



*Beneath Ingleborough Fell, Yorkshire Dales,  
May 2007*

**B**ECAUSE IT WAS HER WEDDING GIFT, STELLA CAME FIRST OUT OF the tunnel. Filthy, wet and shivering hot-cold from the effort of the last fifty-metre uphill haul, she crawled on her belly, pulling herself face down into the empty blackness beyond.

She moved slowly, keeping taut the umbilical line that linked her to Kit, feeling first with her hands for the quality of the footing, then shuffling forward no further than the spilled light from her head-torch.

Like the tunnel, the cave was of chalk. Her gloved hands pressed on stone, washed smooth by century upon patient century of water. Her torch showed bright trickles of damp everywhere, washing over flat, undulating limestone. Beyond the splash of yellow light was unknown territory, unmapped, unexplored, as likely to be a ledge and a bottomless fall as a flat cave floor.

With cold-stiff fingers, she established safety, set a bolt into the wall by the mouth of the tunnel, clipped in to it, and tugged the rope to let Kit know that she had stopped and not to pay out more rope. By the light of her head-lamp, she checked her compass and her watch and marked the incline and her estimate of its length and direction with wax pencil on the chart that she

kept in her chest pocket, where it would not snag on tunnel walls.

Only after she had done all these things did Stella turn and look up and round, and send the thread of her torch into the vast, cathedral space Kit had found for her.

‘My God . . . Kit, come and look.’

She spoke to herself; he was too far back to hear. She tugged twice on the rope, saying the same thing, and felt the single answering twitch and then the sudden slack as he began to move towards her.

Her hands coiled rope as a habit, without any conscious thought. Switching off her head-lamp, Stella stood in the roaring silence and let Kit’s gift stand still in all its vast, black perfection around her, so that she could remember it for the rest of her life.

*Marriage is fine for the rest of the world, but I want to find you a present that will last us for ever, something to remember when the magic of now has grown to quiet domesticity. What is it in the world that you want most, my lovely woman, that will let you love me for eternity?*

He had said it in Cambridge, in his river room that sat proud above the Cam, with the river running glassy green below, on the morning before they had gone to the registrar with their two witnesses and made themselves legal in the eyes of the world.

She had known him little more than a year; he the Bede’s scholar to the depths of his bones, she the Yorkshire lass with a degree from a metropolitan university who knew nothing of the ivory towers. Between these two poles, they had found a meeting of minds that had carried them, in fourteen dizzying months, from discussions on string theory to marriage.

Then, lying at peace with herself and the world, there was nothing she wanted from him that he had not given, but it was a beautiful day and she was thinking of rock and how little of it there was in the flat fenlands of Cambridge.

‘Find me a cave,’ she had said, without thinking particularly, ‘a cave no one else has ever seen. For that, I will love you for ever.’

He had come to kneel by the bed, to a place where his complex green-brown eyes could see and be seen. They were quiet then,

more hazel than emerald, with hints of leafiness and summer. He had kissed her on the centre of her brow and smiled his driest, most knowing smile, and said, *What if I were to find you a cave with buried treasure that no one has entered for four hundred and nineteen years? Would that be almost as good?*

‘Four hundred and nineteen . . .?’ She had sat up, too fast for the heat of the day.

Always, he surprised her; it was why she was going to marry him. ‘You’ve found Cedric Owen’s cave? The cathedral of the earth? Why didn’t you tell me?’

*Because I wanted to be sure.*

‘And are you now?’

*As sure as I can be without going there to look. It’s all in the cipher in the ledgers; the hanging thorns, the curve of the bow, the falling river. It had to be somewhere Owen knew like the back of his hand and the only place is Ingleborough Hill up in Yorkshire. He was born on the side of it. The thorns are gone by now but I found references to them in an old diary and there’s a river that falls into Gaping Ghyll.*

‘Gaping Ghyll? Kit, that’s the deepest pothole in England. The cave system running out from it goes for miles.’

*It does indeed. And there are bits of it that haven’t been explored yet, possibly a cathedral of the earth that no one has been in since Cedric Owen wrote his poem.*

*Would you like to go, as our present to each other? To find the cave and search out the white water and dive for the hidden pearl entombed therein?*

Stella had known, then, that the gift was for him as much as for her. Cedric Owen’s blue heart-stone was Kit’s life’s love, his project, his grail for ever quested for as long as she had known him; the great treasure of his college that had been sought by the high and mighty down the ages but never found.

They had not known where to look, the great and the good; they had not read between the lines for the hidden words and phrases as Kit had. It was his greatest accomplishment, and his greatest secret; by marrying him, she became a part of it.

Even so . . . she wrinkled her brow and looked out of the window at the sandstone library and great lawned courts of Bede's College, with their five hundred years of tending and all the legends that went with them. She had learned those, too. 'I thought the skull killed all those who ever held it?'

He had laughed and slid his part-dressed body over the top of hers and said, *Only if they fell into the sins of lust and avarice. We won't do that.*

They were close then, eye to eye, nose to nose, heartbeat to heartbeat sharing each breath. She had held the weight of him balanced on the palms of her hands and looked up into the measure of his face and, quite truthfully, said, 'I could fall into lust for the first descent of an undiscovered cave. You can't begin to imagine what kind of gift that would be.'

*But I can. You're a caver: it means to you what finding Owen's heart-stone would mean to me. It's why we can do it, you and me, bravely and together. Then we can tell the world what we have found.*

She was the caver; hers the responsibility to bring the dream to reality. Which was why she had persisted after she found the rock fall that blocked the route, and why, when she had discovered an opening that might lead to where they wanted to go, she had gone first along the long, claustrophobic tunnel, where she had to become a snake and then an eel and then a worm in order to bend round the corners and slide under the overhangs and creep, inch by pulling inch, up fifty metres of a one in ten incline that brought her at last to the exit and the cavern beyond.

The rope went tight in her hands and then slack again as Kit rounded the final bend. She switched on her head-torch, to give him something to aim for.

Like a flickering cinema, her beam picked out random lengths of stalactites and stalagmites, closing like shark's teeth from floor to roof and back again. She eased the camera from the lid of her pack and turned a full half-circle, taking serial shots from floor to roof and roof to floor.

The flash reached out and splashed colour across the rising,

falling calcite, drew rainbows from the constant sheen of water, sprinkled brilliant, living diamonds across the roof at each crack and angle of the rock.

She took pictures for the sheer joy of it, revelling in the beauty. Only as Kit was easing out of the tunnel to stand beside her, did she follow at last the thunderous noise and turn west, to shed light on the cascading torrent of the waterfall.

‘My God . . .’

‘The cathedral of the earth. You clever, clever girl. I thought the rock fall had finished us.’

She was no longer alone. Kit’s voice warmed her ear. Kit’s arm wrapped her waist, immersing her in bittersweet joy; it was always hard to relinquish the purity of solitude, and yet, out of all the world, this one man understood her need for black aloneness and did not fear it.

She leaned in to him, dry-suit to dry-suit, and turned her light up to his face. Encircled by black neoprene, he was filthy and euphoric at once; a man on the brink of a promise.

She said, ‘I can’t think Cedric Owen knew about this route; you’d never get a Tudor physician in doublet and tights along that tunnel.’

‘Nor any sane man, without his lady love to guide him.’ He twirled a knightly bow and blew her a kiss. ‘Mrs O’Connor, I adore you and everything there is of you, but I can’t kiss you with a head-torch on.’

Laughing, she snatched the flying blessing from the air with her teeth. ‘That’s Dr Cody, until it becomes Professor Cody, and don’t you ever forget it.’ They had been wed for a little over forty-eight hours. Already the argument was old and private between them; in public there was never a chance he would steal her name.

She said, ‘Have you a flare? It’d be good to see it all properly.’

‘I have.’ He was already rummaging in his pack. ‘And then we have to find out where Owen came in when he walked the easy route. I’m rather hoping there’s an obvious way out. I really don’t want to have to do that second hairpin in reverse. Going down and then up and trying to turn at the same time wouldn’t be any fun at all.’

‘But not impossible. It matters to remember that.’ She had been caught once in a cave where the way in was not a possible way out. She dreamed of it still, on the bad nights, when life pressed too close. ‘Light the flare and let’s see all that we haven’t seen yet.’

‘Ask and it shall be given.’ Kit locked the flare in a cleft high up where he could reach and she could not; six inches’ extra height was good for some things and bad for others. ‘Stand back.’

He lit it with his hand covering his face, as she had taught him, and stepped back before the magnesium fully lit.

*White!*

Blistering incandescence spilled from the cavern wall. Under its light, the stalagmites were virgin snow, the waterfall was a cascade of living ice, and beyond all the jagged shark’s teeth the cave’s roof was finally visible, a greying white limestone arch halfway to the heavens.

‘How high is it, do you think?’ Kit asked. His voice was lost in the rush and thunder of the waterfall.

‘A hundred metres? Maybe a bit more. We could climb one of the walls and find out if you’re feeling keen.’

‘Am I ever keen to lift my feet off the ground if I don’t have to?’ He grinned, weakly. ‘I’d rather find the skull.’

He leaned back on the wall, bit his glove off one hand, delved into the hidden pockets of his backpack, and came out with the precious folded paper, the print of Cedric Owen’s cipher, the pinnacle of three years’ work.

*‘That which you seek lies hidden in white water. The waterfall is white.’*

‘And the water is full of limescale, which is another form of white. Read me again the bit that comes after having the courage to go forward?’

He was a poet at heart, for all that he buried his head in hexadecimal code and computer languages. He turned so that the flare cast his shadow behind him and read aloud:

*‘Enter with courage. Go forward as far as the dark allows. Step through night’s arch and come to the*

*cathedral of the earth. Face the rising of the sun, and its setting, pierce the curtain to the well of living water and discover at last the pearl there entombed.'*

He lowered the paper. Softly, he said, 'We have come to the cathedral of the earth.'

'We have. So next we have to face the rising and setting sun. But we didn't step through night's arch to get here, we crawled through a tunnel that wasn't there before half a ton of rock fell into the route Cedric Owen took. We need to find out where he came in before we can work out where he went next.'

Stella stood at the margins of the magnesium white and turned in a slow circle. Her head-lamp cut a horizontal line along the wall, cutting through stalactites, snagging on outcrops, falling into a tall slice of darkness.

'There.'

She ran to it, soft-footed on wet rock. The arch was more of a cleft, jaggedly asymmetric, higher than her upstretched hands, broader than her arm-span. She followed the dark space cautiously, rounding a bend, moving into a narrower passageway.

'Stell?' Kit was at the entrance, peering in.

She shouted back to him, cupping her hands against the echo. 'This is it. The rock fall's up ahead. It must be at least twenty metres thick. Our crawl-tunnel looped out and round to come out further along the cavern's wall.' She reversed back towards him, playing her torch over the passage walls. Here and there were smudges of colour that barely held her torchlight.

'I think there are cave paintings on the wall.' She could hear the awe in her own voice. 'We're going to have to tell people about this.'

She backed out, into the cavern, to the place where there was light enough to see, to look around, to search the high walls for other signs of ancient life.

'God, Kit . . . I take it all back. There *are* better things than finding a cave no one has ever been in.' She grinned at him, stupidly, her blood fizzing in her veins.

‘Stell?’

The flare was fading fast. Gobbets of molten magnesium fell hissing to the ground. In the yellowing light, she saw him pull off his head-torch and strip back the black neoprene hood. His hair glowed like gold in the poor light. There was a line of clean skin where the cap had been. He had half a day’s stubble, which had caught the mud. She saw what he was going to do and yanked off her own gloves, and touched her face and was glad that it was not clean.

He leaned forward, and lifted her torch clear of her head and stripped her cap back as he had his own. Coppery lights bounced off her hair and lit the water. He was near and warm and he smelled of sweat and fear and excitement and she loved him.

They closed the kiss in darkness, with no head-torches and no flare, and Stella was afraid, suddenly, for both of them, that from these heights there was only a long slope down.

He caught the swoop of her feeling. Hoarsely, he said, ‘Are you ready to face the rising of the sun and its setting?’

She checked the compass on her wrist. ‘I think that means we need to go east of the entrance and then west. There’s a river over by the north side of the cavern. Can you set the second flare somewhere up there, so that it shines on the wall and the water together?’

They had three flares. She very rarely used more than one on any caving trip. He wedged their second between two stalagmites at the side of the water-cut channel in the chalk, where she showed him. The magnesium spat and flared and the black ribbon of the river became a thread of silver in snow.

Stella said, ‘We don’t know how deep it is and it’s too wide to jump. We’re looking for a bridge, or a stepping stone, or a pinch point where we can cross.’

Kit was ahead of her, searching. He was back in neoprene with his lamp set at his brow. The smears on his cheeks made him more gaunt than he should have been. He said, ‘Why are we trying to cross the river?’

‘Because it’s the only good reason to go east before we go west.’



There must be a crossing point to the east so we can walk back west along the north wall. The waterfall is a curtain and there's a pool at its foot that's as close to a well of living water as we're likely to get. It's also as far from night's arch as you can go in this cave. Owen was hiding his heart-stone to keep it safe for posterity. He didn't want it to be easy to find, but equally not impossible. Therefore, across the river, which you wouldn't do by chance, or even by choice, unless you had to.'

'Then we'll cross here, will we?' said Kit uncertainly. 'On the stepping stones that look like marbles?'

The stepping stones also rolled like marbles underfoot, so that, after a trial step on the first one, Stella made Kit wait while she set another bolt and strung out two lines at right angles to give maximum security before she tried again. She was glad of them when the third stone rolled under her feet and she felt the strength of the black current.

'You're cold,' Kit said, when he joined her.

She might have tried to deny it, but his hand was on her arm, bouncing in time with her shuddering. She shrugged and made her teeth keep still from chattering. 'Caves are always cold. I'll be fine when we get moving again. And it's not a bad thing to be wet if we're going to have to dive for the skull.'

'You don't have the gear to dive.' He sounded anxious, which was not at all like him; the water had unnerved him more than either of them had expected.

'I have you. What more Kit do I need?' It was cheap, but she was in need of easy warmth. 'And we're not coming back, are we? It's too far and no cave in the world is as much fun a second time. I've got a mask and an underwater light. They'll do.'

'We might need the third flare.'

'No. We don't know what's ahead. We might need it to get out. Come on, let's have a look at the waterfall.' Already, she was regretting the profligate waste of the earlier light.

'Face the rising of the sun and its setting. Pierce the curtain to the well of living water and discover at last . . . et cetera, et cetera.'

Her world was limited to the circle of her head-torch, and Kit's beside her. In all the looming blackness, the noise told her more than she had seen of the waterfall, of its size, and its volume and the plunging depth of the pool at its feet.

She tilted her head back to look up at the cataract, to guess its height. Her beam did not reach a point where there was no water, although right at the limit of its reach was turbulence, and a spray that reached far out into the cavern and danced like fairy lights so that she could believe the river's head might be there.

When she looked down, she followed boiling ice-cold water that plunged deep into blackness for an immeasurable depth. For the hell of it, she found a stone the size of her fist and threw it in. It spun like a leaf in the violent water and vanished.

'*Pierce the curtain,*' Kit said. 'Christ. How?'

'I don't know, but Cedric Owen did it four hundred and nineteen years ago without magnesium flares or a neoprene dry-suit and he came out alive, so we have to assume that it's not as terrifying as it looks. I think if we—'

'Stell?'

'Take a look at the northern end of the rock face where the waterfall ends, then we—'

'Stella . . .'

'—might find that there's a hollow in the space behind the water that will let us— What?'

'I don't think he did.' Kit's voice was flat, leached of all inflection.

'You don't think who did what?'

'I don't think Cedric Owen made it out alive. There's a skeleton here, with not a bit of flesh on it, and a huge amount of limescale deposit, which suggests to my untrained eyes that it's been here for a very long time.'