í . Only joking! This story is far too funky to be a fairy tale. My name is Lilly, I'm eleven years old and this is how the story really begins:-

We were dropped off by our mum at Auntie Ruthy's after school and we immediately raced for the staircase that leads up and changed from our uniforms into something more suitable. We knew the routine well, and as usual everything was lined-up and ready. Auntie is a stickler for detail and organisation. The picnic was ready and waiting in the fridge, in order to have sandwiches that were stiff, fresh and straight instead of warm, droopy and soggy. It's always orange or apple juice - Auntie won't let us have Coca-Cola, although we are allowed to at home. Oh, and there would be no cake. Mum says that Auntie is the only person she knows that doesn't live for cake. Auntie is thin, Mum is not. There are always sweets, though: she's not that strict!

Once we were all changed and ready we set off. First though there was a final 'wee' check (Martha is only five, so this still has to be done), and a welly sock check. You can't start an adventure if your trousers are not stuck in the socks properly, or your sock just ends up down the toe and, apart from being just annoying, your feet get cold. Then there were the mobile phone check, the money check, and the 'put-key-in-the-third-flower-pot-in-case-Mum-gets-back-before-us' check. We say 'au revoir' to Mum - it's our new thing, we are having extra French lessons after school on Wednesdays - and we set off.

It was a spring-like day, even though it was actually September. The sun was shining but it wasn't doing a very good job at being warm, as you still had to wear a thin coat and a jumper. It had been raining in the week, but the ground was only a little muddy, so luckily it seemed we were in for a good afternoon.

The forest was getting ready to bed down for the winter but seemed to be delaying it a bit. I guess it's the same for me when mum shouts out 'bedtime!' It was great that Auntie's house is so close to the woods; at home we have a twenty minute walk before any fun begins, or even a car ride, (boring!) Here the adventure starts ten seconds after leaving the front gate!

On this particular day, though, the adventure started thirty-six seconds from the front gate because for some reason we crossed the road into the woods and turned right! Why we turned right I still don't know. We always turned left; left towards the pond. The routine was always: leave the gate, cross the road and turn left! But today was obviously going to be different. It must have slightly confused all of us because minutes later Martha lost her footing and fell flat on her face into a pile of wet leaves, twigs and muddy moss. Normal behaviour really, as Marf does tend to fall over a lot. This time we could just blame the new wellies - or maybe not!

Ruthy promptly went to pick her up - we were no use at all, we were laughing too much. But although Ruthy was pulling at her, she was not rising off the ground. Putting down her rucksack for more power, Ruthy pulled Marf upwards, Marf was still not rising. After a hefty upward sideward pull Marf was up in the air but her wellies stayed put!

'Lilly, get the wellies! I can't put her down or her socks will get wet!'

I was still helpless with laughter. Marf had a black muddy fringe, leaves stuck to her face and two wet, black hands. Her face wore a serious -it's not funny look, but at least she wasn't crying: she's a tough little nut really.

“Lilly, stop laughing! Oh Tabs, come on! Get the wellies!”

“She always falls over,” shrugged Tabs

“No I don’t!”

“You do, Marf!”

“What’s this!” exclaimed Tabs suddenly.

Ruthy put Marf on a fallen tree out of the mud and went to get the wellies herself.

“Tabby, pass them over! , Tabs?”

“They’re STUCK!”

“They can’t be. It isn’t that muddy.”

“No, they’re stuck - stuck under something.”

“It’ll be a tree root; that’s probably what she fell over.”

“Uh - Uh! Nope, it’s no tree root!”

“What the? .?”

“That’s what I said!”

“What on earth..?”

What on earth, indeed! Never *ever* in all my eleven years had I come across *anything* like this. It was obvious the picnic was now well and truly ditched: we had bigger plans!

Pushing all the leaves to one side, we scraped the mud away to reveal a handle. I kid you not - a handle in the ground, in the middle of the forest! (Well, probably not the actual “middle.” Epping Forest is pretty big ó but you get the idea.) It was something you just wouldn’t expect, and we for sure were not expecting it. It was a long handle made of black metal and attached to one edge of a square door constructed of five wide slats of wood. The wood itself looked ancient. It was soaking wet, slippery and had hundreds of minute holes probably from wood worm; it was, I’d say, about half the size of the single duvet cover on my bed. It took all of our strength to lift it up, and it made a loud creaking sound.

“Um, could do with a little oil there!” Ruthy remarked. Auntie is so self-sufficient, only she could come out with that at such a time!

The thick, heavy old door dropped like a boulder when we finally pushed it up high enough on its hinges to let it go on the other side. Making a huge thud into the mud, it sent leaves flying through the air and whirling around us, with some of the mud splattering up our legs. It might even have been enough to blow Marf off her tree trunk, but no one turned to check. Below us was a deep, dark, damp hole with short stone steps leading down. What should we

do? It was rather perfectly obvious what we should do! .get Marf's wellies back on and get down there. Or that's what our initial reaction was, but it didn't take long to think better of it!

“Oh my! Oh my!” Ray-Ray was showing her nervous side. “Oh no, no, no!”

I looked at Ray-Ray, Marf looked at me, Ray-Ray looked at Tabs. Tabs raised an eyebrow, Ruthy looked at Marf. Eyebrows and eyeballs were looking everywhere until I said,

“Are we all seriously thinking the same, that we should go down there? Now I'm only eleven, but I've seen films about this sort of thing - you know, going down holes and never coming back out again, especially ‘black holes!’”

“Scaredy cat!” Tab had always been the brainy clever one and now all of a sudden she was the brave courageous one!

“If we don't take a look, we'll never know. It could be a passage that leads us back to my house! Now that would be a wizz wouldn't it! And if it is, it could considerably add to the value of the house. I could even rent it out to film makers maybe!”

“A wizz?” another eyebrow lifted, can't remember whose.

“So, now Auntie Ruthy has a good enough reason, I say let's do it!” I don't really know why I said this: I think I must have been showing off.

“Well, I'm not going first, and I'm definitely not going last.” Tabs was obviously not that brave after all!

We stepped in. Not all at the same time, you understand: we took time to make a safe, organised line plan. I went first, followed by Ray-Ray; Tabitha, who didn't want to go first or last, went between Ray and Marf and Auntie Ruthy followed at the end, so she could keep an eye on everyone.

Of course we were not prepared for what might be about to happen because we didn't know! I had already thought through some action plans in my head, though: Plan A, we go down; Plan B we don't go because Auntie Ruthy wouldn't let us do something so unsafe and crazy anyway; Plan C we don't go because the steps might just lead to a small underground bunker and nowhere else; Plan D we don't go because as there were only two of them the steps couldn't actually lead anywhere. Then came Plan E - we don't go because one of us (probably Marf) would pull out and not even want to go down the steps; Plan F we don't go, as a stranger from the woods might appear and frighten us all; Plan G we don't go because ‘, No! There was no plan G, as I had run out of thinking time and my right toe was hitting the first step all by itself!

It's odd how you dream of adventures in your head: taking over the world, (I don't actually have this dream, but my dad does), talking to animals, flying, never going to school ever again, (tend to have this one a lot), being a traveller and finding new countries! These thoughts are always easy, exciting, thrilling and all conjured up in one night with a smile on your face! But now, in real life, there was no smile on my face. There were no smiles on

anyone's faces! Our eyes were all so big and wide they were touching our eyebrows; eyebrows which now touched hair lines, hair lines that had receded so much they were making our ears go backwards! My body was saying NO! My brain was screaming NO! My hands, supposed to be guiding me and keeping me out of harm's way but actually shaking like jelly, were saying NO! But my stupid feet were still walking down the steps, and Auntie Ruthy wasn't really shouting out, "No! Stop! I was only joking! No way on this earth I'm letting you go down a stupid, dark, scary hole in the middle of the forest!"

# Chapter Two

Twenty four steps down. Enough steps I think to go down into true darkness: I don't even go down the stairs at home in the dark! My legs were shaking by step twelve, so goodness only knows how I got down the rest. I kept looking back, but it truly was so dark I couldn't even see anyone. I called out, "Everyone still with me-ee?" A series of "umms" and wobbly "yeps" were my answers. Then suddenly the dark became light again!

I started to smile - just a little, mind: I was relieved, not happy. I turned behind me to show my relief, only to see Ray-Ray's face, which in turn frightened the living daylights out of me. Tarsier! (I would recommend you Google Tarsier to fully appreciate my comparison!) I had to laugh, although it wasn't my normal laugh - a jolly Lilly, without a care in the world laugh. It was more of a high pitched screech, mixed in with an "I can't breathe in or out" kind of laugh. I'd say, if I knew what it actually meant, I was hyperventilating! I've heard about it on TV.

As we slowly emerged from the darkness our shoulders dropped back down to where they belonged. Auntie Ruthy was the last to appear, looking as if she'd had a really bad facelift. She was so white, she looked like she had just won the lottery but only had three minutes left to live! An odd look, you can imagine.

"Well, one thing is for sure. Your house is still worth the same, Auntie Ruthy!" I was at the age of learning the art of sarcasm, and I liked it; was even quite good at it, if I say so myself.

Everything had changed. We were not back at Auntie's. We were not in the woods either; we were in a large opening more like an enclosed meadow than a wood. There were flowers everywhere: bluebells, daisies and buttercups at our feet; roses mixed with honeysuckle scrambling up the walls and the whiff of jasmine scenting the air. All the clues pointed to spring, not September. It was lovely.

"Oh, my word, Girls! You know I always say there's always a time and a place?" Auntie Ruthy exclaimed.

"Yes?"

"Well this is one of those times, I officially allow us to eat chocolate before our sandwiches. I for one could do with a little sugar right now!" It did the trick, colour soon appearing back in her face, and all of our faces really. We ate ALL of our sweets and paid no attention to any sandwich. This was going to be huge; we needed energy if nothing else.

"Ruthy?"

"Yes Marf!"

"There's a í í erm.. a.."

“Out with it, Merf! What are you waving at?”

I use “Merfö” here, as we have various variations of Martha’s name. Sometimes she is “the Marfö”, used when we can’t find her - “Where’s The Marf?” Other times she is known as “Merfö” when she is being sweet and cute, e.g. “How are you today little Merf.” But mostly she is just “Marfö” just cos it’s short. Martha is used in formal situations, such as births, marriages, and by teachers.

“A sparkly fairy! Over there!”

“I think you’ll find that’s just a flower, Merf.”

“Can’t be just a flower. It’s waving and winking at me!”

We all stopped chewing.

Our heads froze: our eyes were back on alarm mode! All eyeballs were facing west. . . and on the Fairy! All the previous nerves and heightened energy were forgotten. She was floating and dancing, whirling and swirling; she was tiny and she was definitely sparkly, and for a nice change she was not pink! But orange! Not at all like the ones you see in books. She landed on the smallest sign-post in the world and started doing the Michael Jackson Moon Walk. Rachael was up on her feet and racing over, holding her glasses to her face as she went. Rachael didn’t always wear glasses, but the doctor said if she wore them now until she was seven, she could stop and her eyes would be fixed. Only three months left to go and she was feeling happy about that! “It doesn’t make sense,” she screeched. [Note: Rachael IS the loudest person in the whole of Essex] “It says ‘S.A.S.A.A.T.N Island!’” As you can see for yourselves and as we all agreed, it did not make sense. It was code! The only fact we knew for sure was that we were on an island and it was obviously magical, (so in fact that made two facts!)

The fairy was gone within seconds and replaced with a smell, a sweet smell; it reminded me of our breakfast at home, (no not eggs and bacon! I said a sweet smell!). We followed the path and our noses at quite a speed. It was like a film, a film you see at the cinema. Everything was shiny and bright and beautiful; colours of every shade of pink, blue, yellow, I think there were even colours that hadn’t been invented yet! I saw a particularly attractive shade of purple, which I logged in my memory, thinking it would look good in my bedroom.

“Don’t go too far! We need to make it back by 6pm for Mummy,” Ruthy called. (She obviously had not checked her watch, as I knew it was only 3.30pm.) In view, but slightly in the distance we could make out a bridge, and for some reason known only to Man - and children - when you see a bridge, you always have to be first on it, even thirty-eight year old aunties. So we all started one of those silly fast walking sessions which naturally turns into a jaunty, high-spirited jog as everyone starts to compete; finally ending up in a full-on charge, racing to be the first there. On tripping, slipping, flying and missing the bridge completely, Ruthy finally stopped with her face in the stream, nearly taking Marf with her. (Marf is a bit slower at running than us, so they were holding hands.)

“What the ...? It’s honey!”

Once we had finished laughing at her misfortune, we peered over the side only to find that the bridge itself was actually made of wafer biscuits covered in chocolate, very similar to a sweet called 'Timeout' (We decided to nickname it the Timeout Bridge, so we would remember the way back.) While we waited for Ruthy to clean the honey from her eyelashes, I noticed that the hands on my watch had started moving at a bizarre pace! .. Strange! But what was even stranger was that as I actually focused to read the time it stopped and said 3.30pm! Then when I looked away from the face, off it went spinning again!

“Thank goodness for wet wipes! Girls, where are you?” Ruthy asked

“Over here, on the other side of the bridge. Come over and take a look at my watch!”

Ruthy came across the bridge with Marf. Poor Marf! - that was the second time she had fallen over today, and this time it wasn't even her fault. We looked down to find that my watch was moving faster than - a really fast thing; going, well! really fast! We looked at one another, the eyebrows were off again!

“Let's go back the way we came so we don't get lost, ok?” being a grown-up must be really boring if you always have to say the sensible and right thing, (not really looking forward to being a grown-up myself to tell you the truth.) The only thing that was the same back on the other side of the bridge were the skid marks Ruthy and Marf had made earlier, and the place was no longer shiny and bright - it was getting dark!

“What *is* going on here? I don't recognise a thing! We can't be lost. How can we be lost when we were here 30 seconds ago?” But things were about to get even weirder!

“Maybe we should go across the bridge and come back again. Maybe it's a time warp bridge, not a time-out bridge! ha ha! í Oh! that's odd: we named it Timeout as a joke, but maybe we've changed the bridge. Let's rename it 'Come Back Time Bridge! Ha ha!” No-one was laughing. Tabs was not impressed and started to walk off over the bridge to check things out.

“Don't go anywhere, Tabs! We stick together!”

“That would explain my watch! It's all to do with time.”

“Don't panic, I've got the time on my mobile,” Ruthy announced. She was so in charge! And so calm! Strange!

“What....? Mine is doing the same thing!”

“Well! . I'll just ring Mummy and tell her we might be a bit late.” Ruthy grabbed her phone from her bag while we stood there just grinning. In a way I was secretly glad we were a bit lost, it made for a good adventure! We never get lost at home as we are never allowed out on our own to go anywhere to get lost! She dialled Mummy's number! ..

“Beep ... Beep... Beep. Sorry! Numbers from this phone are not recognised.”

She redialled.

“I said! Numbers from this phone are not recognised!”

As she dropped the phone, in a kind of throwing action, she shouted, “What the..?” (She says this a lot. I think there are meant to be words on the end, but she never says them!)

“Well, another idea would be useful at this point!” My sarcasm again popping up into good use!

“Well, I guess we’d better get our bearings and try to head back.” said Ruthy.

“Get my bearings? I didn’t bring any bearings! What are my bearings?” Marf’s little face was full of confusion.

“No, Marf! You don’t own bearings; you just get them in your head. You have to... oh, never mind!” I would normally try and explain but this was not really the time.

“I know! Why we don’t just find that little fairy . shake her . get some magic . and then just use it!” Martha said slowly, but in a very, very thoughtful manner.

“Nice Marf, but I think my idea might be a bit more useful,” I said. “I think as it’s getting a bit dark and chilly, we should build a kind of shelter in case it gets too dark or rains and we don’t find the door back.” Everyone knows that an adventure story always includes the making of a shelter, and they always look magnificent.

“OK, that’ll work for now, until I get a proper signal on this damn phone. Right, split up into two groups and find a flat surface, but don’t go where I can’t see you, ok! - and don’t go on that bridge!” Ruthy said. She was being mighty calm about our situation, considering.

“Coolio!” we replied, and off we ran in all different directions.

Whilst we were off looking and Ruthy was walking around like a mobile aerial mast, we discovered more weird stuff! Marshmallows, bon-bons, nougat, toffee apples, Turkish delight, Match Makers! We came back with armfuls of it.

“What have you got there? Don’t tell me you found a sweet shop!” Ruthy gasped.

We all laughed. “Oh no! No sweet shop, just a shed load of sweets!” I said.

“A shed, you found a shed?”

“Er, no! Just the sweets, growing! Sweets growing out of *the ground!*”

With a confused face she asked if we had managed to find a flat surface.

“Well, er, no! We stopped looking when we found the sweets!” What did she expect - we are only children!

“Ok, I found one anyway. Still can’t get a stupid signal though and I’m going to punch this guy on the nose if he keeps on with his, “I’m not telling you again, Miss, calls are not recognised from this phone!” Her calmness was wearing a little thin.

“Where is it?” we replied.

“Over there.”

We looked over to where she pointed. It was a beautiful clearing with trees all around, good climbing trees by the looks of them as well; it was like it had been planned ready for us.

“Well, let’s start building the shelter then.” I was rather eager, as I like building dens at home and I had a feeling this one was going to be good. This is what I had in my mind.



“Yep, let’s get started! We will needí” ö Ruthy said as she sat down on a rock: a rock that started squashing underneath her. Springing up and peeling the rock off her bottom, she said, “Fudge? Fudge! Fudge is what we need! Fudge everybody, get fudge!”

So we were off, running around again finding as much fudge as we possibly could. “I’m going to draw a plan so you can start building.” She had told us once that she always wanted to be an architect - actually trained as one for two weeks, but found drawing straight lines every day a bit boring, so became a designer instead. Good choice, because the plan she drew was rather rubbish.

And the building beganí ..

Can you even imagine the state we got into! I now have full respect for Eskimos, (different building materials - same design). We had fudge in places you wouldn’t want fudge in! It all got a bit sticky after a while and was actually quite hard work.

When our masterpiece was finished and Marf's belly was filled with two tonnes of leftovers, we decided to try it out.

“Umm, well, this is pants!! My bum hurts, and there's a big draft coming from that hole in the wall!” Tabby was moaning: she always moans at home, and I'm surprised actually that we had come this far without the moaning!

“We need a door! And floor!” came from Marf. She is so switched-on sometimes - and so stupid other times.

“How about marshmallows for a floor and a Dime Bar for a door? Ha ha! I'm a poet and I don't even know it!” Ruthy laughed at her own joke! (Which always makes a joke less funny, and anyway it wasn't even a proper joke!) “Oh I'm so funny! Stay here, I'll be two minutes! I saw a big blob of white stuff out there somewhere.”

I can't say I was happy about being left for two seconds in this place, let alone two minutes. It was getting quite dark too, but sorting out the argument that broke out about who was going to sit next to whom took my mind off things, and sooner rather than later she was back and we were all cosy inside with the door shut!

Hoping our house wouldn't melt in the morning sun, one by one, (in order of age funnily enough), we shut our eyes and went to sleep.

This is how our shelter actually ended up; not the *actual* one, as we didn't have a camera. But it gives you an idea nevertheless.