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The Distant Hours

Written by Kate Morton

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The Distant Hours



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PAN



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Part One

A Lost Letter Finds Its Way

1992

It started with a letter. A letter that had been lost a long time, waiting out half a century in a forgotten postal bag in the dim attic of a nondescript house in Bermondsey. I think about it sometimes, that mailbag: of the hundreds of love letters, grocery bills, birthday cards, notes from children to their parents, that lay together, swelling and sighing as their thwarted messages whispered in the dark. Waiting, waiting, for someone to realize they were there. For it is said, you know, that a letter will always seek a reader; that sooner or later, like it or not, words have a way of finding the light, of making their secrets known.

Forgive me, I'm being romantic—a habit acquired from the years spent reading nineteenth-century novels with a torch when my parents thought I was asleep. What I mean to say is that it's odd to think that if Arthur Tyrell had been a little more responsible, if he hadn't had one too many rum toddies that Christmas Eve in 1941 and gone home and fallen into a drunken slumber instead of finishing his mail delivery, if the bag hadn't then been tucked in his attic and hidden until his death some fifty years later when one of his daughters unearthed it and called the *Daily Mail*, the whole thing might have turned out differently. For my mum, for me, and especially for Juniper Blythe.

You probably read about it when it happened; it was in all the newspapers, and on the TV news. Channel 4 even ran a special where they invited some of the recipients to talk about their letter, their particular voice from the past that had come back to surprise them. There was a woman whose sweetheart had been in the RAF, and the man with the birthday card his evacuated son had sent, the little boy who was killed by a piece of falling shrapnel a week or so later. It was a very good programme, I thought: moving in parts, happy and sad stories interspersed with old footage of the war. I cried a couple of times, but that's not saying much: I'm rather disposed to weep.

Mum didn't go on the show, though. The producers contacted her and asked whether there was anything special in her letter that she'd like to share with the nation, but she said no, that it was just an ordinary old clothing order from a shop that had long ago gone out of business. But that wasn't the truth. I know this because I was there when the letter arrived. I saw her reaction to that lost letter and it was anything but ordinary.

It was a morning in late February, winter still had us by the throat, the flowerbeds were icy, and I'd come over to help with the Sunday roast. I do that sometimes because my parents like it, even though I'm a vegetarian and I know that at some point during the course of the meal my mother will start to look worried, then agonized, until finally she can stand it no longer and statistics about protein and anaemia will begin to fly.

I was peeling potatoes in the sink when the letter dropped through the slot in the door. The mail doesn't usually come on Sundays so that should have tipped us off, but

it didn't. For my part, I was too busy wondering how I was going to tell my parents that Jamie and I had broken up. It had been two months since it happened and I knew I had to say something eventually, but the longer I took to utter the words, the more calcified they became. And I had my reasons for staying silent: my parents had been suspicious of Jamie from the first, they didn't take kindly to upsets, and Mum would worry even more than usual if she knew that I was living in the flat alone. Most of all, though, I was dreading the inevitable, awkward conversation that would follow my announcement. To see first bewilderment, then alarm, then resignation, cross Mum's face as she realized the maternal code required her to provide some sort of consolation… But back to the mail. The sound of something dropping softly through the slot.

'Edie, can you get that?'

This was my mother. (Edie is me: I'm sorry, I should have said so earlier.) She nodded towards the hallway and gestured with the hand that wasn't stuck up the inside of the chicken.

I put down the potato, wiped my hands on a tea towel and went to fetch the post. There was only one letter, lying on the welcome mat: an official Post Office envelope declaring the contents as 'lost mail'. I read the label to Mum as I brought it into the kitchen.

She'd finished stuffing the chicken by then and was drying her own hands. Frowning a little, from habit rather than any particular expectation, she took the letter from me and plucked her reading glasses from the pineapple in the fruit bowl. She skimmed the post office notice and with a flicker of her eyebrows began to open the outer envelope.

I'd turned back to the potatoes by now; a task that was arguably more engaging than watching my mum open mail, so I'm sorry to say I didn't see her face as she fished the smaller envelope from inside, as she registered the frail austerity paper and the old stamp, as she turned the letter over and read the name written on the back. I've imagined it many times since, though, the colour draining instantly from her cheeks, her fingers beginning to tremble so that it took minutes before she was able to slit the envelope open.

What I don't have to imagine is the sound. The horrid, guttural gasp, followed quickly by a series of rasping sobs that swamped the air and made me slip with the peeler so that I cut my finger.

'Mum?' I went to her, draping my arm around her shoulders, careful not to bleed on her dress. But she didn't say anything. She couldn't, she told me later, not then. She stood rigidly as tears spilled down her cheeks and she clutched the strange little envelope, its paper so thin I could make out the corner of the folded letter inside, hard against her bosom. Then she disappeared upstairs to her bedroom leaving a fraying wake of instructions about the bird and the oven and the potatoes.

The kitchen settled in a bruised silence around her absence and I stayed very quiet, moved very slowly so as not to disturb it further. My mother is not a crier, but this moment – her upset and the shock of it – felt oddly familiar, as if we'd been here before. After fifteen minutes in which I variously peeled potatoes, turned over possibilities as to whom the letter might be from, and wondered how to proceed, I finally knocked on her door and asked whether she'd like a cup of tea. She'd composed herself by then and we sat

opposite one another at the small Formica-covered table in the kitchen. As I pretended not to notice she'd been crying, she began to talk about the envelope's contents.

'A letter,' she said, 'someone I used to know a long time ago. When I was just a girl, twelve, thirteen.'

A picture came into my mind, a hazy memory of a photograph that had sat on my gran's bedside when she was old and dying. Three children, the youngest of whom was my mum, a girl with short dark hair, perched on something in the foreground. It was odd, I'd sat with Gran a hundred times or more but I couldn't bring that girl's features into focus now. Perhaps children are never really interested in who their parents were before they were born; not unless something particular happens to shine a light on the past. I sipped my tea, waiting for Mum to continue.

'I don't know that I've told you much about that time, have I? During the war, the Second World War. It was a terrible time, such confusion, so many things were broken. It seemed…' she sighed. 'Well, it seemed as if the world would never return to normal. As if it had been tipped off its axis and nothing would ever set it to rights.' She cupped her hands around the steaming rim of her mug and stared down at it.

'My family – Mum and Dad, Rita and Ed and I – we all lived in a flat together in Barlow Street, over at Elephant and Castle, and the day after war broke out we were rounded up in school classes, marched over to the railway station and put into train carriages. I'll never forget it, all of us with our tags on and our masks and our packs, and the mothers, who'd had second thoughts because they came running down the road towards the station, shouting at the guard to let their

kids off; then shouting at older siblings to look after the little ones, not to let them out of their sight.'

She sat for a moment, biting her bottom lip as the scene played out in her memory.

'You must've been frightened,' I said quietly. We're not really hand-holders in our family or else I'd have reached out and taken hers.

'I was, at first.' She removed her glasses and rubbed her eyes. Her face had a vulnerable, unfinished look without her frames, like a small nocturnal animal confused by the daylight. I was glad when she put them on again and continued. 'I'd never been away from home before, never spent a night apart from my mother. But I had my older brother and sister with me, and as the trip went on and one of the teachers handed round bars of chocolate, everybody started to cheer up and look upon the experience almost like an adventure. Can you imagine? War had been declared but we were all singing songs and eating tinned pears and looking out of the window playing I-spy. Children are very resilient, you know, callous in some cases.

'We arrived eventually in a town called Cranbrook, only to be split into groups and loaded onto various coaches. The one I was on with Ed and Rita took us to the village of Milderhurst, where we were walked in lines to a hall. A group of local women were waiting for us there, smiles fixed on their faces, lists in hand, and we were made to stand in rows as people milled about, making their selection.

'The little ones went fast, especially the pretty ones. People supposed they'd be less work, I expect, that they'd have less of the whiff of London about them.'

She smiled crookedly. 'They soon learned. My brother

was picked early. He was a strong boy, tall for his age, and the farmers were desperate for help. My sister went a short while after with her friend from school.'

Well that was it. I reached out and laid my hand on hers. 'Oh, Mum.'

'Never mind.' She pulled free and gave my fingers a tap. 'I wasn't the last to go. There were a few others, a little boy with a terrible skin condition. I don't know what happened to him, but he was still standing there in that hall when I left.

'You know, for a long time afterwards, years and years, I forced myself to buy bruised fruit if that's what I picked up first at the greengrocer's. None of this checking it over and putting it back on the shelf if it didn't measure up.'

'But you were chosen eventually.'

'Yes, I was chosen eventually.' She lowered her voice, fiddling with something in her lap, and I had to lean close. 'She came in late. The room was almost clear, most of the children had gone and the WVS ladies were putting away the tea things. I'd started to cry a little, though I did so very discreetly. Then all of a sudden, *she* swept in and the room, the very air, seemed to alter.'

'Alter?' I wrinkled my nose, thinking of that scene in *Carrie* when the light explodes.

'It's hard to explain. Have you ever met a person who seems to bring their own atmosphere with them when they arrive somewhere?'

Maybe. I lifted my shoulders, uncertain. My friend Sarah has a habit of turning heads wherever she goes, not exactly an atmospheric phenomenon, but still…

'No, of course you haven't. It sounds so silly to say it like that. What I mean is that she was different from other

people, more… Oh, I don't know. Just *more*. Beautiful in an odd way, long hair, big eyes, rather wild looking, but it wasn't that alone that set her apart. She was only seventeen at the time, in September 1939, but the other women all seemed to fold into themselves when she arrived.'

'They were deferential?'

'Yes, that's the word, deferential. Surprised to see her and uncertain how to behave. One of them spoke up eventually and asked if she could help, but the girl merely waved her long fingers and announced that she'd come for her evacuee. That's what she said; not *an* evacuee, *her* evacuee. And then she came straight over to where I was sitting on the floor. "What's your name?" she said, and when I told her she smiled and said that I must be tired, having come such a long way. "Would you like to come and stay with me?" I nodded, I must have, for she turned then to the bossiest woman, the one with the list, and said that she would take me home with her.'

'What was her name?'

'Blythe,' said my mother, suppressing the faintest of shivers. 'Juniper Blythe.'

'And was it she who sent you the letter?'

Mum nodded. 'She led me to the fanciest car I'd ever seen and drove me back to the place where she and her older twin sisters lived, through a set of iron gates, along a winding driveway, until we reached an enormous stone house surrounded by thick woods. Milderhurst Castle.'

The name was straight out of a gothic novel and I tingled a little, remembering Mum's sob when she'd read the woman's name and address on the envelope. I'd heard stories about the evacuees, about some of the things that went on, and I said on a breath, 'Was it ghastly?'

'Oh no, nothing like that. Not ghastly at all. Quite the opposite.'

'But the letter—. It made you—'

'The letter was a surprise, that's all. A memory from a long time ago.'

She fell silent then and I thought about the enormity of evacuation, how frightening, how odd it must have been for her as a child, to be sent to a strange place where everyone and everything was vastly different. I could still touch my own childhood experiences, the horror of being thrust into new, unnerving situations, the furious bonds that were forged of necessity – to buildings, to sympathetic adults, to special friends – in order to survive. Remembering those urgent friendships, something struck me: 'Did you ever go back, Mum, after the war? To Milderhurst?'

She looked up sharply. 'Of course not. Why would I?'

'I don't know. To catch up, to say hello. To see your friend.'

'No.' She said it firmly. 'I had my own family in London, my mother couldn't spare me, and besides, there was work to be done, cleaning up after the war. Then I met your father. Real life went on.' And with that, the familiar veil came down between us and I knew the conversation had ended.

We didn't have the roast in the end. Mum said she didn't feel like it and asked whether I minded terribly giving it a Miss this weekend. It seemed unkind to remind her that I don't eat meat anyway and that my attendance was more in the order of daughterly service, so I told her it was fine and suggested that she have a lie down. She agreed, and as I gathered my things into my bag she was already swallowing

two paracetamol in preparation, reminding me to keep my ears covered in the wind.

My dad, as it turns out, slept through the whole thing. He's older than Mum and retired from his work a few months ago. Retirement hasn't been good for him: he roams the house during the week, looking for things to fix and tidy, driving Mum mad, then on Sunday he rests in his armchair. The God-given right of the man of the house, he says to anyone who'll listen.

I gave him a kiss on the cheek and left the house, braving the chill air as I made my way to the tube, tired and unsettled and somewhat subdued to be heading back alone to the fiendishly expensive flat I'd shared until recently with Jamie. It wasn't until somewhere between High Street Kensington and Notting Hill Gate that I realized Mum hadn't told me what the letter said.

A Memory Clarifies

Writing it down now, I'm a little disappointed in myself. But everyone's an expert with the virtue of hindsight and it's easy to wonder why I didn't go looking, now that I know what there was to find. And I'm not a complete dolt. Mum and I met for tea a few days later and, although I failed again to mention my changed circumstances, I did ask her about the contents of the letter. She waved the question away and said it wasn't important, little more than a greeting; that her reaction had been brought on by surprise and nothing more. I didn't know then that my mum is a good liar or else I might have had reason to doubt her, to question further or to take special notice of her body language. You don't though, do you? Your instinct is usually to believe what people tell you, particularly people you know well, family, those you trust; at least mine is. Or was.

And so I forgot for a time about Milderhurst Castle and Mum's evacuation and even the odd fact that I'd never heard her speak of it before. It was easy enough to explain away, most things are if you try hard enough: Mum and I got on all right, but we'd never been especially close, and we certainly didn't go in for long chummy discussions about the past. Or the present, for that matter. By all accounts her evacuation had been a pleasant but forgettable experience; there was no reason she should've shared it with me. Lord knew, there was enough I didn't tell her.

Harder to rationalize was the strong, strange sense that had come upon me when I witnessed her reaction to the letter, the inexplicable certainty of an important memory I couldn't pin down. Something I'd seen, or heard, and since forgotten, fluttering now around the shadowy rim of my memory, refusing to stop still and let me name it. It fluttered and I wondered, trying very hard to remember whether perhaps another letter had arrived, years before, a letter that had also made her cry. But it was no use, the elusive, granular feeling refused to clarify and I decided it was more than likely my overactive imagination at work, the one my parents had always warned would get me into trouble if I wasn't careful.

At the time I had more pressing concerns: namely, where I was going to live when the period of pre-paid rent on the flat was up. The six months paid in advance had been Jamie's parting gift, an apology of sorts, compensation for his regrettable behaviour, but it would end in June. I'd been combing the papers and estate agents' windows for studio flats, but on my modest salary it was proving difficult to find anywhere even remotely close to work.

I'm an editor at Billing & Brown Book Publishers. They're a small family-run publisher, here in Notting Hill, set up in the late 1940s by Herbert Billing and Michael Brown, as a means, initially, of publishing their own plays and poetry. When they started I believe they were quite respected, but over the decades, as bigger publishers took a greater share of the market and public taste for niche titles declined, we've been reduced to printing genres we refer to kindly as 'speciality' and those to which we refer less kindly as 'vanity'. Mr Billing–Herbert–is my boss; he's also my mentor, champion and closest friend. I don't have many, not the living,

breathing sort at any rate. And I don't mean that in a sad and lonely way; I'm just not the type of person who accumulates friends or enjoys crowds. I'm good with words, but not the spoken kind; I've often thought what a marvellous thing it would be if I could only conduct relationships on paper. And I suppose, in a sense, that's what I do, for I've hundreds of the other sort, the friends contained within bindings, page after glorious page of ink, stories that unfold the same way every time but never lose their joy, that take me by the hand and lead me through doorways into worlds of great terror and rapturous delight. Exciting, worthy, reliable companions – full of wise counsel, some of them – but sadly ill-equipped to offer the use of a spare bedroom for a month or two.

For although I was inexperienced at breaking up – Jamie was my first real boyfriend, the sort with whom I'd envisaged a future – I suspected this was the time to call in favours from friends. Which is why I turned to Sarah. The two of us grew up as neighbours and our house became her second home whenever her four younger siblings turned into wild things and she needed to escape. I was flattered that someone like Sarah thought of my parents' rather staid suburban home as a refuge, and we remained close through secondary school until Sarah was caught smoking behind the toilets one too many times and traded in maths classes for beauty school. She works freelance now, for magazines and film shoots. Her success is a brilliant thing, but unfortunately it meant that in my hour of need she was away in Hollywood turning actors into zombies, her flat and its spare room sublet to an Austrian architect.

I fretted for a time, envisaging in piquant detail the sort

of life I might be forced to eke out sans roof, before, in a fine act of chivalry, Herbert offered me the sofa in his little flat below our office.

'After all you did for me?' he said, when I asked if he were sure. 'Picked me up off the floor, you did. Rescued me!'

He was exaggerating; I'd never actually found him on the floor, but I knew what he meant. I'd only been with them a couple of years and had just started to look around for something a little more challenging, when Mr Brown passed away. Herbert took the death of his partner so hard, though, that there was no way I could leave him, not then. He didn't appear to have anyone else, other than his rotund, piggy little dog, and although he never said as much, it became clear to me by the type and the intensity of his grief that he and Mr Brown had been more than business partners. He stopped eating, stopped washing, and drank himself silly on gin one morning even though he's a teetotaller.

There didn't seem to be much choice about the matter: I began making him meals, confiscated the gin, and when the figures were very bad and I couldn't raise his interest, I took it upon myself to door-knock and find us some new work. That's when we moved into printing flyers for local businesses. Herbert was so grateful when he found out that he quite overestimated my motivation. He started referring to me as his protégée and cheered considerably when he talked about the future of Billing & Brown; how he and I were going to rebuild the company in honour of Mr Brown. The glimmer was back in his eyes and I put off my job search a little longer.

And here I am now. Eight years later. Much to Sarah's bemusement. It's hard to explain to someone like her, a

creative, clever person who refuses to do anything on terms that aren't her own, that the rest of us have different criteria for satisfaction in life. I work with people I adore, I earn enough money to support myself (though not perhaps in a two-bedder in Notting Hill), I get to spend my days playing with words and sentences, helping people to express their ideas and fulfil their dreams of publication. Besides, it's not as if I haven't got prospects. Just last year, Herbert promoted me to the position of Vice Chairman; never mind that there are only the two of us working in the office full-time. We had a little ceremony and everything. Susan, the part-time junior, baked a pound cake and came in on her day off so we could all three drink non-alcoholic wine together from teacups.

Faced with imminent eviction, I gratefully accepted his offer of a place to bunk; it was really a very touching gesture, particularly in light of his flat's tiny proportions. It was also my only option. Herbert was extremely pleased. 'Marvellous! Jess will be beside herself – she does love guests.'

So it was, back in May, I was preparing to leave forever the flat that Jamie and I had shared, to turn the final, blank page of our story and begin a new one all of my own. I had my work, I had my health, I had an awful lot of books; I just needed to be brave, to face up to the grey, lonely days that stretched on indefinitely.

All things considered, I think I was doing pretty well: only occasionally did I allow myself to slip deep inside the pool of my own most maudlin imaginings. At these times I'd find a quiet, dark corner – all the better to give myself over fully to the fantasy – and picture in great detail those bland future days when I would walk along our street, stop at our building, gaze up at the windowsill on which I used to grow my herbs and see

someone else's silhouette fall across the glass. Glimpse the shadowy barrier between the past and the present, and know keenly the physical ache of being unable ever to go back…

I was a daydreamer when I was small, and a source of constant frustration to my poor mother. She used to despair when I walked through the middle of a muddy puddle, or had to be wrenched back from the gutter and the path of the hurtling bus, and say things like: 'It's dangerous to get lost inside one's own head,' or 'You won't be able to see what's really going on around you–that's when accidents happen, Edie. You must pay attention.'

Which was easy for her: never had a more sensible, pragmatic woman walked the earth. Not so simple; tough, for a girl who'd lived inside her head for as long as she'd been able to wonder: 'What if…?' And I didn't stop daydreaming, of course, I merely got better at hiding the fact. But she was right, in a way, for it was my preoccupation with imagining my bleak and dreary post-Jamie future that left me so utterly unprepared for what happened next.

In late May, we received a phone call at the office from a self-styled ghost whisperer who wanted to publish a manuscript about his other-worldly encounters on Romney Marsh. When a prospective new client makes contact, we do whatever we can to keep them happy, which is why I found myself driving Herbert's rather ancient Peugeot hatchback down to Kent for a meet, greet and, hopefully, woo. I don't drive often and I loathe the motorway when it's busy, so I left at the crack of dawn, figuring it gave me a clearer run at getting out of London unscathed.

I was there by nine, the meeting itself went very

well–wooing was done, contracts were signed–and I was back on the road again by midday. A much busier road by then, and one to which Herbert's car, incapable of going faster than fifty miles per hour without serious risk of tyre-loss, was decidedly unequal. I planted myself in the slow lane, but still managed to attract much frustrated horn-honking and head-shaking. It is not good for the soul to be cast as a nuisance, particularly when one has no choice in the matter, so I left the motorway at Ashford and took the back roads instead. My sense of direction is quite dreadful, but there was an AA book in the glove compartment and I was resigned to pulling over regularly to consult it.

It took me a good half hour to become well and truly lost. I still don't know how it happened, but I suspect the map's vintage played a part. That, and the fact that I'd been enjoying the view–fields speckled with cowslips; wild flowers decorating the ditches by the side of the road–when I probably should have been paying attention to the road itself. Whatever the cause, I'd lost my spot on the map, and was driving along a narrow lane over which great bowed trees were arched when I finally admitted that I had no idea whether I was heading north, south, east or west.

I wasn't worried, though, not then. As far as I could see, if I just continued on my way, sooner or later I was bound to reach a junction, a landmark, maybe even a roadside stall where someone might be kind enough to draw a big red X on my map. I wasn't due back at work that afternoon; roads didn't continue on forever; I just needed to keep my eyes peeled. Which I did.

And that's how I saw it. Poking up from the middle of an aggressive mound of ivy. One of those old white posts with

the letters carved into arrowed pieces of wood and the names of local villages pointing in each direction. *Milderhurst*, it read, *3 miles*.

I stopped the car and read the signpost again, hairs beginning to quiver on the back of my neck. An odd sixth sense overcame me and the cloudy memory that I'd been struggling to bring into focus ever since Mum's lost letter arrived in February resurrected itself. I climbed out of the car, as if in a dream, and followed where the signpost led. I felt like I was watching myself from the outside, almost as if I knew what I was going to find. And perhaps I did.

For there they were, half a mile along the road, right where I'd imagined they might be. Rising from the brambles, a set of tall iron gates, once grand but listing now at odd angles. Leaning, one towards the other, as if to share a weighty burden. A sign was hanging on the small stone gatehouse, a rusted sign that read, Milderhurst Castle.

My heart beat fast and hard against my ribcage and I crossed the road towards the gates. I gripped a bar with each hand, cold, rough, rusting iron beneath my palms, and brought my face, my forehead, slowly to lean against them. I followed with my eyes the gravel driveway that curved away, up the hill, until it crossed a bridge and disappeared behind a thick patch of woods.

It was beautiful and overgrown and melancholy, but it wasn't the view that stole my breath. It was the thudding realization, the absolute certainty, that I had been here before. That I had stood at these gates and peered between the posts and watched the birds flying like scraps of nighttime sky above the bristling woods.

Details shimmered into place around me and it seemed as if I'd stepped into the fabric of a dream; as if I were occupying, once again, the very same temporal and geographical space that my long-ago self had done. My fingers tightened around the bars and somewhere, deep within my body, I recognized the gesture. I'd done the same thing before. The skin of my palms remembered. *I* remembered. A sunny day, a warm breeze playing with the hem of my dress, my best dress, the shadow of my mother, tall in my peripheral vision.

I glanced sideways to where she stood, watching her as she watched the castle, the dark and distant shape on the horizon. I was thirsty, I was hot, I wanted to go swimming in the rippling lake that I could see through the gates. Swimming with the ducks and moorhens and the dragonflies making stabbing movements amongst the reeds along the banks.

'Mum,' I remembered saying, but she hadn't replied. 'Mum?' Her head turned to face me, and a split second passed in which not a spark of recognition lit her features. Instead, an expression held them hostage that I didn't understand. She was a stranger to me, a grown-up woman whose eyes masked secret things. I have words to describe that odd amalgam now: regret, fondness, sorrow, nostalgia; but back then I was clueless. Even more so when she said, 'I've made a mistake. I should never have come. It's too late.'

I don't think I answered her, not then. I had no idea what she meant and before I could ask she'd gripped my hand and pulled so hard that my shoulder hurt, dragging me back across the road to where our car was parked. I'd caught a

hint of her perfume as we went, sharper now and, mixed with the day's scorching air, the unfamiliar country smells. And she'd started the car, and we'd been driving, and I was watching a pair of sparrows through the window when I heard it. The same ghastly cry that she'd made when the letter arrived from Juniper Blythe.