The Crossing Places

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Extract

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PROLOGUE

They wait for the tide and set out at first light.

It has rained all night and in the morning the ground is seething gently, the mist rising up to join the overhanging clouds. Nelson calls for Ruth in an unmarked police car. He sits beside the driver and Ruth is in the back, like a passenger in a minicab. They drive in silence to the car park near where the bones were first found. As they drive along the Saltmarsh road, the only sounds are the sudden, staccato crackle of the police radio and the driver's heavy, cold-clogged breathing. Nelson says nothing. There is nothing to say.

They get out of the car and walk across the rain-sodden grass towards the marsh. The wind is whispering through the reeds, and here and there they see glimpses of still, sullen water reflecting the grey sky. At the edge of the marshland Ruth stops, looking for the first sunken post, the twisting shingle path that leads through the treacherous water and out to the mudflats. When she finds it, half-submerged by brackish water, she sets out without looking back.

Silently, they cross the marshes. As they get nearer the sea, the mist disperses and the sun starts to filter through the clouds. At the henge circle, the tide is out and the sand glitters in the early morning light. Ruth kneels on the

ground as she saw Erik doing all those years ago. Gently, she stirs the quivering mud with her trowel.

Suddenly everything is quiet; even the seabirds stop their mad skirling and calling up above. Or maybe they are still there and she just doesn't hear them. In the background she can hear Nelson breathing hard but Ruth herself feels strangely calm. Even when she sees it, the tiny arm still wearing the christening bracelet, even then she feels nothing.

She had known what she was going to find.

CHAPTER 1

Waking is like rising from the dead. The slow climb out of sleep, shapes appearing out of blackness, the alarm clock ringing like the last trump. Ruth flings out an arm and sends the alarm crashing to the floor, where it carries on ringing reproachfully. Groaning, she levers herself upright and pulls up the blind. Still dark. It's just not right, she tells herself, wincing as her feet touch the cold floorboards. Neolithic man would have gone to sleep when the sun set and woken when it rose. What makes us think this is the right way round? Falling asleep on the sofa during *Newsnight*, then dragging herself upstairs to lie sleepless over a Rebus book, listen to the World Service on the radio, count Iron Age burial sites to make herself sleep and now this; waking in the darkness feeling like death. It just wasn't right somehow.

In the shower, the water unglues her eyes and sends her hair streaming down her back. This is baptism, if you like. Ruth's parents are Born Again Christians and are fans of Full Immersion For Adults (capitals obligatory). Ruth can quite see the attraction, apart from the slight problem of not believing in God. Still, her parents are Praying For Her (capitals again), which should be a comfort but somehow isn't.

Ruth rubs herself vigorously with a towel and stares unseeingly into the steamy mirror. She knows what she

will see and the knowledge is no more comforting than her parents' prayers. Shoulder-length brown hair, blue eyes, pale skin – and however she stands on the scales, which are at present banished to the broom cupboard – she weighs twelve and a half stone. She sighs (I am not defined by my weight, fat is a state of mind) and squeezes toothpaste onto her brush. She has a very beautiful smile, but she isn't smiling now and so this too is low on the list of comforts.

Clean, damp-footed, she pads back into the bedroom. She has lectures today so will have to dress slightly more formally than usual. Black trousers, black shapeless top. She hardly looks as she selects the clothes. She likes colour and fabric; in fact she has quite a weakness for sequins, bugle beads and diamanté. You wouldn't know this from her wardrobe though. A dour row of dark trousers and loose, dark jackets. The drawers in her pine dressing table are full of black jumpers, long cardigans and opaque tights. She used to wear jeans until she hit size sixteen and now favours cords, black, of course. Jeans are too young for her anyhow. She will be forty next year.

Dressed, she negotiates the stairs. The tiny cottage has very steep stairs, more like a ladder than anything else. 'I'll never be able to manage those' her mother had said on her one and only visit. Who's asking you to, Ruth had replied silently. Her parents had stayed at the local B and B as Ruth has only one bedroom; going upstairs was strictly unnecessary (there is a downstairs loo but it is by the kitchen, which her mother considers unsanitary). The stairs lead directly into the sitting room: sanded wooden

floor, comfortable faded sofa, large flat-screen TV, books covering every available surface. Archaeology books mostly but also murder mysteries, cookery books, travel guides, doctor–nurse romances. Ruth is nothing if not eclectic in her tastes. She has a particular fondness for children's books about ballet or horse-riding, neither of which she has ever tried.

The kitchen barely has room for a fridge and a cooker but Ruth, despite the books, rarely cooks. Now she switches on the kettle and puts bread into the toaster, clicking on Radio 4 with a practised hand. Then she collects her lecture notes and sits at the table by the front window. Her favourite place. Beyond her front garden with its windblown grass and broken blue fence there is nothingness. Just miles and miles of marshland, spotted with stunted gorse bushes and criss-crossed with small, treacherous streams. Sometimes, at this time of year, you see great flocks of wild geese wheeling across the sky, their feathers turning pink in the rays of the rising sun. But today, on this grey winter morning, there is not a living creature as far as the eye can see. Everything is pale and washed out, grey-green merging to grey-white as the marsh meets the sky. Far off is the sea, a line of darker grey, seagulls riding in on the waves. It is utterly desolate and Ruth has absolutely no idea why she loves it so much.

She eats her toast and drinks her tea (she prefers coffee but is saving herself for a proper espresso at the university). As she does so, she leafs through her lecture notes, originally typewritten but now scribbled over with a palimpsest of additional notes in different coloured pens. 'Gender and

Prehistoric Technology', 'Excavating Artefacts', 'Life and Death in the Mesolithic', 'The Role of Animal Bone in Excavations'. Although it is only early November, the Christmas term will soon be over and this will be her last week of lectures. Briefly, she conjures up the faces of her students: earnest, hard-working, slightly dull. She only teaches postgraduates these days and rather misses the casual, hungover good humour of the undergraduates. Her students are so *keen*, waylaying her after lectures to talk about Lindow Man and Boxgrove Man and whether women really would have played a significant role in prehistoric society. Look around you, she wants to shout, we don't always play a significant role in *this* society. Why do you think a gang of grunting hunter-gatherers would have been any more enlightened than we?

Thought for the Day seeps into her unconscious, reminding her that it is time to leave. 'In some ways, God is like an iPod …' She puts her plate and cup in the sink and leaves down food for her cats, Sparky and Flint. As she does so, she answers the ever-present sardonic interviewer in her head. 'OK, I'm a single, overweight woman on my own and I have cats. What's the big deal? And, OK, sometimes I do speak to them but I don't imagine that they answer back and I don't pretend that I'm any more to them than a convenient food dispenser.' Right on cue, Flint, a large ginger Tom, squeezes himself through the cat flap and fixes her with an unblinking, golden stare.

'Does God feature on our Recently Played list or do we sometimes have to press Shuffle?'

Ruth strokes Flint and goes back into the sitting room to

put her papers into her rucksack. She winds a red scarf (her only concession to colour: even fat people can buy scarves) round her neck and puts on her anorak. Then she turns out the lights and leaves the cottage.

Ruth's cottage is one in a line of three on the edge of the Saltmarsh. One is occupied by the warden of the bird sanctuary, the other by weekenders who come down in summer, have lots of toxic barbecues and park their 4 × 4 in front of Ruth's view. The road is frequently flooded in spring and autumn and often impassable by midwinter. 'Why don't you live somewhere more convenient?' her colleagues ask. 'There are some lovely properties in King's Lynn, or even Blakeney if you want to be near to nature.' Ruth can't explain, even to herself, how a girl born and brought up in South London can feel such a pull to these inhospitable marshlands, these desolate mudflats, this lonely, unrelenting view. It was research that first brought her to the Saltmarsh but she doesn't know herself what it is that makes her stay, in the face of so much opposition. 'I'm used to it,' is all she says. 'Anyway the cats would hate to move.' And they laugh. Good old Ruth, devoted to her cats, child-substitutes of course, shame she never got married, she's really very pretty when she smiles.

Today, though, the road is clear, with only the ever-present wind blowing a thin line of salt onto her windscreen. She squirts water without noticing it, bumps slowly over the cattle grid and negotiates the twisting road that leads to the village. In summer the trees meet overhead, making this a mysterious green tunnel. But today the trees are mere skeletons, their bare arms stretching up to

the sky. Ruth, driving slightly faster than is prudent, passes the four houses and boarded-up pub that constitute the village and takes the turning for King's Lynn. Her first lecture is at ten. She has plenty of time.

Ruth teaches at the University of North Norfolk (UNN is the unprepossessing acronym), a new university just outside King's Lynn. She teaches archaeology, which is a new discipline there, specialising in forensic archaeology, which is newer still. Phil, her head of department, frequently jokes that there is nothing new about archaeology and Ruth always smiles dutifully. It is only a matter of time, she thinks, before Phil gets himself a bumper sticker. 'Archaeologists dig it.' 'You're never too old for an archaeologist.' Her special interest is bones. Why didn't the skeleton go to the ball? Because he had no body to dance with. She has heard them all but she still laughs every time. Last year her students bought her a life-size cut-out of Bones from *Star Trek*. He stands at the top of her stairs, terrifying the cats.

On the radio someone is discussing life after death. Why do we feel the need to create a heaven? Is this a sign that there is one or just wishful thinking on a massive scale? Ruth's parents talk about heaven as if it is very familiar, a kind of cosmic shopping centre where they will know their way around and have free passes for the park-and-ride, and where Ruth will languish forever in the underground car park. Until she is Born Again, of course. Ruth prefers the Catholic heaven, remembered from student trips to Italy and Spain. Vast cloudy skies, incense and smoke, darkness and mystery. Ruth likes the Vast: paintings by John Martin, the Vatican, the Norfolk sky. Just as well, she thinks wryly

as she negotiates the turn into the university grounds.

The university consists of long, low buildings, linked by glass walkways. On grey mornings like this it looks inviting, the buttery light shining out across the myriad car parks, a row of dwarf lamps lighting the way to the Archaeology and Natural Sciences Building. Closer to, it looks less impressive. Though the building is only ten years old, cracks are appearing in the concrete façade, there is graffiti on the walls and a good third of the dwarf lamps don't work. Ruth hardly notices this, however, as she parks in her usual space and hauls out her heavy rucksack – heavy because it is half-full of bones.

Climbing the dank-smelling staircase to her office, she thinks about her first lecture: First Principles in Excavation. Although they are postgraduates, many of her students will have little or no first-hand experience of digs. Many are from overseas (the university needs the fees) and the frozen East Anglian earth will be quite a culture shock for them. This is why they won't do their first official dig until April.

As she scrabbles for her key card in the corridor, she is aware of two people approaching her. One is Phil, the Head of Department, the other she doesn't recognise. He is tall and dark, with greying hair cut very short and there is something hard about him, something contained and slightly dangerous that makes her think that he can't be a student and certainly not a lecturer. She stands aside to let them pass but, to her surprise, Phil stops in front of her and speaks in a serious voice which nevertheless contains an ill-concealed edge of excitement.

'Ruth. There's someone who wants to meet you.'

A student after all, then. Ruth starts to paste a welcoming smile on her face but it is frozen by Phil's next words.

'This is Detective Chief Inspector Harry Nelson. He wants to talk to you about a murder.'

CHAPTER 2

'Suspected murder,' Detective Chief Inspector Harry Nelson says quickly.

'Yes, yes,' says Phil, just as quickly, shooting a look at Ruth as if to say, 'Look at me talking to a real detective.' Ruth keeps her face impassive.

'This is Doctor Ruth Galloway,' says Phil. 'She's our forensics expert.'

'Pleased to meet you,' says Nelson without smiling. He gestures towards the locked door of Ruth's office. 'Can we?'

Ruth slides in her key card and pushes open the door. Her office is tiny, barely six feet across. One wall is entirely taken up by bookshelves, another by the door and a third by a grubby window with a view of an even grubbier ornamental lake. Ruth's desk squats against the fourth wall, with a framed poster of Indiana Jones – ironical, she always explains hastily – hanging over it. When she has tutorials the students frequently spill out into the corridor and she props the door open with her cat doorstop, a present from Peter. But now she slams the door shut and Phil and the detective stand there awkwardly, looking too big for the space. Nelson, in particular, seems to block out all the light as he stands, scowling, in front of the window. He looks too broad, too tall, too *grown up* for the room.

'Please …' Ruth gestures to the chairs stacked by the door. Phil makes a great performance of giving Nelson his chair first, practically wiping away the dust with his jumper sleeve.

Ruth squeezes behind her desk, which gives her an illusion of security, of being in charge. This illusion is instantly shattered when Nelson leans back, crosses his legs and addresses her in a brisk monotone. He has a slight Northern accent, which only serves to make him sound more efficient, as if he hasn't time for the slow vowels of Norfolk.

'We've found some bones,' he says. 'They seem to be a child's but they look old. I need to know how old.'

Ruth is silent but Phil chips in eagerly. 'Where did you find them, Inspector?'

'Near the bird sanctuary. Saltmarsh.'

Phil looks at Ruth. 'But that's right where you …'

'I know it,' Ruth cuts in. 'What makes you think the bones look old?'

'They're brown, discoloured, but they look in good condition. I thought that was your area,' he says, suddenly aggressive.

'It is,' says Ruth calmly. 'I assume that's why you're here?'

'Well, would you be able to tell if they are modern or not?' asks Nelson, again sounding rather belligerent.

'A recent discovery is usually obvious,' says Ruth, 'you can tell by appearance and surface. Older bones are more tricky. Sometimes it's almost impossible to tell fifty-year-old bones from two-thousand-year-old. You need radiocarbon dating for that.'

'Professor Galloway is an expert on bone preservation.' This is Phil again, anxious not to be left out. 'She's worked in Bosnia, on the war graves …'

'Will you come and look?' Nelson interrupts.

Ruth pretends to consider but, of course, she is utterly fascinated. Bones! On the Saltmarsh! Where she did that first unforgettable dig with Erik. It could be anything. It could be a find. It could be …

'You suspect it's a murder?' she asks.

Nelson looks uncomfortable for the first time. 'I'd rather not say,' he says heavily, 'not at the present time. Will you come and look?'

Ruth stands up. 'I've got a lecture at ten. I could come in my lunch break.'

'I'll send a car for you at twelve,' says Nelson.

Much to Ruth's secret disappointment, Nelson does not send a police car complete with flashing blue light. Instead he appears himself, driving a muddy Mercedes. She is waiting, as agreed, by the main gate, and he does not even get out of the car but merely leans over and opens the passenger door. Ruth climbs in, feeling fat, as she always does in cars. She has a morbid dread of the seatbelt not fitting around her or of some invisible weight sensor setting off a shrill alarm. 'Twelve and a half stone! Twelve and a half stone in car! Emergency! Press ejector button.'

Nelson glances at Ruth's rucksack. 'Got everything you need?'

'Yes.' She has brought her instant excavation kit: pointing trowel, small hand shovel, plastic freezer bags for

samples, tapes, notebook, pencils, paint brushes, compass, digital camera. She has also changed into trainers and is wearing a reflective jacket. She is annoyed to find herself thinking that she must look a complete mess.

'So you live out Saltmarsh way?' Nelson says, pulling out across the traffic with a squeal of tyres. He drives like a maniac.

'Yes,' says Ruth, feeling defensive though she doesn't know why. 'New Road.'

'New Road!' Nelson lets out a bark of laughter. 'I thought only twitchers lived out there.'

'Well, the warden of the bird sanctuary is one of my neighbours,' says Ruth, struggling to remain polite while keeping one foot clamped on an imaginary brake.

'I wouldn't fancy it,' says Nelson. 'Too isolated.'

'I like it,' says Ruth. 'I did a dig there and never left.'

'A dig? Archaeology?'

'Yes.' Ruth is remembering that summer, ten years ago. Sitting around the campfire in the evenings, eating burnt sausages and singing corny songs. The sound of birdsong in the mornings and the marsh blooming purple with sea lavender. The time when sheep trampled their tents at night. The time when Peter got stranded out on the tidal marsh and Erik had to rescue him, crawling on his hands and knees across the mudflats. The unbelievable excitement when they found that first wooden post, proof that the henge actually existed. She remembers the exact sound of Erik's voice as he turned and shouted at them across the incoming tide, 'We've found it!'

She turns to Nelson. 'We were looking for a henge.'

'A henge? Like Stonehenge?'

'Yes. All it means is a circular bank with a ditch around it. Usually with posts inside the circle.'

'I read somewhere that Stonehenge is just a big sundial. A way of telling the time.'

'Well, we don't know exactly what it was for,' says Ruth, 'but it's safe to say that it involves ritual of some kind.'

Nelson shoots a strange look at her.

'Ritual?'

'Yes, worship, offerings, sacrifices.'

'Sacrifices?' echoes Nelson. He seems genuinely interested now, the faintly condescending note has disappeared from his voice.

'Well, sometimes we find evidence of sacrifices. Pots, spears, animal bones.'

'What about human bones? Do you ever find human bones?'

'Yes, sometimes human bones.'

There is silence and then Nelson says, 'Funny place for one of those henge things, isn't it? Right out to sea.'

'This wasn't sea then. Landscape changes. Only ten thousand years ago this country was still linked to the continent. You could walk from here to Scandinavia.'

'You're joking!'

'No. King's Lynn was once a huge tidal lake. That's what Lynn means. It's the Celtic word for lake.'

Nelson turns to look sceptically at her, causing the car to swerve alarmingly. Ruth wonders if he suspects her of making the whole thing up.

'So if this area wasn't sea, what was it?'

'Flat marshland. We think the henge was on the edge of a marsh.'

'Still seems a funny place to build something like that.'

'Marshland is very important in prehistory,' explains Ruth, 'it's a kind of symbolic landscape. We think that it was important because it's a link between the land and the sea, or between life and death.'

Nelson snorts. 'Come again?'

'Well, marsh isn't dry land and it isn't sea. It's a sort of mixture of both. We know it was important to prehistoric man.'

'How do we know?'

'We've found objects left on the edge of marshes. Votive hoards.'

'Votive?'

'Offerings to the Gods, left at special or sacred places. And sometimes bodies. Have you heard of bog bodies? Lindow Man?'

'Might have,' says Nelson cautiously.

'Bodies buried in peat are almost perfectly preserved, but some people think the bodies were buried in the bogs for a purpose. To appease the Gods.'

Nelson shoots her another look but says nothing. They are approaching the Saltmarsh now, driving up from the lower road towards the visitor car park. Notices listing the various birds to be found on the marshes stand around forlornly, battered by the wind. A boarded-up kiosk advertises ice-creams, their lurid colours faded now. It seems impossible to imagine people picnicking here, enjoying ice-creams in the sun. The place seems made for the wind and the rain.

The car park is empty apart from a solitary police car.

The occupant gets out as they approach and stands there, looking cold and fed up.

'Doctor Ruth Galloway,' Nelson introduces briskly, 'Detective Sergeant Clough.'

DS Clough nods glumly. Ruth gets the impression that hanging about on a windy marshland is not his favourite way of passing the time. Nelson, though, looks positively eager, jogging slightly on the spot like a racehorse in sight of the gallops. He leads the way along a gravel path marked 'Visitor's Trail'. They pass a wooden hide, built on stilts over the marsh. It is empty, apart from some crisp wrappers and an empty can of coke lying on the surrounding platform.

Nelson, without stopping, points at the litter and barks, 'Bag it.' Ruth has to admire his thoroughness, if not his manners. It occurs to her that police work must be rather similar to archaeology. She, too, would bag anything found at a site, labelling it carefully to give it a context. She, too, would be prepared to search for days, weeks, in the hope of finding something significant. She, too, she realises with a sudden shiver, is primarily concerned with death.

Ruth is out of breath before they find the spot marked out with the blue and white police tape that reminds her of traffic accidents. Nelson is now some ten yards ahead, hands in pockets, head forward as if sniffing the air. Clough plods behind him, holding a plastic bag containing the rubbish from the hide.

Beyond the tape is a shallow hole, half-filled by muddy water. Ruth ducks under the tape and kneels down to look. Clearly visible in the rich mud are human bones.

'How did you find this?' she asks.

It is Clough who answers. 'Member of the public, walking her dog. Animal actually had one of the bones in its mouth.'

'Did you keep it? The bone, I mean.'

'It's at the station.'

Ruth takes a quick photo of the site and sketches a brief map in her notebook. This is the far west of the marsh; she has never dug here before. The beach, where the henge was found, is about two miles away to the east. Squatting down on the muddy soil, she begins laboriously bailing out the water, using a plastic beaker from her excavation kit. Nelson is almost hopping with impatience.

'Can't we help with that?' he asks.

'No,' says Ruth shortly.

When the hole is almost free from water, Ruth's heart starts to beat faster. Carefully she scoops out another beakerful of water and only then reaches into the mud and exposes something that is pressed flat against the dark soil.

'Well?' Nelson is leaning eagerly over her shoulder.

'It's a body,' says Ruth hesitantly, 'but …'

Slowly she reaches for her trowel. She mustn't rush things. She has seen entire excavations ruined because of one moment's carelessness. So, with Nelson grinding his teeth beside her, she gently lifts away the sodden soil. A hand, slightly clenched, wearing a bracelet of what looks like grass, lies exposed in the trench.

'Bloody hell!' murmurs Nelson over her shoulder.

She is working almost in a trance now. She plots the find on her map, noting which way it is facing. Next she takes a photograph and starts to dig again.

This time her trowel grates against metal. Still working slowly and meticulously, Ruth reaches down and pulls the object free from the mud. It gleams dully in the winter light, the sixpence in the Christmas cake: a lump of twisted metal, semi-circular in shape.

'What's that?' Nelson's voice seems to come from another world.

'I think it's a torque,' says Ruth dreamily.

'What the hell's that?'

'A necklace. Probably from the Iron Age.'

'The Iron Age? When was that?'

'About two thousand years ago,' says Ruth.

Clough lets out a sudden bark of laughter. Nelson turns away without a word.

Nelson gives Ruth a lift back to the university. He seems sunk in gloom but Ruth is in a state of high excitement. An Iron Age body, because the bodies must surely be from the Iron Age, that time of ritual slaughter and fabulous treasure hoards. What does it mean? It's a long way from the henge but could the two discoveries possibly be linked? The henge is early Bronze Age, over a thousand years before the Iron Age. But surely another find on the same site can't simply be coincidence? She can't wait to tell Phil. Perhaps they should inform the press; the publicity might be just what the Department needs.

Nelson says suddenly, 'You're sure about the date?'

'I'm pretty sure about the torque, that's definitely Iron Age and it seems logical that the body was buried with it. But we can do carbon 14 dating to be sure.'

'What's that?'

'Carbon 14 is present in the earth's atmosphere. Plants take it in, animals eat the plants, we eat the animals. So we all absorb carbon 14 and, when we die, we stop absorbing it and the carbon 14 in our bones starts to break down. So, by measuring the amount of carbon 14 left in a bone, we can tell its age.'

'How accurate is it?'

'Well, cosmic radiation can skew the findings – sun spots, solar flares, nuclear testing, that sort of thing. But it can be accurate within a range of a few hundred years. So we'll be able to tell if the bones are roughly from the Iron Age.'

'Which was when exactly?'

'I can't be that exact but roughly seven hundred BC to forty-three AD.'

Nelson is silent for a moment, taking this in, and then he asks, 'Why would an Iron Age body be buried here?'

'As an offering to the Gods. Possibly it would have been staked down. Did you see the grass around the wrist? That could have been a rope of some kind.'

'Jesus. Staked down and left to die?'

'Well maybe, or maybe it was dead before they left it here. The stakes would be just to keep it in place.'

'Jesus,' he says again.

Suddenly Ruth remembers why she is here, in this police car, with this man. 'Why did you think the bones might be modern?' she asks.

Nelson sighs. 'Some ten years ago there was a child that went missing. Near here. We never found the body. I thought it might be her.'

'Her?'

'Her name was Lucy Downey.'

Ruth is silent. Having a name makes it all more real somehow. After all, hadn't the archaeologist who discovered the first modern human given her a name? Funnily enough, she was called Lucy too.

Nelson sighs again. 'There were letters sent to me about the Lucy Downey case. It's funny, what you said earlier.'

'What?' asks Ruth, rather bemused.

'About ritual and that. There was all sorts of rubbish in the letters but one thing they said was that Lucy had been a sacrifice and that we'd find her where the earth meets the sky.'

'Where the earth meets the sky,' Ruth repeats. 'But that could be anywhere.'

'Yes, but this place, it feels like the end of the world somehow. That's why, when I heard that bones had been found …'

'You thought they might be hers?'

'Yes. It's hard for the parents when they don't know. Sometimes, finding a body, it gives them a chance to grieve.'

'You're sure she's dead then?'

Nelson is silent for a moment before replying, concentrating on overtaking a lorry on the inside. 'Yes,' he says at last. 'Five-year-old child, goes missing in November, no sign of her for ten years. She's dead alright.'

'November?'

'Yes. Almost ten years ago to the day.'

Ruth thinks of November, the darkening nights, the wind howling over the marshes. She thinks of the parents, waiting, praying for their daughter's return, jumping at

every phone call, hoping that every day might bring news. The slow ebbing away of hope, the dull certainty of loss.

'The parents,' she asks. 'Do they still live nearby?'

'Yes, they live out Fakenham way.' He swerves to avoid a lorry. Ruth closes her eyes. 'Cases like this,' he goes on, 'it's usually the parents.'

Ruth is shocked. 'The parents who killed the child?'

Nelson's voice is matter-of-fact, the Northern vowels very flat. 'Nine cases out of ten. You get the parents all distraught, news conferences, floods of tears and then we find the child buried in the back garden.'

'How awful.'

'Yes. But this case, I don't know, I'm sure it wasn't them. They were a nice couple, not young, been trying for a baby for years and then Lucy came along. They adored her.'

'How dreadful for them,' says Ruth inadequately.

'Dreadful, yes.' Nelson's voice is expressionless. 'But they never blamed us. Never blamed me or the team. They still send me Christmas cards. That's why I—' He falters for a second. 'That's why I wanted a result for them.'

They are at the university now. Nelson screeches to a halt outside the Natural Sciences building. Students hurrying to lectures turn and stare. Although it is only two-thirty, it is already getting dark.

'Thanks for the lift,' says Ruth slightly awkwardly. 'I'll get the bones dated for you.'

'Thanks,' says Nelson. He looks at Ruth for what seems to be the first time. She is acutely aware of her wild hair and mud-stained clothes. 'This discovery, might it be important for you?'

'Yes,' says Ruth. 'It might be.'

'Glad someone's happy.' As soon as Ruth is out of the car he drives off without saying goodbye. She doesn't think she will ever see him again.

CHAPTER 3

Nelson cuts across two lanes of traffic as he heads into King's Lynn. His car is unmarked but he makes it a point of honour always to drive as if he is pursuing a suspect. He enjoys the expressions on the faces of the clueless uniforms when, after pulling them in for speeding, he flourishes his warrant card. In any case, this route is so familiar that he could drive it in his sleep: past the industrial park and the Campbell's soup factory, along the London Road and through the archway in the old city wall. Doctor Ruth Galloway would be sure to tell him exactly how old this wall is: 'I can't be that exact but I estimate that it was built before lunch on Friday 1 February 1556'. But, to Nelson, it just represents a final traffic jam before he reaches the police station.

He is no fan of his adopted county. He is a northerner, born in Blackpool, within sight of the Golden Mile. He went to the Catholic grammar school, St Joseph's (Holy Joe's as it was known locally) and joined the police as a cadet, aged sixteen. Right from the start, he'd loved the job. He loved the camaraderie, the long hours, the physical exertion, the sense of doing something worthwhile. And, though he would never admit it, he'd even liked the paperwork. Nelson is methodical, he likes lists and schedules, he is excellent at cutting through crap. He'd risen through the

ranks and soon had a pretty good life: satisfying work, congenial mates, pub on Friday nights, the match on Saturdays, golf on Sundays.

But then the job in Norfolk had come up and his wife, Michelle, had been on at him to take it. Promotion, more money, and 'the chance to live in the country'. Who in their right mind, thinks Nelson, thinking of the Saltmarsh, would want to live in the bloody country? It's all cows and mud and locals who look like the result of several generations of keeping it in the family. But he'd given in and they had moved to King's Lynn. Michelle had started working for a posh hairdressing salon. They'd sent the girls to private schools and they'd come back laughing at his accent ('It's not bath, Daddy, it's ba-arth …'). He'd done well, become a detective inspector in double quick time, people had even talked of higher things. Until Lucy Downey went missing.

Nelson turns, without indicating, into the station car park. He is thinking of Lucy and of the body on the marsh. He had always been sure that Lucy was buried somewhere near the Saltmarsh, and when the bones were found he thought that he was near an ending at last. Not a happy ending, but at least an ending. And now this Doctor Ruth Galloway tells him that the bones are from some bloody Stone Age body. Jesus, all that stuff she'd spouted about henges and burials and being able to walk to Scandinavia. He'd thought she was taking the piss at first. But, when they got to the site, he could see she was a professional. He admired the way that she did everything slowly and carefully, making notes, taking photos, sifting the evidence. It's the way that police work should be done. Not that she'd

ever make a policewoman. Too overweight, for one thing. What would Michelle say about a woman so out-of-condition that she is out of breath after a five-minute walk? She would be genuinely horrified. But, then, he can't think of any situation in which Michelle would meet Doctor Ruth Galloway. She's not likely to start popping into the salon, not from what he could see of her hair.

But she interests him. Like all forceful people (he calls it forceful rather than bullying), he prefers people who stand up to him, but in his job that doesn't happen often. People either despise him or kowtow to him. Ruth had done neither. She had looked him in the face, coolly, as an equal. He thinks he's never met anyone, any *woman*, quite as sure of themselves as Ruth Galloway. Even the way she dresses – baggy clothes, trainers – seemed to be a way of saying that she doesn't care what anyone thinks. She's not going to tart herself up in skirts and high heels just to please men. Not that there's anything wrong with pleasing men, muses Nelson, kicking open the door to his office, but there's something interesting, even refreshing, about a woman who doesn't care whether or not she's attractive.

And the things she said about ritual were interesting too. Nelson is frowning as he sits behind his desk. Talking about ritual and sacrifice and all that crap has brought it all back: the days and nights spent in fingertip searches, the anguished meetings with the parents, the gradual, unbearable shift from hope to despair, the station full to bursting point, teams brought in from six different forces, all dedicated to finding one little girl. All in vain.

Nelson sighs. However much he tries not to, he knows

that, before he goes home tonight, he will read through the Lucy Downey files.

It is pitch black by the time Ruth drives home, edging her car carefully along New Road. There are ditches on both sides of the road and the merest twitch on the wheel can send you plunging ignominiously downwards. This has happened to Ruth once before and she is not keen to repeat the experience. Her headlights illuminate the raised tarmac of the road; the land drops away on either side so that she seems to be driving into nothingness. Nothing but the road ahead and the sky above. *Where the earth meets the sky*. She shivers and turns on the car radio. Radio 4, soothing, civilised and slightly smug, fills the car. 'And now for the News Quiz …'

Ruth parks outside her broken blue fence and pulls her rucksack out of the boot. The weekenders' house is in darkness but the warden has a light on upstairs. She assumes he goes to bed early so as to be up for the dawn chorus. Flint appears on her doorstep mewing piteously for admittance even though he has his own cat-flap and has, in fact, been snoozing inside all day. Remembering she hasn't yet seen Sparky, Ruth feels a pang of anxiety as she opens the door. But Sparky, a small black cat with a white nose, is sleeping safely on the sofa. Ruth calls her but she stays put, flexing her claws and shutting her eyes. Sparky is a reserved character, quite unlike Flint who is now weaving ecstatically around Ruth's legs.

'Stop it, you stupid cat.'

She drops her rucksack on the table and puts down food for the cats. Her answer phone light is flashing. She has a feeling that it won't be good news and when she presses

PLAY she is right. Her mother's voice, aggrieved and slightly breathless, fills the room.

'… whether you're coming for Christmas. Really, Ruth, you could be a bit more considerate. I heard from Simon weeks ago. I assume you'll be coming because I can't imagine you'll want to spend Christmas on your own in that awful …'

Ruth clicks DELETE, breathing hard. In just a few short sentences her mother has managed to encapsulate years of irritation and subtle put-down. The accusation of inconsiderate behaviour, the comparison with the perfect Simon, the implication that, if she doesn't visit her parents, Ruth's Christmas will consist of an M & S meal for one in front of the TV. Angrily sloshing wine into a glass (her mother's voice: 'How are your units Ruth? Daddy and I are worried you're getting dependent …'), Ruth composes a reply. She will never give it in person but it is comforting to stomp around the kitchen, cutting her mother down to size with thin slices of logic.

'The reason I haven't told you about Christmas is that I dread coming home and hearing you drone on about the Christ child and the true meaning of Christmas. Simon has been in touch because he's a creep and an arse-licker. And if I don't come home I'll be with my friends or on some tropical island, not alone slumped in front of *The Vicar of Dibley*. And my house isn't awful, it's a hundred times better than your Eltham semi with its pine cladding and vile china ornaments. And Peter didn't finish with me, I finished with him.'

She has added the last one because she knows from experience that her mother will bring up the subject of

Peter sometime over Christmas. 'Peter sent us a card … such a shame … do you ever hear? … you know he's married now?' That her daughter could voluntarily end a relationship with a nice-looking, eligible man is something that Ruth's mother will never be able to accept. Ruth noticed the same tendency in her friends and colleagues when she announced that she and Peter were no longer together. 'I'm so sorry … Has he found someone else? … Don't worry, he'll come back …' Ruth explained patiently that she had ended the relationship five years ago for the simple, yet surprisingly complicated, reason that she no longer loved him. 'That's right,' people would say, ignoring her, 'he'll soon get bored with the new woman. In the meantime, pamper yourself, have a massage, maybe even lose some …'

To cheer herself up, Ruth boils the water for some nice, fattening pasta and rings Erik. Her first tutor, Erik Anderssen, predictably nicknamed Erik the Viking, was the man responsible for getting her into forensic archaeology. He has been a huge influence on her life and is now a close friend. Smiling, she conjures him up: silver-blond hair pulled back in a pony tail, faded jeans, unravelling sweater. She knows he will be passionately interested in today's find.

Erik the Viking has, appropriately enough, moved back to Norway. Ruth visited him last summer, in his log cabin by the lake – freezing morning swims followed by steaming saunas, Magda's wonderful food, talking to Erik about Mayan civilisation as the stars came out at night. Madga, his wife, a voluptuous blonde goddess whose beauty manages to make you feel better, not worse, about your-

self, is another good friend. *She* never once mentioned Peter, even though she had been there that summer when Ruth and Peter first fell in love; had, in fact, by her tact and gentle benevolence, actually brought them together.

But Erik is out. Ruth leaves a message and, feeling restless, gets the battered lump of metal out of her rucksack and examines it. Still in its freezer bag, carefully dated and labelled, it stares back at her. Phil wanted her to leave it in the Department safe but she refused. She had wanted to bring the torque home, to the Saltmarsh, at least for one night. Now she examines it under her desk light.

Stained dark green from its long immersion in the marsh, the metal nonetheless has a burnished sheen that looks like it might be gold. A gold torque! How much would that be worth? She thinks of the so-called 'marriage torc' found near here, at Snettisham. That had been a wonderful, elaborate object, showing a human face with a ring through its mouth. This piece is more battered, perhaps it has been broken by ploughing or digging. However, squinting closely, she can just see a twisted pattern, almost like a plait. The piece in her hand is barely fifteen centimetres long but she can imagine it as a full half-circle, imagine it round the neck of some savage beauty. Or round the neck of a child, a sacrificial victim?

She remembers Nelson's bitter disappointment when he learnt that the bones were not those of Lucy Downey. What must it feel like to have those deaths, those ghosts, forever on your mind? Ruth knows that for him the Iron Age bones are an annoyance, an irrelevancy, but for her they are as real as the five-year-old girl who went missing all those years ago. Why were the bones left on the edges

of the marsh? Was she (from their size, Ruth thinks the bones are female but she cannot be sure) left for dead, sinking in the treacherous mud? Or was she killed somewhere else and buried at the start of the marshland, to mark the beginning of the sacred landscape?

When her pasta is cooked Ruth eats it at the table by the window, Erik's book *The Shivering Sand* propped up in front of her. The title is from *The Moonstone* by Wilkie Collins and Ruth turns again to the first page where Erik quotes Collins' description of the sands:

> The last of the evening light was fading away; and over all the desolate place there hung a still and awful calm. The heave of the main ocean on the great sand-bank out in the bay, was a heave that made no sound. The inner sea lay lost and dim, without a breath of wind to stir it. Patches of nasty ooze floated, yellow-white on the dead surface of the water. Scum and slime shone faintly in certain places, where the last of the light still caught them on the two great spits of rock jutting out, north and south, into the sea. It was now the time of the turn of the tide: and even as I stood there waiting, the broad brown face of the quicksand began to dimple and quiver – the only moving thing in all the horrid place.

Collins, surely, had understood about the ritual landscape of the sea and land and of the haunted, uncanny places that lie between the two. Ruth remembers that at least one character in *The Moonstone* meets their death on the sands. She remembers another phrase, 'What the Sand

gets, the Sand keeps forever.' But the Saltmarsh had given up some of its secrets; first the henge and now this body, just waiting there for Ruth to discover them. Surely there *must* be a link.

Reading again about the discovery of the henge (Erik wrote at least three books on the strength of the find), Ruth remembers how eerie it had looked in that first morning light, like a shipwreck that had risen silently to the surface, the wooden posts forming a sombre ring, black against the sky. She remembers Erik telling fireside stories about Norse water spirits: the Nixes, shape-shifters who lure unwary travellers into the water; the Nokke, river sprites who sing at dawn and dusk. Water as a source of life and a place of death. Water is also often associated with women; women with vengeance in their hearts, luring men to a watery grave. Drowned spirits, their hair flowing green around them, their webbed hands reaching out above the turning tide …

Ruth reads on, her pasta forgotten. She has no lectures tomorrow; she will go back to the place where the bones were buried.

But in the morning it is raining, driving, slanting rain that batters against the windows and envelops the marsh in an impenetrable grey haze. Frustrated, Ruth busies herself with work: writing up lecture notes, ordering books from Amazon, even cleaning out her fridge. But she keeps coming back to the torque lying in its freezer bag on the table by the window. Sensing her interest, Flint jumps up and sits heavily on the bag. Ruth pushes him off. She doesn't want Phil to notice the cat hairs. He is apt to be

whimsical about the cats, calling them 'Ruth's familiars'. She grits her teeth. He is not going to be whimsical about this find. Phil has always been rather sceptical about Erik the Viking and his views on ritual landscape. For the Iron Age people the henge was already ancient, probably as much of a mystery to them as it is to us. Did they bury this body in the mud to symbolise the beginning of this mystic landscape? Or was the victim ritually killed to appease the water spirits? If Ruth can prove a link between the body and the henge, then the whole area becomes significant. Saltmarsh could become a major archaeological site.

By lunchtime she thinks that the weather is improving slightly. She goes out as far as the gate and the rain is soft and friendly on her face. It is ridiculous really, because the trench will have filled with water and she can do no real work on her own, but she makes up her mind to walk to the site. It's not far, maybe a mile away, and the exercise will do her good. She tells herself this briskly as she puts on the sou'wester and waders she'd bought for a dig in the Outer Hebrides, puts a torch in her pocket and shrugs her rucksack onto her back. She's just going for a look, that's all. A nice brisk walk before it gets dark. Better than sitting at home wondering and eating biscuits.

At first it is quite pleasant. She is walking with her back to the wind and the sou'wester keeps her nice and dry. In her pocket she has the very same ordnance survey map that they used on the henge dig. Looking at it earlier, she saw the henge marked in yellow, with green stickers where other pieces of prehistoric wood were found. They seemed to form a line radiating out from the henge and

Erik thought at the time that they might have been part of a path, or causeway. Could the path be leading to Ruth's bones?

Rather than following the road to the car park, Ruth strikes out west, keeping to a path intended for bird watchers. As long as she sticks to the path she will be fine. The marsh lies on either side of her, huge clumps of reed and mile upon mile of wind-swept grass. The ground looks solid enough but she knows from experience that it is full of hidden pools, treacherous and deep. When the tide comes in, the sea will come halfway up the marsh, covering the ground swiftly and silently. It was here that Peter was marooned all those years ago, stuck between the tidal and the freshwater marshes, lying on his face in the muddy water, clinging to a piece of driftwood while Erik crept towards him across the mudflats shouting words of encouragement in Norwegian.

Ruth plods along the path. It is very narrow here and the mist means that she can only see a few yards in front of her. She doesn't want to be lured onto the marsh. The rain falls steadily and the sky is heavy and grey. Once, she disturbs a flock of snipe, who rise zigzagging crazily into the air, but otherwise she is quite alone. She hums as she walks, thinking of Erik and Peter and of the enchanted summer on the Saltmarsh. She thinks of the druids who came and camped out by the henge. Erik had been on their side, she remembers. After all, he had said, this is what it was built for, not for scientific study in a museum. But the university, which was sponsoring the dig, had wanted the timbers moved. They were being eroded by the tide, they had argued, they needed to be moved for their own safety. 'But

they were *meant* to be eroded,' Erik had argued. 'Life and death, ebb and flow, that's what it's all about.'

But Erik had lost and the timbers were removed, slowly and painstakingly, to the university laboratory. Now Ruth feels a stab of regret for the timber circle that had lain buried in the sand for two thousand years. It belongs here, she thought, wading through muddy puddles, hands deep in her pockets. What the Sand gets, the Sand keeps forever.

At last she can see the hide where Nelson ordered Clough to bag up the litter. She can even see the car park, deserted now of course. The ground is firmer here and she walks quickly despite being out of breath (she really *must* start going to the gym in January). The police tape is still fluttering in the breeze and Ruth, ducking underneath it, thinks of Nelson, his eagerness, his disappointment when the bones did not turn out to be those of Lucy Downey. He was an odd man, she thought, brusque and unfriendly, but it seemed as if he had really cared about that little girl.

As she suspected, the trench is now almost entirely filled with water. This is the major problem with excavating marshy, tidal sites. In archaeology, it is essential to get a 'context', a clear view of where something is discovered. With sites like this, the very ground is changing beneath your feet. Ruth takes out her beaker and starts to scoop away some of the water. She cannot hope to empty the trench but she just wants to see if there is anything else visible in the soil. Phil has promised to send a team from the university to excavate properly but she wants to see it first. This is her discovery.

After about half an hour, maybe more, she thinks she sees something. A dull, bronze-green gleam in the rich, dark soil. Gently she brushes away soil from its edges. It looks like another torque. Trembling, she takes out her original plan of the site and marks in the new find. A second torque could mean the beginnings of a hoard, a ritual depositing of treasure.

It is definitely another torque, battered and scrunched up as if crushed by a huge hand. But, looking closely, Ruth can see that it is intact. She can see both ends, rounded and smooth compared with the plaited quality of the rest of the metal. Ruth is sure it is from the same period, early to middle Iron Age. Is this a votive hoard? One find looks like chance, two starts to look like a ritual.

She sits back on her heels, her arms aching. It is only then that she realises how dark it has become. She looks at her watch. Four o'clock! The walk can only have taken half-an-hour so she has been squatting here in the mud for nearly two hours. She must be getting back. She straightens up, puts the bag containing the torque in her pocket and pulls up her hood. The rain, which had settled into a fine mist, now suddenly gathers in strength, hitting her in the face as she starts the climb back up towards the path. Ruth puts her head down and ploughs onwards; she has never been stuck on the marsh in the dark and she doesn't mean to start now.

For about twenty minutes she plods on, head down against the driving rain. Then she stops. She should have reached the gravel path by now. It is almost completely dark, with just a faint phosphorescent gleam coming from the marsh itself. Ruth gets out her torch but its shaky light

shows her only flat marshland in all directions. Far off, she can hear the sea roaring as it thunders inland. She tries to get out her map but it is blown back in her face. It is too precious to lose so she packs it away again. She can hear the sea but from which direction? She gets out her compass. She is heading too far to the east. Slowly, trying not to panic, she revolves on the spot until she is facing south, then sets out again.

This time she stops because her foot steps into nothingness. Literally one minute she is on dry land and the next she has sunk knee-high into the bog. She almost falls on her face but manages to save herself, rocking backwards until she is sitting on the firm ground. With an effort she pulls her leg from the liquid mud. It comes free with a horrible squelching sound but her wader, thank God, stays on. Panting, she takes a step backwards. Firm Ground. Step forwards. Oozing mud. To the right, more mud. To the left, firmer ground. She starts to edge to the left, her torch held out in front of her.

After a few yards, she falls headlong into a ditch. Putting out her hands to save herself, she encounters icy water. She raises a hand to her lips. Salt. Oh God, she must have wandered right out to the tidal marsh. Scrambling to her feet she wipes mud off her face and checks her compass again. Due east. Has she missed the path altogether? Is she heading straight out to sea? The roaring in her ears is so loud now that she cannot tell if it is the sea or just the wind. Then a wave breaks right over her feet. There is no mistaking it, a freezing, briny-smelling swell of water. She is on the tidal mudflats, possibly at the very spot where Peter called for help all those years ago. But there is no

Erik to save her. She will be drowned right here on the desolate marshland with a priceless Iron Age torque in her pocket.

She is sobbing now, her tears mingling with the rain and sea water on her face. Then she hears something so miraculous that she almost discounts it as a mirage. A voice. Calling her. She sees a light, a shaky hand-held light coming towards her. 'Help!' she shouts frantically, 'Help!'

The light comes nearer and a man's voice shouts. 'Come this way. Towards me.' Almost on all fours, she crawls towards the light and the voice. A figure looms out of the mist, a thick-set figure wearing a reflective jacket. A hand reaches out and grabs hers. 'This way,' says the voice, 'this way.'

Clinging on to the yellow waterproof sleeve as if it were a lifebelt, she stumbles along beside the man. He seems familiar somehow but she can't think about that now. All she can do is follow him as he traces a circuitous path, first left and then right, now into the wind, now away from the wind, through the mudflats. But whatever route he is taking seems a remarkably effective one. Her feet are on firm ground almost all the time, and before too long she can see the blue and white police tape and the car park where a battered Land Rover is waiting.

'Oh my God.' She lets go of the man and leans over to catch her breath.

The man steps back, shining his torch into her face. 'What the hell were you playing at?' he demands.

'I was trying to get home. I got lost. Thank you. I don't know what I would have done if you hadn't come along.'

'You'd have drowned, that's what you would have done.' Then his voice changes. 'You're the girl from the university, aren't you?'

Ruth looks at him, taking in close-cropped grey hair, blue eyes, official-looking jacket. It is her neighbour, the warden of the bird sanctuary. She smiles. Despite her feminist principles, she quite likes being called a girl.

'Yes. You're my neighbour, aren't you?'

He holds out a hand. 'David.'

She shakes hands, smiling again at the strangeness of it. A few moments ago she was clinging on to his sleeve, sobbing hysterically. Now they are behaving as if they have just met at a cocktail party.

'I'm Ruth. Thanks again for saving me.'

He shrugs. 'That's OK. Look, we'd better get you home. My car's over there.'

In the Land Rover, a blessed oasis of warmth and safety, Ruth feels almost elated. She isn't dead, she is about to be driven home in comfort and she has the torque in her pocket. She turns to David, who is coaxing the engine into life.

'How did you know the way back? It was amazing, the way you twisted and turned across the marsh.'

'I know this place like the back of my hand,' says David, putting the car into gear. 'It's weird. There are wooden posts sunk into the ground. If you follow them, it leads you on a safe path through the marsh. I don't know who put them there but, whoever did, they knew the land even better than I do.'

Ruth stares at him. 'Wooden posts …' she whispers.

'Yes. They're sunk deep into the ground, sometimes half-

submerged, but if you know where they are they'll lead you through the treacherous ground, right out to sea.'

Right out to sea. Right out to the henge. Ruth touches the freezer bag in her pocket but says nothing. Her mind is working furiously.

'What were you doing out on a night like this anyway?' asks David as they drive along the Saltmarsh Road. The windscreen wipers are almost buckling under the weight of water.

'We found something. Over by the car park. I wanted to take a second look. I know it was stupid.'

'You found something? Something old? You're an archaeologist, aren't you?'

'Yes. Some Iron Age bones. I think they might be linked to the henge. Do you remember, ten years ago, when we found the henge?' She dimly remembers David watching the excavations that summer. How terrible that they haven't spoken since.

'Yes,' he says slowly, 'I remember. That chap with a pony tail, he was in charge wasn't he? He was a good bloke. I had a lot of time for him.'

'Yes, he is a good bloke.' Funnily enough, there is something about David that reminds her of Erik. Perhaps it's the eyes, used to scanning far horizons.

'So, will there be all sorts of people here again? Druids and students and idiots with cameras?'

Ruth hesitates. She can tell that David thinks the Saltmarsh should be left to him and the birds. How can she say that she hopes there will be a major excavation, almost certainly involving students and idiots with cameras, if not druids.

'Not necessarily,' she says at last. 'It's very low key at the moment.'

David grunts. 'The police were here the other day. What were they after?'

Ruth is not sure how much she should say. Eventually she says, 'It was because of the bones, but when they turned out to be prehistoric they lost interest.'

They have reached Ruth's blue gate now. David turns to her and smiles for the first time. He has very white teeth. How old is he she wonders. Forty? Fifty? Like Erik, he has an ageless quality.

'But you,' says David, 'you're more interested now, aren't you?'

Ruth grins. 'Yes I am.'

As she opens her front door, the phone is ringing. She knows, beyond any doubt, that it will be Erik.

'Ruthie!' Erik's singsong voice echoes across the frozen miles from Norway. 'What's all this about a find?'

'Oh Erik,' says Ruth ecstatically, standing dripping onto the rug. 'I think I've found your causeway.'

It is dark but she is used to that. She stretches out a hand to see if she can touch the wall and encounters cold stone. No door. There is a trapdoor in the roof but she never knows when that will open. And sometimes it is worse when it does. No use screaming or crying; she has done this many times before and it never helps. Sometimes, though, she likes to shout just to hear her own voice. It sounds different somehow, like a stranger's voice. Sometimes it's almost company, this other voice. They have long talks, sometimes, whispering in the dark.

'Don't worry.'

'It'll all come right in the end.'

'Darkest before dawn.'

Words she can't even remember hearing, though now they seem lodged in her brain. Who was it who told her once that it was darkest before dawn? She doesn't know. She only knows that the words give her a warm, ticklish feeling, like being wrapped in a blanket. She has an extra blanket when it's cold but even then she shivers so much that in the morning her whole body aches. Sometimes it's warmer and a little light shines through the edges of the trapdoor. Once he opened the window in the roof. Usually it's only open at night when the sky is black, but this time it was bright and blue and it made her eyes hurt. The bars on the window turned into a little yellow ladder. Sometimes

she dreams about climbing the ladder and escaping to … where? She doesn't know. She thinks of the sun on her face and being in a garden where there are voices and cooking smells and cool water falling. Sometimes she walks through the water and it's like a curtain. A curtain. Where? A beaded curtain that you run through, laughing, and on the other side there's the warm light again and the voices and someone holding you tight, so tight; so tight they will never let you go.

And, other times, she thinks there is nothing there at all, beyond these walls. Only more walls and iron bars and cold, concrete floors.