

One The buff coloured envelope was addressed to her, Miss Belinda Lawrence, in thin spidery handwriting as though a tipsy insect had dipped its legs in ink and waltzed across the envelope. Belinda gave a tiny cry. 'Great-aunt Jane!' Normally they only exchanged cards at Christmas. The letter was brief and to the point. "Dear Belinda, I would appreciate it if you would come down to the cottage this weekend. I have something of interest for you. Yours, Jane Lawrence."

It was years since Belinda had been to the tiny West Country village. She felt guilty for not having visited her aunt more frequently, although to be honest, aunt Jane had never really given any indication that she would welcome visits from Belinda – the opposite, really, thought Belinda as she prepared for bed that evening. She sat brushing her silky black hair, making plans to talk to David, her boss, in the morning. She had some holidays due to her and would welcome a break. She could take Friday off, spend the weekend down in Bath and visit aunt Jane at the same time. As she settled down in bed and switched off the light, Belinda wondered what could be so important that her aunt would not divulge it in a letter but must tell her face to face. Great-aunt Jane lived in Milford, a small village outside of Bath, and it was there some years ago that Belinda, freshly arrived from Australia as an eager nineteenyear-old, had tracked down her father's aunt. 'What do you want?' the old lady had said suspiciously as she peered around the weather-beaten door. Belinda had been startled at her appearance and greeting, as she had written to her great-aunt advising her that she would call that day. 'Aunt Jane?' she enquired hesitantly, 'I'm your great niece, Belinda Lawrence. Did you get my letter?' The old lady eyed her up and down as though suspecting her of being an imposter, then nodded abruptly and stepped back to allow Belinda to enter the house. The first thing she noticed was the bone-chilling cold. Shuffling along on a walking stick, her tall figure stooped and the hem of her long skirt trailing on the floor, her aunt led the way into a long narrow room that ran the length of the back of the house. There she sank down into a worn armchair before a tiny ineffectual fire, pointing at a nearby chair for Belinda to sit down. Belinda sat tentatively on the edge of the seat under the eagle eye of the old woman, whose grey hair splayed out around her sharp features. 'So you're Robert's child.' She took in Belinda from the top of her head to her toes. The visit wasn't a great success, but before Belinda left she had coaxed the old lady into a grudging familiarity. She never visited her aunt again, feeling that the old lady had not exactly welcomed her, but had sent a Christmas card and was surprised when in the New Year one was returned to her. They had exchanged cards over the last few years and although the greetings never went beyond "best wishes" Belinda sensed that behind these few words her great-aunt had cherished this one contact with a now vanished family. Belinda chuckled to herself as she recalled that one meeting with aunt Jane, and found herself looking forward to this new visit. As the InterCity train rushed westwards as though it too actively sought the calm green of the Somerset hills, Belinda sank back further into her seat. The hazy morning light grew stronger and snow-covered fields flashed past as the speeding train snaked its way between small villages and distant manor houses. The warmth of the carriage and the gentle rocking lulled Belinda into a half-sleep, and with a start she opened her eyes as the train slowed to a halt at Reading. The usual handful of dark-suited businessmen alighted, to be replaced by an equal number of duplicates. They were joined by elderly women and the odd back-packer, disorientated and wild-eyed from the turmoil of arrival at Heathrow airport. As the train drew away from the platform, Belinda became aware of a pair of denim-clad, strong male lower limbs, as their owner leant forward to deposit a canvas bag on the case-rack above. With a loud sigh and a thump, the man dropped heavily into the seat next to Belinda. 'Whew. Just made it,' he gasped, his broad chest heaving as he drew his breath in deeply. 'That bus from Oxford seems to take longer each time.' Belinda drew back from him as his arm encroached on her space. She smiled a silent reply and transferred her gaze to the passing fields. But she was only too aware of her new companion's presence. It wasn't only that he was big, but his great padded waterproof jacket added to the impression that he was a young giant. He seemed somehow to

sprawl in the seat, and his legs, with their muddied boots, appeared too large for the space provided by the railway company. The steward appeared in the carriage with his trolley of coffee and sandwiches. Belinda reached for her purse and fumbled for some cash as she called to the steward. 'Coffee, please.' Her young companion dropped his magazine and also ordered coffee, which he paid for with a twentypound note. The steward handed over the plastic cups with their plastic seal and, grumbling about big spenders, gave the young man his change. Belinda slid her fingernails under the lid but it wouldn't budge. 'May I help?' the man enquired, reaching across to grasp the plastic container. 'No, I can manage.' But she couldn't and reluctantly let the cup go into his strong grasp. He took the lid in his powerful fingers and in one swift movement removed it. In doing so he tipped the cup on its side, allowing the contents to shoot up in the air and over Belinda's skirt. Belinda let out a shriek and leapt to her feet. At the same time the man jumped up, and their heads met with a resounding thump. They both fell backwards into their seats. She clutched her head with one hand and attempted to mop up the hot coffee now saturating her best woollen skirt. 'You clumsy oaf,' she cried, 'look what you've done.' He was rubbing his forehead and had a pained expression on his face. He glanced down at the sodden skirt. 'I'm terribly sorry. Here, let me help you.' He reached into his pocket and produced a grubby handkerchief that he brushed over Belinda's skirt. She pushed his hand away and rose unsteadily to her feet. 'Stop that. You're making it worse. Why did you have to sit next to me, when you had the whole train to choose from?' Belinda brushed past him and hurried down the passageway. The paper towel and cold water in the washroom did little to remove the coffee but at least she had mopped up most of it and she hoped that by the time she arrived at her aunt's it would have dried and that her coat would hide the stain. She stepped out into the carriage and walked back to her seat. The man had vanished and the space next to her was taken by an elderly woman who was intent on her knitting. Belinda took her place and the woman smiled vacantly at her and returned her attention to the clicking needles. Belinda sank back and glanced at her new companion. 'What happened to the young man?' asked Belinda. The needles faltered for a moment. 'Young man?' The woman's expression was one of bewilderment. 'The young man who was sitting here?' continued Belinda. A look of mild anguish passed over the woman's face as though she could barely recall what a young man was. Abruptly she shook her head. 'No, no,' she muttered, dismissing the suggestion that she knew any young man. Her needles raced into action again, her thoughts already returning to knitting patterns. Belinda turned to glance around the carriage but all that met her eye were the crowns of various heads engrossed in newspapers or travel guides. As Belinda left the station at Bath to make her way along Pierrepont Street, the grace of the Georgian city gradually seduced her, and all anger and annoyance evaporated as she proceeded into what Samuel Pepys described as "the prettiest city in the kingdom". Soon the town, shimmering gold in the pale sunlight, lay behind Belinda as her taxi sped towards the village of Milford. In a few minutes they were passing open green fields where patches of snow lay melting in the warmth of the West Country air, but the sun that had greeted her in Bath weakened beneath a battery of threatening clouds. Suddenly the car turned off the main road and drove down a short hill until it came to crossroads where four cottages stood, one on each corner. The taxi halted outside a large grey stone two-storey cottage that stood a little apart from the others. 'That was the village, that was,' said the driver as he hauled himself from the car, 'the only other sign of life is the local pub at the bottom of the hill.' He pointed down past the front of aunt Jane's house towards the peaceful jade hills that rolled away as far as the eye could see. Belinda took her overnight bag from the taxi, paid the driver and stepped up to the door by the walled garden, which led to the back of the house. This was the way that she had entered the cottage all those years ago but this time the door did not yield to her. Try as she may the rear entrance remained securely locked. Belinda stepped back onto the road and inspected the cottage. The front of the house faced down the hill and overlooked a large garden area that stretched the length of the

slope, down almost to the pub. The side of the building blended into the wall that bordered the property and the back of the cottage faced up the hill towards the other dwellings in the village. Behind the house was a walled kitchen garden. The one small window in the otherwise blank wall abutting the road was firmly shut and wooden shutters prevented her from peering into the interior. A little past the cottage set into the high wall was a huge wooden door that Belinda supposed led into the front of the house. She made her way down the steep hill towards it and with great effort managed to turn the handle. With a screech of rusted metal as though surprised by the unforeseen intruder, as well as complaining at the prospect of future activity, the heavy garden gate swung open. Belinda stepped gingerly on to the garden path. It was clear that her aunt had given up any attempt at keeping the garden under control. Weeds, long and tentacled, shrubs and the chaotic limbs of trees frustrated her progress. The sun slid behind a dark cloud and a sudden sharp wind shook the bare branches of the intertwining trees. A shiver of fear ran through Belinda as she struggled along the path, slipping almost to her knees on the moss-covered stones. The facade of the large cottage stretched up before her as she picked her way through the untamed plants. The slate-grey stone of the building darkened in the diminishing light and from the distance came a low rumble of thunder. Belinda's reflection sped in erratic liquid manoeuvres across the uneven glass of the shrouded windows. Dead leaves blew across the decaying stone slabs that formed the terrace. The cottage was bigger than she recalled, the front door reaching almost to the level of the first floor windows. Belinda dropped her bag and rapped her arrival on the great doorknocker. The sound thundered in her ears but brought no reaction from the resident of the house. The door handle rattled loosely in her hand. 'Aunt Jane? Are you there? It's Belinda.' The splatter of raindrops on the stone was her only reply. She stepped back and looked up to the windows of the first floor. Something dark and cunning moved on the terrace balustrade and Belinda turned in fright to face it. A gross grey rat scuttled for cover. Tiny hairs on Belinda's neck moved. The rustic silence seemed unnatural after the London clamour. Rapidly she beat upon the door, again calling to her aunt. The door gave a sudden click and, with surprising ease, swung back noiselessly on its hinges. Belinda hesitated on the doorstep. 'Why would she write, invite me down, and then go away?' she asked herself. She was racked with indecision. The light from the garden extended only a few feet into the hall. A wave of dusty, malodorous air spewed out. Belinda swallowed hard and peered into the blackness. 'Aunt Jane? Are you there?' Her voice sounded dry and querulous in the dominant stillness of the ancient house. 'I wish I'd never come,' she muttered to herself, while silently cursing her great-aunt. At a shriek from above she whirled about to see a large bird swoop down from the rooftop to settle on a tree branch. It watched her intently with a hostile eye. In its beak it held a small furry animal that struggled to break free of the vice-like grip. Minute drops of bright vermilion blood flowed from the bird's beak and fell to colour the ash-grey terrace stone. A shock of revulsion forced Belinda to step backwards. Before she realised it she was standing in the entrance hall. The gloom stretched before her, menacing and enigmatic. Shrugging off her apprehension Belinda slid her hand along the wall until it connected with a heavy brass light switch. 'She's probably gone shopping in Bath. Country people never lock doors,' Belinda said loudly, more to hear the comfort of her own voice than to explain her aunt's absence. The dim light from the inadequate bulb high against the ceiling cast a faint illumination over the hall. Belinda recalled that on the left side was a large drawing room. On the right was an unused dining room, where stacked boxes vied for space with overcrowded, over-ornate furniture. Belinda made her way slowly to the rear of the hall where a door leading to the back section of the house stood squarely in the middle of the wall. She remembered from her previous visit that the back lower-ground floor consisted of the long sitting room where her aunt had entertained her, a small entrance hall from the rear door, a kitchen and bathroom. There was a narrow staircase that led upstairs. The door opened reluctantly with heavy creaks from unoiled hinges. Belinda grimaced. Aunt Jane obviously never used the front of the house.

The smell strengthened as she stepped into the long room and she fumbled for her handkerchief to hold over her nose. The shuttered window filtered a weak light into the musty chamber and Belinda moved tentatively towards it. A small table crashed to the floor as she bumped into it but she reached the window, flung back the shutters and opened the window, gulping in the fresh air as she did so. Feeling a little refreshed, she inspected the room. The chill air infiltrated even her heavy winter coat and she turned to the fireplace to stir the ashes. They did not respond to the probing of the poker and Belinda realised that the fire had been dead for some time. 'Surely she'd have a fire in the middle of winter.' But the dank air declared this was not so. The room appeared much as she remembered it. Against the wall there was a divan that looked as though it had been used as a bed. The chairs that she and her aunt sat in when they first met were in their place and a cup and saucer stood on a small table next to her aunt's chair. Belinda took the cup and inspected it. The dregs of the milky tea were covered with a layer of dust. The shiver of fear returned and Belinda sensed that there might be an unpleasant reason for her aunt's unexplained absence. 'She may be ill in bed,' thought Belinda, glancing up to the ceiling. She had never been upstairs, and a tremor of dread made her shiver more violently. Belinda crossed the long room to a door that she remembered led into the back hall and the staircase. The stench increased as she pulled the door towards her and she heard tiny sounds of scattering feet. 'Rats!' The stench and the prospect of vermin made Belinda hesitate but she was determined to find her aunt. She moved tentatively across the hall, her hands held searchingly before her. Her foot caught on something solid and she stumbled and felt herself falling. With a scream she plummeted onto the grimy floor. Her hand slid in a sticky substance. Stunned, she fought to catch her breath. She lay dazed for a moment, her head on the floor. As her eyes grew accustomed to the imperceptible light from the other room Belinda realised that only inches away, her aunt Jane's deathly glazed eyes stared accusingly out of her decaying face. Two The police carried aunt Jane's body bag to th