

A
Kind of
Vanishing

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*For my Mum and Dad – May and Bill –
special parents.*

And for LMH for so very much.

Part One

June 1968

One

‘One... two... three... four... five...’

Later Eleanor would describe to the Scotland Yard detective how it had been her turn to hide and she hadn’t had long. Now that the counting had stopped Alice would come at any moment.

She heard a crack, a twig or the sound of plastic breaking. Someone was there. She squeezed through a gap in the bushes and plunged recklessly into the tangled undergrowth, wincing as thorny tentacles scratched her skin. Finally she nestled into a space, concealed deep in the branches.

Eleanor was glad to have got away from Alice, even for a few minutes. She was not enjoying playing with her. Eleanor usually invited friends down from London where her family lived, but that Whitsun all possible candidates had been quick to say they were doing other things. She wouldn’t have minded being on her own, but her parents were convinced that Eleanor, the youngest Ramsay and officially designated as a ‘problem’, would benefit from calm and mature companionship. The perfect solution had been Alice, the daughter of Steve Howland, the village of Charbury’s new postman. Alice’s family had just moved to Charbury from Newhaven, ten miles away, and she knew no one. She was understood to be sensible and well behaved, the kind of girl who would stop Eleanor being a nuisance or getting into scrapes. In the Ramsay family, Eleanor was the benchmark against which her brother and sister measured their behaviour and took their allotted roles. Gina was the eldest; at nearly thirteen already loftily occupying

a different world to her siblings. Lucian was the only boy; he would be a doctor like his father, a self-imposed destiny, for his mother wanted him to be an artist. Then there was Eleanor, who talked too fast, got red and hot after playing, with a foghorn voice that heralded a slipstream of chaos wherever she went.

Eleanor Ramsay would be nine years old in 1968, although that day, Tuesday, the fourth of June, she was eight and counting the days – a vast twenty-four more – until her birthday. Her sister Gina had said Eleanor was too old for hide and seek, which ensured that Alice, who had been nine for three months and who always agreed with Gina, was a grudging, even obstructive participant.

Although Eleanor had hidden, she was upset at Alice's treachery in stopping counting. Balanced on her haunches, she fulminated at the injustice. Eleanor set huge store in playing fair. She was reluctant to admit something bad in someone else, so it was with dismay that she silently formed the words.

Alice had cheated.

With her chin resting on bony knees, Eleanor crouched low and waited.

Since they'd met, only four and a half days earlier, Alice had tried to keep things ordinary. Eleanor was speechless when Alice said there were no robbers or ghosts, no dragons or kings and insisted they play hopscotch. She watched, dumbfounded, as Alice marked out squares in coloured chalk on the concrete by the swings in completely straight lines. After Alice had won five times in a row, she had made Eleanor watch her skip a hundred skips non-stop. She had put out a hand like a policeman barring the way when Eleanor quickly whispered, for someone might come, about the dangerous mountain ranges waiting to be explored and the child-eating monsters they must fight and vanquish. Alice's voice came through her nose as she declared Eleanor's scary jungle was a dirty green sofa and that she had done a project on Sussex and there were no mountains. Eleanor gaped uncomprehending when Alice had screamed 'yuk!' at the cat hairs on the cushions and the crumbs underneath. She would only sit on the sofa after Gina had flounced in and flung

herself into a corner hugging a cushion, scoffing at her younger sister. Later Alice said she hated dirt and mess, implying Eleanor was to blame. Now as Eleanor stared up through the roof of criss-cross branches, half closing her eyes so that the shapes of light became a fuzzy kaleidoscope, she decided Alice didn't know anything, whatever she said.

Eleanor had brought Alice to the Tide Mills village the day after they first met. Four and a half days was a lifetime to the nearly-nine-year-old, and now while she lay in wait for Alice to come looking, Eleanor could barely remember her life before she knew her. She pictured the many-levelled stretch of time, packed with evil witches, gnarled branches, and dark hiding places lurking with mythic murderers and strutting Cindy dolls with hairdos like Alice's mother, with growing despondency. It was only Tuesday; she had at least four more days of Alice before they went back to London. Eleanor didn't know how she would bear it. Her whole half term had been wasted. The Tide Mills village had been her last resort: a place where the ghosts of children now old and dead might lure Alice away from skipping and talking about dresses and dancing. It had been a big sacrifice for Eleanor to reveal her most secret place.

Eleanor would come to think of this decision as a mistake.

Every time Eleanor visited the deserted village, which was a quarter of a mile from the White House, she found something new: a 1936 sixpence, a perfume bottle, and one Christmas a great triumph, the discovery of the name 'Herbert' scratched into a wall in the communal wash and mangle house. The squat building had no roof, and rotting rafters let blocks of light slant across the walls, still lined with chipped and cracked white porcelain tiles. At the far end, in the shadow of a twisted pear tree – evidence of an orchard – were two bent and rusting mangles appearing to grow out of the chalk. Alice had hung back, arms folded, as Eleanor fervently related the tale of Prince Herbert's four straining stallions. The magnificent beasts were, she informed her hoarsely, even now tethered to a huge ring fixed to the granary wall, eager to canter to far off corners of

his kingdom. Alice had retreated out into the sunshine with a shrug as Eleanor paced out the scene, talking rapidly and raising her voice as her audience drifted away. In the end she decided to skip the story and get straight to explaining the rules: each time a hiding place was discovered they lost a life. They each had three lives and after that they were truly dead. The first one to die must give up.

The one thing that Eleanor would never forget was that she had described these rules quite clearly to Alice. When they had first played hide and seek last Sunday afternoon, in the lane near her home, Alice had spied on her while she was still counting to see where Eleanor hid. This had made Eleanor very doubtful that Alice would play properly this time. But that last morning, as they did exploring and excavating, because Eleanor was practising to be an archaeologist, Alice had been quite obliging, at least for the first couple of hours.

Whenever Eleanor talked, Alice ogled the sky with saucer eyes, doing peculiar things with her mouth. After only two days, Eleanor had spotted that when this happened, Alice was being Gina, using the same voice her sister put on to talk to her horse, where words did a kind of swooping. This gave Eleanor an uncomfortable feeling. A phantom Gina was there too. Most people tried to be like Gina. A fact that absolutely baffled Eleanor, who found nothing in her older sister worth imitating.

There was no further sign of Alice coming to find her. Eleanor pushed and patted loose soil into a comfortable hillock, as she considered how there was no point to skipping. Alice would get ready for what was in effect a Skipping Show with the studied care of the famous: tossing her long hair back Gina-fashion and tugging at her skirt to keep her stupid frilly knickers hidden. Eleanor wondered why Alice breathed so noisily: taking huge breaths as if she was suffocating.

'I like coffee, I like tea...'

The matchstick legs in white socks had blurred, as the rope whirred round and round, slapping the ground. Alice never let Eleanor use her rope for anything except skipping, and certainly not for tying up bandits. It was new and clean and a present

from her Dad. As she had dutifully watched Alice perform skipping feats in the village playground, Eleanor waited on the baking asphalt for a rescue party that never came.

Someone watching the two girls as once more they prepared to play hide and seek on that Tuesday might have guessed that apart from their age, they had little in common. One stood stiffly sentinel with reedy arms folded across her budding chest. Her pinafore dress was a primrose-yellow cotton column, while white socks with no wrinkles were strapped to the cut out figure by their paper folds. The other girl was recklessly boyish in a huge grass-stained shirt, with short sleeves that reached to her wrists. An observer might have frowned at the cropped haystack hair which stuck up at one side, imagining a mother's neglect. It would be hard to make sense of this child's erratic behaviour. She darted back and forth around the other girl, gesticulating urgently like a director allotting actors their strict space and choreography: leaping, jumping, pointing. An onlooker might have marvelled at the poise of the cleaner, party-dressed child, pale skin rendering her ghostly against the tumbledown buildings, as the goblin creature cavorted indefatigably. The pose of suffering tolerance endowed this child with calm maturity beyond her years.

Then the boy-girl belted away over the hill towards the sea leaving the Angelic One alone. Abruptly, she put hands to her face, an action that was heart rending until she began to count in a cooing voice with quavering tones that lacked conviction.

Eleanor could hear the echo of Alice's voice in her head, although it must be ages since Alice had stopped. There was still no sign of her. She had pronounced each number with the hesitant chant of an infant class still learning to count. Eleanor pictured Alice's words as jewels that – like Alice's three Sindy dolls – she kept stored in a cupboard for special occasions. Eleanor always knew what Alice was going to say because her sentences had belonged to other people first.

'My favourite colour is pink, what's yours? My best dinner is roast pork. I hate girls who climb trees. When I grow up I want to be a nurse, who do you want to be?'

Eleanor had not known who she would be. Alice had made it clear she didn't believe her by tutting and sighing. Eleanor was telling the truth, but to please her she finally lit upon Mickey Dolenz, which had disgusted Alice.

Eleanor never knew the right answers to Alice's questions. She pondered now, one foot wedged against a tussock. How could Alice hate girls who climbed trees when she didn't know all of them?

Eleanor stopped breathing and jerked her head up.

There was the unmistakable sound of someone walking on the path, treading quietly so as not to be heard. Eleanor shut her eyes to better hear the click of Alice's shiny shoes on the flints. She could have seen her if she had lifted the branches, but with her eyes shut, Eleanor was cloaked with invisibility. The footsteps crunched past and faded away.

One, two, one, two.

Eleanor's ears were pounding and to stop the sound she clapped her hands over them and pummelled away the memory. She slumped against a bush, relaxing into its armchair comfort, shifting until the springy branches stopped poking into her back.

She felt guilty for bringing Alice to the empty village again. They were playing illegally because their parents had forbidden them to go there. It was overgrown with tall weeds and overblown with untold dangers. Eleanor's father had said the ground was subsiding and that eventually the whole lot would fall into the sea. There were rumours in the village of an attack there after the war, a child's strangled body found at the bottom of the cliff and no one caught. Eleanor had taken all her friends there.

On the first day Alice's mother had told them to play nicely on the village green where there were swings, and a lumbering roundabout that was hard to push and hard to stop. Eleanor hated the square of tarmac surrounded by yellowed grass, with no hiding places, dotted with benches for dead people whose names Alice said she knew off by heart. Skipping and hopscotch were the only things to do there, since Alice

didn't play football. Eleanor couldn't skip, her legs caught up in the snaking rope, but Alice's mother had said Alice must stay clean and tidy and not crumple her lovely new dress. This meant she refused to move around much. While her Mum was giving instructions, Alice had smoothed the cuffs and stroked her fancy dress with pointy pink fingers and, doing what Eleanor considered a stupid smile, had turned into the ancient Mrs Mahey warbling nursery rhymes with the infants in their school play.

'...six, seven, eight, nine, ten, then I put it back again...'

Eleanor heard her holiday clang shut.

When she was at home in London, Eleanor would make up stories of perfect afternoons at the White House. Everyone would sit together in the shade of great-uncle Jack's willow tree, planted after he was gassed in the trenches in the First World War. The sound of her father pouring tea, as she traced jigsaw patches of sunlight on the stained tablecloth – in her fantasies always piled with cakes – made her stomach buzz. Shutting her eyes and lifting her arm slowly, Eleanor could feel the weight of the jug of freezing lemonade, and the smooth curvy handle on her dead grandmother's bone china teapot that was more like a friendly person than crockery. She knew her Dad felt the same way about it, although he never said. Instead he would tell her Mum they shouldn't use it because one day they would break it. This would make her mother use the smile she could snap off suddenly like a trick.

'This is supposed to be a home not a museum stuffed full of your dead relatives.'

Mark Ramsay was right, for one day the teapot did get broken. By that time, a morning over thirty years later as the sun shone brightly on a new century, so much was different that while the Ramsays stared dumbstruck at the smashed china scattered across the kitchen tiles, they felt nothing at all.

As Eleanor lay in bed back home in Hammersmith she would wander around the White House's large garden, smelling the lawn just mowed by Leonard, the very old man who also did the grass in the churchyard where his wife had

been 'sleeping by the west buttress for forty years'. Tripping between the long rectangular beds, past the caged sweet peas, the nets weighed down by fallen leaves from the oak tree above, she would bury her face in her pillow to muffle the silence from the floors below. She would think of the newly dug soil and the scent of roses that her mother loved and by concentrating, conjure up the clinking of cups with chipped lips and knives with blotches like snowflakes on the blades. The windows were always open wide, tattered curtains ballooning out in the breeze like sails. Her parents would be laughing, her sister snorting like a horse, and her brother sprawled back on his tilting chair in fits at Eleanor's jokes. By concentrating hard, Eleanor could give these vaporous figures substance.

The Tide Mills ruins belonged to Eleanor. She had never seen children from the village there and only once a grown-up. Last holidays she had come across an old tramp in a torn donkey jacket, with long grey hair combed over his head like Bobby Charlton, waiting by the disused level crossing for an approaching train. It was because of the tramp that her parents had absolutely forbidden her to play at the Mills.

Last year when they were in Sussex for the summer, Eleanor had rushed straight down there while everyone was unpacking and unaware that she had gone. She trotted round checking on the state of the buildings. Once a grand house with a porch and three storeys, only a section of the ground floor remained of the Mill Owner's home. There was one corner of the upper floor, as if someone had pared away the rest with a knife. A complete tiled fireplace was attached to the snatch of wall, the paper long gone, the dado had rotted to a stain.

Eleanor had traced the disgusting smell to a half eaten cat on the floor of what had been the kitchen. It nestled on terracotta tiles with coarse tufts of grass pushing between them. The lower half of the cat's furry face was missing. As Eleanor knelt down, its eye sockets blinked and she tumbled backwards as a cloud of blowflies rose up around her. The carcass buzzed like a gigantic bee. A doctor's daughter, she had meticulously examined the stiff matted body, poking into the dried fur with

a stick, quite free of emotion. The floor was encrusted with oyster shells and tiny bones, coke tins, beer bottles, jagged bits of coloured plastic, cigarette ends and suspicious gobbets of tissue – several generations of rubbish that formed clues to lives long dead or now lived elsewhere.

Honeysuckle and goose grass grew up one wall forcing the remains of a window frame further from the brick. A low wall was all that was left of a row of workman's cottages opposite the mill. Eleanor had run along the top, leaping over gaps for windows and doors. The cottage furthest from the sea, in the shelter of the granary wall, had survived. It was a Hansel and Gretel house with its little windows and low doorway. Someone, perhaps Bobby Charlton, had been in the front room. There were squashed triangular milk cartons and leathery banana skins all over the floor. The staircase was missing, so there was no way up. She heard skittering and scurrying as she crept inside. The glass had long gone from the windows. She thought of the house as a skull, a vacant home gaping out at the countryside. During that summer Eleanor had begun weeding, pulling at the stalks that thrust through cracks in the sun-baked flagstones. Her efforts at restoration were slow and haphazard. One evening she had picked out the prettiest weeds. Mrs Jackson had said that nothing was a weed if you liked it. It all depended where it grew. As Eleanor hopped and jumped along irregular railway sleepers in the track that used to run up to the Seaford and London line, she had paused to add scabious and red clover to a sweaty bunch of nodding dandelions and daisies to present to her Mum.

She had planted seeds at the back of the Mill House in a bit of soil she had cleared, unaware that a hundred years earlier a portly widower had taken as much pride in dahlias growing in the same spot. The next time she visited the ruins, Eleanor hurried to see if the seeds had sprouted and was greeted by a tangle of red and orange nasturtiums. She had never grown anything before and was ecstatic, but she had to keep quiet about it because she wasn't meant to be there. Until Alice she had never shown anyone.

The tiny garden was her secret.

When Alice had seen the long thin mound with its straggling nasturtiums she had shuddered dramatically and pronounced it was like a grave. There was, she had crowed, absolutely no point in having flowers in the middle of rubbish. Also she had done nasturtiums at school. Whatever that meant.

Eleanor preferred the Tide Mills to anywhere because it was full of places to hide and make dens. She was never alone. As she sat on the worn front step of the cottage or trailed along the old railway line, she saw the shadows of what, until the extension of Newhaven harbour at the end of the nineteenth century, had been a thriving community of several hundred people.

Eleanor would hear the clanging bell warning of a train and then a fantastic silver locomotive would steam by, sneezing and puffing, with a handsome name like *Alexander the Great* or *The Flying Horseman*. There would be Summer Holiday trains, hammock racks bundled with suitcases and a rainbow jumble of beach things smelling of warm, soft plastic. The train would stop at the halt, with 'Bongville' painted in uneven sloping letters on a large concrete sign, breaking the country silence with a clattering of doors and bundling of cases, as the ticket barrier framed a parade of faces sporting a deathly London pallor.

Eleanor seldom reflected that she invented the most exciting bits of her life. The whimsical world in her head was real, the life she lived a dull perseverance in comparison. When Alice had insisted she was lying, Eleanor hadn't understood.

Eleanor had in fact rarely been on a train. In June 1968, Doctor Ramsay drove his family down to Sussex in his brand new racing green Rover, which Alice had said made her feel sick when he had brought them home from the swings the second time they played together.

Until that June, when everything changed, the Ramsays had spent every holiday at the White House, a three-storey detached house fronted by a sweeping circular drive that was reached by entering through two huge wrought iron gates. The

house had been built by Eleanor's great-great-grandfather with money her mother said he got through slavery, just as Mark's father, Judge Henry Ramsay, whose scary portrait hung in the chilly dining room at the White House, had made his money through hanging people. That made her Dad go on about how James Ramsay was rich because of his share in the Tide Mills and investment in Newhaven harbour and that Henry (he always referred to his father by his first name) had wanted to create a better world through the rule of law. The children would sigh and exchange looks because the history lesson about James Ramsay and the stained-glass-lamb-window in the church was coming next. To make the story friendly, Doctor Ramsay's youngest daughter pictured James Ramsay as a white woolly lamb with her cat Crawford's fluffy front paws.

This year seagulls had splattered the outside walls of the only remaining cottage at the Tide Mills with gashes of berry-red and scattered fluffy feathers on the rubble floor, which had also made Alice feel sick. Fat pigeons jostled and clattered in the larder of the cottage, their wistful voices amplified in the enclosed space. Gorse and blackberry bushes, nettles and dandelions made it hard to walk along the pathways between the buildings. Lichen and moss had moved like a tide over the worn stone, which peeped out like bone through tissue in places where the ground dipped away. Once, ferreting in the undergrowth, Eleanor had discovered an iron key as big as her hand and, easing and tugging at it with a patience no one knew she possessed, had got it out from between the stones without disturbing the tiled floor of the Mill Owner's hallway. It fitted the rusted lock of the outhouse door, but would not turn. She put it in her Box of Secrets.

The Box of Secrets came from South Africa, and was an unwanted present to her mother. The cedarwood was always warm and smelled of Saturday mornings perched on her Mum's bed listening to snippets from *Vogue* or *Nova* and examining pictures of beautiful women. This image greeted Eleanor as she slipped the gold catch and opened the lid, and cheered her whatever her mood.

The secrets included three train tickets found in the waste paper basket in her father's study, an ivory compact still with traces of rouge that had been given to her by an actress friend of her parents. A Victorian Bun penny, two farthings and the sixpence from the Tide Mills were wrapped in tissue paper and kept in a soft leather bag with a drawstring. Tucked in next to this was a silver case shaped like a plump cushion. It was lined with a nest of red velvet on which rested a tuft of grey fur from her rabbit, killed and mostly eaten up by a neighbour's cat when Eleanor was seven. She had snipped off the fur from the leftovers. After this Eleanor promised herself never to mind things again.

Eleanor acquired her most cherished treasure a few days before meeting Alice. The brand new penknife had a sharp blade, and a fan of gleaming tools. She had stolen it from the gun shop where they had gone to buy a new riding hat for Gina. Eleanor had not known she was going to take the knife. Her hand whipped out when the man went to get more hats from the stock room. Once she held it, cold and heavy, she could not put it back. No one was looking as she slipped it into her pocket. Eleanor believed that the knife made her capable of anything.

Later she told the police she had the penknife with her the last time they played hide and seek. She realised too late that she shouldn't have mentioned it because when they asked to see it, she couldn't find it.

Eleanor kept the Box of Secrets under a floorboard in her Sussex bedroom; and when she couldn't sleep in London would make a mental inventory of its contents. After the light was switched off, she waited for the hunched ghouls to become the chest of drawers, the toy cupboard and the wardrobe. Sometimes they never did. Then she composed a spell to lift her bed over London, and fly away across the Sussex Downs to Charbury where it was always summer. There she could lie and listen to the push and hush of the waves, tucked up safely. Eleanor never got back to London; she was already asleep as her bed landed by the sea.

That Tuesday Eleanor had said Alice could hide first. She had hidden ridiculously. As Eleanor reached ‘ten’ and started to search, she straight away spotted Alice peering round from behind the crumbling wall of the Mill House. Eleanor was relieved. She preferred hiding to seeking.

As warm breezes brushed the brambles of Eleanor’s hiding place, they carried the scent of lavender, wild roses and blackberries and bluffed around her like her Mum’s best hugs. She rubbed her nose to stop the tickle. She mustn’t sneeze and give herself away. She didn’t want Alice to find her.

Then after a few moments it dawned on Eleanor that there was no point in hiding. Alice wasn’t looking for her any more. That much was clear. Eleanor pushed aside brambles, and slithered along the floor of the leafy tunnel on her stomach, moving further away from the path. Thorns tore at her skin; soon beads of blood dotted the scratches. Eleanor’s mouth was dry. She was miles from civilisation. It could be days before she found drinking water. She had signed a pledge in blood. *My mother will die if I fail.* She had a new task and would return – like Odysseus (or was it Hercules?) – to the darkened room where Isabel Ramsay lay only when it was completed.

Isabel Ramsay was unaware of the swollen rivers crossed or mad monsters vanquished by her small daughter in her name. Eleanor would tiptoe into her bedroom against her Dad’s instructions and kiss the creamy, scented cheek. In Eleanor’s story Isabel was always glad to see her and leaping out of bed would tug back the curtains and gasp at the bright sun making elongated shadows across the lawn.

‘What is the time? It was morning when I went to sleep.’

‘You have been asleep over a hundred years, under a wicked spell.’

She would explain about spells.

‘After much trouble I have released you.’

‘That long? It seems like a minute. Thank you, darling!’

Then her mother would see the tea table with the white cloth under Uncle Jack’s tree. Her handsome husband and

two other children would wave all together in a row. Hearty family waves like rainbows; a collection of cheery hats and bright summer clothes. Eleanor would lead her Mum out into the sunny garden, doing the slow, traily walk practised in her bedroom. She would give her Darjeeling tea in her favourite cup with the wafer thin edge.

After a few minutes Eleanor crawled into blinding sunlight. She was only inches from a drop of six feet to the beach. With a moment's hesitation, she scooted around to face the other way and inched over the edge on her stomach, feet first, feeling for toeholds. She found one. As she trusted her weight to it and felt for the next one, it gave way in a spray of chalk and she shot down, and crash-landed on the shingle, bruising her knee and jarring her ankles. She heaved herself into a sitting position, relishing the pain as part of the massive task she had to fulfil. Her palms were stinging. But she was alive. She wiped her forehead with her handkerchief, dashing the cloth across her face, the way her Dad did.

The beach was enclosed by a chalky outcrop at one end, and a towering pile of rocks at the other that few people climbed. When the policeman asked her to recall details of that day, Eleanor said the beach was empty. A rusting boat, slouching dark and sulky against the sky, interrupted a stretch of pebbles that dropped in terraces to a finger of wet sand at the shoreline. She told him it was a cloudless day full of colours: yellow, blue and red.

Chief Inspector Hall did not appreciate these vivid observations; the little girl's stream of words made the stiff-suited man shuffle about uneasily on his chair. He thought that there was something strange about her and got stern when Eleanor told him she liked to paddle in the water, and wasn't frightened of the tide returning because she had a tide-table book. He didn't know any other little girls like her, and was especially irritated when she took this comment as a compliment.

Eleanor collapsed back on the stones, keeping her knees bent to avoid the scorching pebbles, with one hand flung over her heart, as the wound from the sword grew worse. She was

badly hurt, but must keep going, she had a long journey ahead to find the Indian Amulet stolen from the King's crown. She must return with it or her mother would die of the curse.

This last bit was based on reality. The day before, Eleanor had searched her bedroom and the playroom for the amulet given to her by Mrs Jackson, who used to live next door in St Peter's Square. Without it Eleanor knew she too would be cursed. She had begun to suspect that Alice stole things. She had to find it. She had better find Alice first.

Eleanor particularly hated the way Alice said her name: in a sing-song voice not as a real name tripping off her tongue well worn and well loved, but like a thing held in delicate and disgusted fingers. Most people called her Elly; until Alice, no one had called her Eleanor unless they were cross, or a teacher.

The tide was coming in so she couldn't go on to the beach, instead, she tramped back up the cliff path. She would go home through the Tide Mills.

The distant hoot of a train on the London line sounded across the fields. Now there were no birds in the sky and nothing moved. The day they arrived, there had been swifts but Lucian said they had gone to Africa. Eleanor wished she could fly to Africa whenever she wanted. She aimed powerful, accurate kicks at stones as she dodged and skipped back up the track. She was Georgie Best as she scored the winning goal.

If Alice was hiding, Eleanor considered it was really unfair. It wasn't her turn. She chased up the six wooden steps to the short village street and began pacing from one end of the ruins to the other. She knew she was being watched, so she walked with her hands behind her back, like the Mill Owner checking the great wheels were turning in the deep pond under the arches of the bridge before going in for his tea in the big house behind the high wall.

She could forget about Alice and go on playing.

Eleanor tiptoed around the cottage and kicked open the back door. It swung inwards and crashed against the wall. Someone had oiled the hinges. A pigeon flapped down from a hole in the ceiling and flew past her, its wings breezing near

her face. She kept perfectly still, listening to the silence. There was no sign of Alice.

She stepped back outside. Then she saw her. A figure was standing near the halt, half hidden behind the Bongville sign. Everything shimmered in the blistering heat so that at first the person and the tall thistles appeared to be doing a strange swaying dance. One minute they were all thistles, the next people. As she got nearer, Eleanor forgot that to be quite fair she should give Alice one more chance. She forgot that Alice had two more lives to go as she crept forward on grandmother's footsteps, claspng her penknife. All she could think of was the huge task she had to accomplish if she was to save her Mum and release everyone from the curse. She began to count, in a voice loud and low:

'Five... four... three... two... one... COMING!'