



Suzanna Williams

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*For another Joe
who looked for aliens amongst the stars.*

CHAPTER ONE

THERE'S A STORM COMING. I can hear the thunder rumbling over the steady chug of the tractor and a threatening band of cloud has covered the top of the mountain, bridging the gap between earth and space. I chuck the last hay bale onto the stack. There's sweat trickling down my face and bits of grass stuck in the sweat but I'm pleased; I've cut and baled all the bottom fields, by myself. Now, if I can just get it covered before the rain hits ...

Forks of lightning split the sky as I drag a tarpaulin over the hay. The August sun's burning but it won't be long before it's wiped by the cloud. It's so black I don't see the Hawk jet skimming the summit of Cader Berwyn until it roars over my head. I duck for cover. The RAF fly training missions all the time along our valley but the noise still makes me jump, stupid really. Anyway, the Hawk banks hard left and disappears round the hillside and I grab a rope, tie down the tarp, climb on the tractor and head home. It's the first day I've finished early for weeks and tonight I'm going out.

The day's turned dark and I don't make it back before the rain starts, huge spots as big as your fist. Lightning flashes so close the air crackles and the hairs on my arms stand on end,

then the jet takes another pass, trailing some imaginary enemy along the mountain-top.

The farmhouse is silhouetted against the thunder clouds as I round the hill; faded creamy paintwork flaking off its solid, grey stone walls. It belonged to my father, and his father before him, and his father before that and ... you get the idea. A stream of water runs down my neck as I turn into the yard, then I spot Rob's battered Fiesta and the day really turns black.

I'd like to be able to tell you I get on with my brother, but I don't. It's not just he's five years older than me, or that he has an IQ which makes Einstein look like a telly tubby. It's not even the fact he won a scholarship to this fancy London medical college normal people sell their soul to get into. No, the problem is, when Rob's around, I turn into the invisible man; a lesser person only fit for hard labour on the farm. Maybe I am.

I leave the tractor under the open shed and race towards the house. The rain's belting down and I notice Rob's left his car window open. I decide not to tell him.

"Joe." Rob's sprawled on a chair at the big kitchen table whilst Nan's slicing the skin off the potatoes at the sink; a short, sharp, angry movement. "How's it going, Bro?" Rob says.

Rob never called me 'Bro' before he went off to London and it doesn't sit right. I mean, brothers look out for each other, don't they?

"Nan say's you've passed your GCSE's," he goes on.

I'm taking my boots off so I just grunt. My scraped collection of C's hardly compare to his full hand of A stars.

"Why're you here?" I ask.

“Whoa. Nice to see you too.” He tries to look hurt but it isn’t convincing because he’s grinning. That’s the other thing with Rob, everything’s a joke. Perhaps if I had his life I’d be laughing too but, as my exam results last week proved, I’m destined to be the one who bales the hay.

“Tell him,” snaps Nan. Slices of potato are hitting the pan and almost bouncing out again and I get a sinking feeling in my stomach.

“OK.” Lightning illuminates the kitchen and I notice Rob’s dyed his hair blond. It’s tied in a ponytail like a surfer on Bondi Beach; except he has no tan or muscles so it looks sad. “There’s been an offer on the farm,” he says.

“It’s not an offer.” Nan slams the lid on the pan and whirls round. “It’s an insult.” Her mouth’s set in a hard line and she folds her arms over the apron she always wears. “This place is worth twice the amount.”

Rob ignores her hostile tone. “Well, if the country wasn’t in a recession,” he says soothingly (you can tell he’s training to be a doctor). “The estate agent thinks we’re lucky to get an offer at all, especially with the state of the place.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Nan spits.

“Well, you’re not exactly turning in a profit here.” Rob looks at me like he expects I’ll back him up. He’s clearly not as bright as people think. “The fields need fencing,” he carries on. “And you’re running at half the amount of sheep the land could support and the windows ...” He waves his hand in the direction of the storm. “The windows are falling out.” He rocks the chair backwards and puts his hands behind his head. “Hardly selling features, eh?”

“Now I’ve finished school I can run things properly,” I tell him.

“You’re sixteen, Joe.” His smarmy ‘trust-me-I’m-a-doctor’ tone makes me want to punch his face. “You should be out doing the things you want to do.”

“One of us having a good time’s enough, don’t you think?” I snap.

Nan draws a sharp breath through her teeth and Rob’s poker face smile slips.

“If we sell, you could get your job at the Leisure Centre back,” he continues. “You liked that.”

“I was a lifeguard,” I interrupt. “It’s hardly a career path.”

“But you were good at it,” he goes on. “Weren’t you the fastest or something?”

“The youngest,” I correct him.

“That’s right,” he says, as though he knew and I’d forgotten. “So you could do that, and we’ll buy one of those bungalows they’re building over by Llanderfyl for Nan.”

“Bungalows?” Water boils out of the pan and hisses on the stove. Nan pulls it from the heat without taking her eyes off Rob. “You mean the old people’s place?” she says.

“They’re not for old people.” Rob smiles his GP smile. “They’re ... manageable,” he says. “Anyway, we’ll split the rest of the money between us and I won’t have the damned Bank Manager ringing me up in lectures; bloody embarrassing.”

There’s a silence apart from the rain battering at the windows and it occurs to me the frames are so rotten the storm might actually knock them out.

“Course, the buyer wants to look at the accounts,” says Rob. “But we can go through them after supper and make them look ...”

“I’m going out,” I interrupt. “And I need a shower.” And I scoot from the kitchen before he can say anything else.

I spend so long in the shower the water runs cold. Nan’ll be mad because I’ve used all the hot and she won’t be able to wash up but I stay in anyway. All the time the thunder’s rumbling and the jet flies over again and makes me drop the soap.

I search about for my least scruffy pair of jeans and a clean shirt, push my feet into my trainers and run a comb through my hair. I’ve got dark hair, like Rob used to have, and I remember his blond ponytail and pass the trimmer through mine; number three setting, nice and short.

Nan’s sitting at the kitchen table surrounded by a scatter of red ‘Final Demand’ letters. The smell of cooking stew almost persuades me to stay, I’m starving after being out all day. But Rob’s got his All Stars propped on my chair so I head for the door.

I almost make it outside when Nan catches my arm. She presses a grubby ten pound note into my hand and gives me a nod. Remember what I said about me being a person nobody sees? Well, Nan’s the exception. Suddenly I feel guilty about the hot water.

“Are we selling?” asks Rob.

I think about protesting but what’s the point? Rob always gets his own way.

The thunder’s grumbling in the distance as I slam the door but the rain’s more at ‘summer-storm-on-Welsh-mountain’ level rather than ‘monsoon-in-tropical-rain-forest’ and the air

smells fresh and clean. The window's still open on Rob's car and I'm sorry I won't be around to see his face when he finds his seat's soaked. Does that make me a bad person?

I stuff the money into my pocket and climb into the Land Rover. Now, before you get worried, I'm not going to take it all the way into town. Despite Dad teaching me to drive round the farm as soon as I could reach the accelerator, I'll not be seventeen till November, but I always ride to the bottom of our lane, saves the walk back up the hill later.

The nearest village is Llandrillo; grey stone houses grouped along a tumbling river, with one shop selling everything, a phone box and a pub. The rain's almost stopped by the time I reach the 'Prince of Wales.'

In the winter there's only the handful of locals who are either too young to drive into town or too old to be bothered, but because it's summer, it's jammed with sweaty hikers carrying oversized rucksacks sheltering from the storm. I'd like to tell you that's why nobody notices me as I push open the door but, honestly, they don't pay much attention any night. It's best that way. My family has given this valley enough to gossip about over the years.

I scan round. Old Alun's pulling pints for the tourists, some girls from school are squashed by the bar with bottles of Coke, the darts team's in the corner and Anthony and Rhys are lining up pound coins on the pool table. I head over as Rhys takes a shot. He misses.

"Hey, Josephine," he calls. "You put me off there."

I hate him calling me Josephine and I clearly didn't put him off anything. Rhys might be two years older than me but he's an idiot sometimes.

"So, Josephine, my next pint's on you," he says.

"Sod off," I say.

Ant chalks up his cue. "Hardly seen you all holiday?" he says.

Ant's family moved from Liverpool when he was seven and he's still got a strong Scouse accent.

"Been busy," I tell him.

"All holiday?" scoffs Rhys. "Jeez, sell the damned place and get out." He watches Ant send the ball spinning into the pocket and sighs. "Three weeks and I'm off to uni and don't think I'm coming back."

I don't say anything. Rhys wants to be a journalist. What do I want to be?

Ant misses the next shot. "You still on for Saturday?" he says to me as Rhys weighs up the table. "I'm rigging the electric in the barn so we can have music and I've got family coming over." He winks at me. "You remember Amy?"

I cringe. But I doubt this conversation is going to be about me having a crush on his older cousin three years ago.

"We've got to find you a new girl, man. Stop you thinking about Sian," he says. "OK, so she's the hottest girl we know but she was using you."

I'm impressed by his thinking but then he hadn't actually been allowed to be seen with Sian Watkins, been allowed to buy her things. Of course, that was when I was earning cash

from the Leisure Centre and she disappeared pretty fast when I had to give the job up. Yeah, Ant's right.

"You've gotta move on," continues Ant.

"I am," I protest. "I have."

"OK." Ant's eyes narrow. "Without looking round, is Sian in here?"

"No, but ..."

"Told you," he interrupts.

"I'm going to get something to eat," I mutter. I head over to the bar and order burger and chips then Ant shouts me and we have time for one game, which I lose, before my food's ready.

As Rhys and Ant start the next match, Gareth comes over. Gareth's been good since Dad died, helping me with the sheep and everything. It's handy his farm's along the valley.

"You've cut the bottom fields," he says. "Did you get them covered up before the rain?"

"Yeah."

He nods approvingly.

"Hey, Gareth," shouts Rhys. "Seen any UFO's?"

I groan. Rhys thinks Gareth's a loon because he goes on about seeing flying saucers.

"It's a good night for them tonight." Gareth's carrying the dregs of a pint of Guinness and he's got white froth on his moustache. "Reminds me of January, 1974."

I can't imagine a summer night like tonight can be anything like January 1974 and I know what's coming next because he's told this story a thousand times.

“I was standing here, like we are now,” he says. “When the glasses on the bar start rattling and that spaceship hits the summit of Cader Berwyn same as one of them nuclear bombs exploding.” Gareth slams his empty glass on the edge of the pool table for emphasis. “I know you lads don’t believe me,” he says. “It was one of them Government cover ups, like happened in that place in America, er, ...”

“Roswell,” I prompt, because I don’t want the story to take longer than it needs to.

“That’s right.” Gareth nods again. “1974 was the Welsh Roswell.”

Rhys is sniggering behind him. I try to edge us further away from the table but Gareth isn’t budging.

“They took away them alien bodies in army trucks.” Gareth’s eyes narrow to slits in his weatherworn face. “A whole convoy of army trucks.”

Sometimes Gareth says it’s only the wreckage of the spaceship they take away but tonight he’s into the whole alien autopsy story. He must have had more Guinness than I thought.

“Did you see the jets earlier?” Gareth asks.

I nod.

“They send them up whenever they track one of them Unidentified Flying Object’s on the radar.” He taps the side of his nose with his finger. “My friend in the UFO Society told me.”

“When I’m a reporter, I’ll publish your story,” shouts Rhys.

“You do that, lad,” says Gareth. “It’ll make your career.”

And it gets to me they're making fun of him. Gareth's a good bloke; a little crazy perhaps, but a good bloke. He doesn't deserve this.

"Hey, Joe," calls Rhys. "You reckon Ant's one of Gareth's aliens? He talks like an alien."

"Not laughin'," growls Ant. He takes a shot and misses. "You playing next?" he asks me.

I glance at Rhys and decide against it. "Nah. I'm going home."

"I'll give you a lift," says Gareth. He pulls his cap over his mad professor hair and adjusts his boots. I remember the Guinness and decide to walk.

"It's OK," I tell him.

Old Alun shouts 'Goodnight boys' as we step outside. He calls everyone 'boy' even though Gareth must be at least sixty.

The cloud from earlier has rolled away and it's one of those clear black nights with a million stars stretching on forever. A slice of a silver moon hangs over the mountain. Gareth's staring up but he mustn't spot any space ships. He'd have pointed them out to me if he had.

"You sure you want to walk?" he asks.

"Yeah."

His four-by-four chokes a bit then begins pouring black smoke out of the exhaust.

"Watch out for them spacemen," Gareth shouts as he draws away.

I glance towards Sian's house. It's a bad habit I ought to stop but tonight ... there she is. Sian's figure could win Miss World, no, Miss Universe. She's got platinum blonde hair (out

of a bottle) and right now she's wearing the shortest of short skirts and six inch heels. Stunning.

But it's nearly closing time at the Prince of Wales, so where's she going? I have to catch myself before I start getting jealous. It's none of my business since she dumped me.

"Hey, Sian."

She turns round, all fluttering eyelashes and lipstick glistening under Llandrillo's one street lamp, and then she sees me and the shine goes crooked.

"Oh ... Joe ... How are you?" She's done her eyes fancy and they look huge under the yellow light.

Before I can answer, a car pulls round the corner. It's little and red with an exhaust belonging to a monster truck. It stops alongside her.

"I'm going into town," Sian says. She opens the car door and dance music blasts out. There's a lad wearing a slick-looking shirt glowering at me, and Sian folds herself into the passenger seat in her super-short skirt.

"Bye, Joe," she calls as she slams the door.

The two red tail lights wind their way up the hillside and I wonder if that's what Gareth mistook for a space ship on one of his Guinness fuelled journey's home. And suddenly I've had enough; enough of Rhys's sarcasm, and Gareth's UFO's and Sian's boyfriend in his stupid noisy car. I've had enough of this village and new bungalows and tourists everywhere. And I hate the farm's failing and I can't manage. And I hate Dad shot himself and left me to cope.

But what can I do? I stare at the car lights until they disappear then I turn and start walking. It's all uphill and

pitch black but I'm powering along. Normally, it takes twenty minutes to get back to our lane. Tonight, it takes ten.

There're a million things running through my head and I don't know what's making me angriest? Is it Rhys making fun of Gareth and me not saying anything? Or Sian going off with her slime-bag new boyfriend and me not telling her how I feel? It definitely could have something to do with Rob selling the farm and me letting him.

I stride on towards the track. My hearts thumping and I'm not sure whether it's because I'm walking so fast uphill or because I'm totally furious.

Our lane's steep and stony and it follows the river coming off Cader Berwyn. There's a waterfall at the top of the hill. We call it the Devil's Claw because of the way the rocks surrounding the catch pool stand like sharp talons. You can usually swim in the pool at this time of year but tonight it's an angry, foaming mass.

I stand beside the Land Rover, watching the water thundering over and that's when I notice the girl; a slim silhouette against the starry night sky standing at the top of the Devil's Claw. I wonder if I'm seeing things. What's she doing and how did she get there? But, before I figure anything out, she throws herself off.

CHAPTER TWO

TIME RUNS IN SLOW MOTION as the girl tumbles down the waterfall, a smear of colour against the rocks. If she makes a sound, it's lost in the roar of the water and then she hits the catch pool and vanishes under the boiling waves. I stand scanning the moon-lit surface of the river, waiting for her to reappear.

She doesn't.

There's still no sign of her by the time I'm clambering round the rocks edging the water and, without considering I might be doing a really stupid, dangerous thing, I kick off my shoes and dive in.

I've swum in this pool a million times but never in the dark when it's taking the run-off after a storm. I head to where she went under, take several deep breaths and dive downwards. It's a black, muffled world underwater, with the raging torrent trying to drag me away. I have to work by touch and all I can feel are the sharp corner of the boulders at the bottom of the pool.

I burst to the surface, into the roar of the waterfall and the silver-tipped waves, and scan round. Why hasn't she come up? Even if she'd knocked herself unconscious in the fall, why isn't she floating?

I dive again. My arm scrapes on a rock. My knee grazes the bottom. My eyes sting. It's too dark to see. My foot jars against a stone. The freezing water zaps my strength. Still I find nothing. I grab a handful of slimy weed which comes off in my hand and, for a moment, I imagine I've pulled her hair off and it freaks me out. I let out a silent shout; a stream of precious air bubbles bursting upwards, leaving my lungs empty and aching. I'm starting for the surface when my hand brushes against soft skin; an arm.

I pull at the body, wondering why she's at the bottom. Is she stuck? I wedge my feet on a rock and tug harder. This time we're away. We burst to the surface into the moonlight and the cool night air. I cup my hand under her chin but I have to work hard to get her to the side and jam her half onto a rock. She's a bit precarious but thankfully she doesn't fall off as I climb out beside her and pull her clear of the water.

The next few minutes are weird. I give her a shake but her eyes are shut tight and she doesn't move. I guess the lifeguard drills pay off because I know exactly what to do. I listen for any sound of breathing. It's hard because the water is thundering but I don't hear anything. I try to spot movement from her chest in the moonlight.

Nope.

Airways clear?

Yes.

I start CPR.

Breathing. Check if her chest rises.

Chest compressions.

Breathing.

Suddenly she splutters and coughs and I'm elated. I punch the air. I've saved someone. The lifeguard kicks in again. 'Reassure the victim, keep them calm.'

"I'm Joe," I say. "You're going to be all right."

She's spewing up water like a fountain but eventually she turns to look at me. I expect her to be grateful I saved her life; instead, she lets out a strangled scream and starts to scramble backwards over the rocks.

"Hey. It's OK," I say.

She's slipping all over the place then she has another choking fit and has to stop.

I move over and slap her on the back until she's finished and she lifts her head and watches me as though I'm a rabid dog about to bite her.

"Don't worry." I try to speak as gently as I can. "You're OK now."

And she dissolves into tears, huge retching sobs that shake her body. I put my arm round her but she tenses up so violently I take it away again. I must resemble Jack the Ripper or something; maybe I shouldn't have cut my hair quite as short. I clamber over the rocks and jam my feet into my trainers. The night breeze chills my wet skin and I realise we're both shivering.

I've never seen the girl before. She sits, hugging her knees to her chest, her dark hair falling round her face, her body shuddering with every breath. She's wearing jeans and a sweatshirt and she appears about my age. The roaring river drowns the sound of her crying and I can see her fighting

for control. After a minute or so she takes a deep breath and straightens up as though she's preparing to do battle.

"I'm Joe," I say again. "Are you alright?" (Stupid question.)
"What's your name?"

Her teeth are chattering and she never takes her eyes off me, like she's expecting me to turn into a three headed monster.

I stand up, hold out my hand. "Come on. I live up the hill and my car's over there. We'll get you a blanket, get you warmed up. My brother's a doctor, well training to be one; he'll make sure you're OK."

She begins to slide backwards up the rocks at the mention of doctors.

"Hey, I only want to help." I hold out my hand again. "Can you walk?"

Very, very slowly she takes my hand. Her fingers are trembling so much I can hardly keep hold of them. I put my hand under her arm and pull her to her feet. "Are you hurt?" I ask.

She shakes her head.

I put my arm round her, half-expecting she'll push me off again but she doesn't and we walk to the Land Rover. She leans against the bonnet whilst I search for a fleece I left in the back. It's an old one but I drape it round her shoulders and she gives me a flicker of a smile.

"What's your name?" I ask again.

"Sarah." Her whisper is almost lost in the raging of the Devil's Claw.

“Great,” I say. Now we’re getting somewhere. “OK, Sarah. Hop in. We’ll have you fixed up in no time.”

I drive to the top of the hill. Nan’s always in bed early but I’m really, really hoping Rob’s still up. A doctor would be damned useful right now but when we reach the yard his car isn’t even there; bloody useless brother. The house is in darkness but the security light on the side of the barn comes on and Meg shoots out of her kennel and jumps round the wheels. I park as close to the house as I can. Sarah’s staring at Meg with wide uncertain eyes.

I get out, bend down and fuss Meg’s fur. “She wants to say hello,” I tell Sarah.

Meg runs off down the yard and Sarah slides out of the truck and follows me to the house.

I flick on the light and dash to grab a couple of towels. Finding new clothes for Sarah is harder. I can hardly lend her any of Nan’s. In the end I settle for a shirt of mine, one of the thick check ones I wear in the winter and a fleece. When I come back, she’s standing, dripping, in the doorway, gazing up at the sky. She whirls round when she hears me. Her face is deathly white and I can see her shivering from across the room.

“Come in,” I tell her. I hand her the clothes and the towel and point towards the downstairs cloakroom. “You can change in there.”

She nods then squelches across the kitchen, shutting the door.

While she’s gone I put the kettle on then race into my bedroom. I chuck my wet clothes into the washing basket, put dry

ones on and return to the kitchen where I make two cups of hot chocolate. I put several spoons of sugar in Sarah's because I reckon she needs the energy and by the time I've finished she's standing in the doorway.

I have to tell you she's pretty cute wearing just my shirt, with my fleece, three sizes too big, wrapped round her. There's a large purple-black bruise blooming on one knee and she's got the whitest legs I've ever seen but she's amazingly good for someone who's almost drowned. I give her the chocolate and she wraps her fingers round the cup.

"Do you want me to take you somewhere?" I ask. "I could drive you into Llandrillo but I probably shouldn't chance further because I've not passed my test yet. Or I could get you a taxi, or ..."

She's shaking her head.

"Well, do you want to ring someone; your Mum or your Dad? They could come and collect you. We could meet them."

Her eyes fill with tears but she swallows hard and blinks them away. "No," she says.

"What happened back there? I mean, should we ring the police?"

"No." She's definite about that.

"You ought to go to the hospital. You were unconscious for a while. I've heard of people collapsing hours after they come out. It's ..." I stop. Secondary drowning is not the most reassuring thing to explain to someone you've just pulled from a river.

She's still shivering so I find a blanket from the cupboard. As I drape it round her shoulders, I note she's got clear grey

eyes but dark circles show through her pale skin like she hasn't slept for a week.

"Let's sit in the living room," I say. "It'll be comfier there." I lead the way and flop onto a chair. Sarah follows me. She perches on the very edge of the sofa taking tiny sips of chocolate.

"You can stay here tonight if you want," I say. Although I don't know how I'm going to explain it to Nan.

She's clinging to the mug like it's the only thing keeping her alive as she whispers, "I should go."

"You can't go and wander about on your own on the mountain at night," I protest. "It's not safe. You could hurt yourself." (Which isn't stupid when you consider I've seen her leap from the Devil's Claw.)

I study her cowering on the settee. I thought I'd blocked out the horror of Dad's suicide but without warning the pain hits me, as fresh as though it happened yesterday. How do I know this girl isn't going to try and kill herself again?

"Hey," I say gently. "Dying never solved anything. Think about your parents and your friends. Think how I'd feel and I don't even know you. It might be an escape for you but it'd be hell for everyone else. I promise you whatever problems you think you've got will be better in the morning."

She doesn't say anything at that.

"I'll get you a pillow and you can sleep on the sofa," I tell her and then I see how tired and cold she is, so I change it to, "You can sleep in my bed, and I'll sleep on the sofa."

She hesitates and for a moment I think she's going to insist on leaving, dressed in only my shirt but then she nods and curls her legs under the blanket.

I realise I'm starving again and I remember Nan's stew. "I'll get us something to eat," I tell her.

I pull the pan onto the cooker and drape Sarah's wet clothes over the drier in the kitchen but when I return to the living room, Sarah's asleep. She doesn't show signs of waking, so I sit and eat by myself then I go to bed. I'm a bit worried about leaving her alone. Is she a master criminal and this has been an elaborate plan to get into the farm? But that'd be pretty pointless, there isn't anything in the farmhouse worth stealing. Even so, I leave my bedroom door open and set my alarm for six o'clock, to make sure I'm up before Nan.

I needn't have bothered. When I go into the living room, Sarah hasn't moved but her eyes fly open as soon as I go near her. There's a second where she's in complete panic but that passes. We stare at each other.

"Morning," I stutter. "How're you feeling?"

She nods a little.

"I'll make us some breakfast," I tell her. "Come on."

I go into the kitchen. Sarah trails behind, hugging my fleece round her as though it's the only thing protecting her from the world, which is kind of sweet. Nan's left the fire in the old AGA ready to light, so I throw in a match.

"It takes a while to get going," I explain, "But then it's good for the day."

And then Nan walks in. Sarah jumps when she's sees her and grips the back of the chair. But Nan ... She stops dead.

Her face changes from pink to white to red in the space of two seconds flat and ends up with random splotches of all three. She opens and closes her mouth several times but no sound comes out. I'm not sure whether it's disbelief, or shock and horror or whether she's about to have some kind of seizure. She's looking at Sarah's long legs sticking out from under my shirt but she might as well be seeing some Soho streetwalker wearing nothing but suspenders and a thong.

"It's not what you think," I tell her.

"No?" Nan finds her voice, which can only be a bad thing.

"No," I say. "This is Sarah. She fell in the Devil's Claw last night and I saved her and ..."

"She 'fell'?" Nan interrupts. She glowers at Sarah as though she's the incarnation of wickedness sent by Satan himself.

"Yeah. Right from the top."

"You took a girl to the top of the Devil's Claw, at night, after a rainstorm?" Nan's voice rises higher.

"No. I didn't take her," I protest. "She got there by herself and ..." I realise I don't actually know what happened so I finish with, "she slipped."

"And you didn't take her to hospital or call an ambulance or anything sensible?"

"She didn't want me to, and she had nowhere to stay so I let her sleep here ... on the couch," I add quickly. "I'll take her into Llandrillo after breakfast and ..."

"You'd better," snaps Nan. "I'll not be having any of 'those' going's on under this roof." She tilts her chin in her no-arguing-on-this-way but, thankfully, she decides not to remind me of her views on 'sex before marriage'.

I glance at Sarah who's holding the chair so tight her knuckles have turned white. "Sarah," I say. "Meet my Nan."

Nan walks over and draws the curtains and the room floods with light. Now, I've seen the sunrise on the mountain every day of my life but I have to admit today it's pretty special. The sky's a rich blue and it's scattered with the neatest collection of clouds, tinged from burnished gold through to flaming red and Sarah sees it and she stares. Then she rushes to the door and struggles to open the lock (something else which needs fixing) so I walk over and release the catch and she flings the door open and stands there.

"Is it always this beautiful?" she breathes.

"No," I tell her. "This is Wales. Most of the time it's dull and wet and cold."

"You can see for ... for ever." Her voice is breathless and I don't know why but I'm really pleased she likes it.

"You'll love the view from the mountain then," I say. "I'll take you later," I add without thinking.

"I thought you were taking her into town," hisses Nan.

"I am ... I will," I say. "But I'm taking the new fence posts up the mountain this morning, she can come with me."

Nan doesn't say anything. She pushes past Sarah and heads for the chickens, which start squawking in anticipation. Sarah watches them too and it makes me smile; only city kids find chickens that interesting. She takes a couple of steps towards them.

"You might want to put your clothes on first," I say. "They should be dry now."

Sarah touches my shirt then nods.

“You can shower too,” I tell her. “It’s a bit tricky to make it work sometimes (another farm fault) but I’ll show you.”

I collect her clothes off the drier and she follows me into the bathroom.

“You have to hold the ‘on’ button and turn it at the same time,” I start explaining but she’s not listening. She’s staring at herself in the mirror. She touches her cheek and runs her fingers through her hair as though it’s changed radically since she last looked. It’s a bit weird. “Right ... I’ll... leave you to the shower,” I say and I retreat at speed.

In the kitchen, Nan’s got the toast under the grill.

“Where’s Rob?” I ask.

I reckon this is the only line of conversation which could distract Nan from Sarah’s overnight sleeping arrangements. Thankfully, I’m right.

“He got a phone call.” She bangs the grill ferociously. “Said he had to go. Well, he’s always got an excuse not to stay, hasn’t he?” The toast slides across the table on a plate towards me. “Says he’ll be back at the weekend.”

As I’m taking a bite of toast, I spot a man walking through the yard. He’s thirtyish with short brown hair, John Lennon sunglasses and a neat goatee beard. He’s wearing khaki combat pants and carrying a rucksack. He sees me watching him and waves, all cheerful, like I know him, and Nan wave’s back, like she does.

“Who the hell’s that?” I ask.

“Jake somebody,” she tells me. “He’s a geologist; wants to study the rock on the farm.”

“What rock?”

“The quartz outcrops up the mountain.”

“Why?”

“I’ve no idea but he was very polite. I told him he could.”

Sarah appears in the doorway. Nan indicates for her to sit down and another plate of buttered toast skids across the table, which I reckon is as close as we’re going to get to Nan being friendly with her at this point.

“Thank you,” whispers Sarah.

“When you’ve finished, we’ll go up the mountain,” I tell her.

Sarah’s watches me then she takes a tiny bite of toast. She smiles and I realise she’s damned gorgeous when she’s not half-drowned. Her gaze wanders to the window again. The sun is a blaze of gold. It’s going to be another hot day.

It takes Sarah forever to eat the toast but after she’s finished we go outside. She watches as I hitch the trailer to the tractor and reverse it under the shed. Dad bought new fencing posts and wire a couple of years ago, before he got depressed and couldn’t be bothered maintaining the farm any longer. I start loading them onto the trailer.

“Can I help?” asks Sarah.

“Sure.”

She’s got an accent I can’t place. Not Welsh, not even English.

“You’re American, right?” I say as we stack the posts.

She gives a vague nod which I take to be a yes.

“I thought so,” I say. “Are you on holiday or something?”

“Umm,” she murmurs.

“Relatives?”

“No.”

“Sightseeing then?”

“Umm.”

“How long have you been here?”

“Not long.”

“And do you like it?”

Her eyes stray to the mountains. “Very much.”

When the trailer’s full, I get her to perch on the wheel arch of the tractor and tell her to hang on and we set off up the mountain track. I’m worried she might fall off, being a city kid, but she manages fine. The sun’s climbing across the sky and Sarah’s skin is already beginning to redden so I grab an old cap I keep on the tractor and tell her to put it on.

“I guess you’re from a cold part of America?” I say. I try to remember where that might be but I was lousy at geography. “Canada?” I venture. But she’s watching a Red Kite circling overhead as though it’s the most fascinating thing she’s ever seen and doesn’t answer.

The worst part of the fence is between our farm and Gareth’s. Our flock’s always getting mixed up with his so I decide that’s the place to start. Sarah keeps glancing round, like she’s watching for someone but the only people you see up here are the die hard hikers.

I climb off the tractor and start throwing the fence posts off one side of the trailer and Sarah works on the other. I have to say, she works pretty hard and we’ve almost finished when I realise she’s stopped. I follow her gaze down the valley.

Gareth's speeding towards us on his quad, his sheepdog bounding along behind. Sarah braces herself, and I'm not sure whether she's worried about the dog or Gareth, who's looking particularly crazy today, with his wiry hair blowing in the breeze.

"Did you see it, Joe?" shouts Gareth as he gets close. He pulls up beside us and his dog flops on the grass, its tongue lolling out with the heat.

"See it?" I don't know what he's talking about.

"The spaceship ... the UFO ... over the mountain ... last night."

"No."

Sarah's half-hidden behind the trailer. I guess she doesn't know what to make of my eccentric neighbour.

"How could you miss it?" Gareth says. Sweat runs from under his cap. "It was right after I left you."

I think back to the events of last night. "I got distracted," I tell him.

Gareth nods acknowledgement at Sarah who flinches as if he's pinned her to the trailer with the quad. "The ship was hovering over them pine trees your Dad planted behind the farm and there was this light coming from it ... a beam ... like a tunnel ... yes, that's it." He seems pleased with the description. "A tunnel of light, then it snuffed out and the ship shot straight up." He stares into the sky as though he hopes it might reappear. "Damnedest thing I ever saw."

"Right."

"So, I rang the UFO society straight away. I've got their emergency number, from the last time there was a sighting,"

he says. “They’re coming this afternoon to take my statement and put it on the UFO-spotters website.”

He says it like I ought to be impressed, but I can’t help thinking the UFO-spotters website is for people with seriously little to do.

“I thought if *you’d* seen it they could talk to you too,” Gareth goes on. “But if you didn’t ...” He sighs like he was expecting the rollover jackpot and I’ve handed him a tenner.

“Sorry,” I shrug.

Gareth surveys the pile of wood we’re unloading. “That job needed doing,” he comments. “You can borrow my fence post driver. Come round for it after tea.”

“OK, thanks, Gareth,” I say.

He revs the quad and turns it back towards his farm. “Tell me if you see anything,” he calls and with a wave of his hand he roars off. The dog heaves itself off the ground and follows.

I cringe at the thought of what Rhys’ll say when he hears Gareth’s got a new UFO story.

Two jets appear over the mountain, one behind the other, fighter formation. The noise makes me drop the fence post I’m holding and it clatters against the trailer. Sarah watches them too.

“They’re Hawk jets from the RAF base on Anglesey,” I explain. “Trainee fighter pilots on manoeuvres ... or chasing aliens if you listen to Gareth.” I laugh but Sarah doesn’t. The planes bank over and disappear from view.

“Are they the best planes you’ve got?” she asks.

I don't understand where she's going with this question and I'm no expert on fighter planes. "I wouldn't know," I say.

She turns to me and her face is deadly serious. "You shouldn't have saved me last night," she says. "You don't know what you've done."

CHAPTER THREE

I FINISH UNLOADING THE POSTS and after a while Sarah joins me. We make another trip and I throw some wire on the trailer too. Sarah doesn't talk much but somehow it doesn't matter and I'm surprised by how she gets stuck into the work, for a city kid. One more journey and I'll be able to start fixing the fences.

Next time we return to the farm, Nan's waving at us from the doorway to get something to eat.

"You're burning," Nan comments, when she sees Sarah's face. "I've never seen anyone so pale. Where're you from, the North Pole?"

"She's American," I tell her.

Nan grunts in an unimpressed way as she spoons out three generous portions of the shepherd's pie she's made and we sit down to eat. I tuck in straight away but Sarah watches for a moment before she picks up her knife and fork. I wonder whether she's religious and was expecting say grace but Nan's not into that, even though she never misses chapel on Sunday.

"This is good," says Sarah. She eats slowly, juggling to keep food on the fork.

“All grown right here,” Nan says. She’s watching Sarah struggle with the cutlery; Sarah’s holding the knife and fork in the wrong hands.

“Your farm is very beautiful,” says Sarah.

Nan doesn’t say anything but it must have been the right thing to say because, after we’ve eaten, she finds Sarah some sun cream for the walk into town.

We take the Land Rover down to the Devil’s Claw. Sarah shivers as she watches the water pouring over the falls but it’s not raging like last night. We get out of the car and start to walk. Sarah keeps stopping to stare at birds or sheep or the sky or the view of the mountains. It makes me realise how much I take for granted, and how much will change if Rob sells the farm.

We drop down into Llandrillo and Sarah’s eyes dart every-where. There’s hardly a breath of wind and we’re both red-faced and sweating by the time we reach the village.

“There’s a bus due anytime,” I tell her. “Goes into Corwen.”

Sarah shrugs. “I’ll walk.”

“It’ll take all afternoon,” I protest.

“It doesn’t matter.”

“Have you got any money?”

She bites her lip.

“Jeez.” There’re a couple of pounds left from the tenner Nan gave me. I try to give them to her but she won’t take it.

“I’ll be OK,” she insists.

“Where are you going?”

“Corwen.”

“And then?”

She shakes her head and looks a bit sad, or is it worried, I'm not sure which.

We're crossing the bridge over the river. Mrs Jones from the shop-that-sells-everything is talking to Ant's mum near the church, a kid on a bike is circling the grass by the swings and there's a man standing near the bus shelter. He's not from round here, half-shaven face, scruffy torn jeans like he's slept under a hedge, some hikers do.

Next moment, Sarah's scrambled over the wall of the bridge and is skittering down the bank towards the river.

"What?"

I vault the wall and follow her. The bridge has two large grey stone spans with a pillar in the centre and a small arch where kids go to smoke. It's a safe enough place because it only takes water when the river's in flood. There's a small ledge running along the big arch and by the time I reach the bank, Sarah's inching her way towards the middle.

"What is it with you and water?" I cuss. "Come back."

Sarah's staring into the water tumbling over the rocks.

I step onto the ledge and shuffle towards her. My feet barely fit. "You won't drown yourself here," I tell her. "You can stand up even in the middle."

She doesn't appear to be listening so I grab her arm.

"Don't make me get more clothes wet," I tell her.

She turns to me and I'm shocked because her grey eyes show total fear.

"What? What is it?" I gasp.

She flattens herself against the bridge, trying to make

herself part of the wall. One hand clutches a necklace she's wearing. "He's found me," she whispers.

"Who?" I glance round, seeing no-one.

She chews her lip.

"Tell me what's going on. I can help you." I'm not sure about that but I say it anyway.

She shakes her head.

"Who's found you?" I ask.

Silence.

"Is it the creep by the bus stop?"

She nods.

"Hey, if you're in trouble we should go to the police," I tell her. This time she shakes her head so vigorously she nearly knocks herself off the ledge.

"Has he hurt you?" I ask.

She's freezes, like her life depends on it. "Not yet."

"Christ, what's that supposed to mean?" I splutter. "But he's not going to find you under the bridge, is he? He'd have to have X-ray eyes or you'd have to be radio-active or something."

She catches her breath when I say that and her foot slips off the ledge so she ends up sprawling in the knee deep water. I resign myself to having wet feet and splash in beside her; it's a good job it's so hot. I grab her arm and guide her to the bank and she ducks under the small arch, among the cigarette ends and empty beer cans.

"Right," I say as we sit down. "Tell me what's going on."

But she's not listening. She's examining her arms, feeling every inch.

“What’s wrong?” I ask.

“Of course he can find me,” she mutters. “I should have known.”

“Eh?”

“Here.” She presses on a tiny round lump under the skin at the top of her arm. “See,” she says.

“What the hell?”

There’s a bottle smashed by my feet and before I can stop her she pounces on a shard of green glass and slices it across her arm.

I’m horrified. “What are you doing?”

For a moment, she stops breathing and I worry she might faint but then she grits her teeth and starts digging under the skin with her fingers like she’s performing emergency surgery. It’s unreal ... on the bridge over our heads, Mrs Jones from the-shop-that-sells-everything is talking to Ant’s mum about cooking steak for supper ... and I’m here with this crazy girl slicing bits out of her arm.

“Christ Almighty! Stop,” I say. My stomach’s churning. “Doesn’t it hurt?”

“More than I expected,” she says. And she’s not being sarcastic, she’s serious.

“You’re ... you’re disturbed,” I tell her. “What is it anyway?”

She teases something out of her arm. It’s small in her fingers but there’s too much blood to see.

“My tracker,” she says and her lip’s trembling.

“Your what?”

She clasps her hand over the gash on her arm and blood oozes through her fingers.

“This is what he followed,” she says. She smacks her hand on her knee. “Why didn’t I think of it before? How could I be so stupid?” She hits her knee again.

“Hey!” I catch her arm before she can do any more damage. Is she one of those people who self-harms? Does the cutting tie in with the suicide attempt? “You can’t think of everything,” I tell her. “You’re only human.”

Sarah makes a funny choking noise when I say that. The bus rumbles over the bridge. It gives me an idea.

“The man who’s after you ... he’ll follow that ... thing?” I gasp.

She nods.

“Give it to me,” I say. Her hand shakes as I take the tracker. I dash out of the arch and leg it up the bank. The bus shelter’s not far away. I hope the bus is going to stop.

I’m in luck. Three hikers are struggling to manoeuvre bulging rucksacks through the bus doors but the man I saw earlier is heading straight for me. I push passed the hikers and stand by the driver; a surly man swigging water out of a bottle.

“How much to Corwen?” I ask. The tracker’s a small round ball in my fingers, slippery with blood.

The driver mops his brow and punches the journey into his ticket machine. Whilst he’s busy, I slide the transmitter into the used ticket slot. It leaves a smear of red. I hope no-one’s seen.

“Three fifty seven,” he says but I’m already out through the door again.

“Thanks,” I call and I’m gone leaving the driver muttering about ‘time wasting’. The bus doors hiss shut.

The scruffy guy's almost on the bridge and I imagine Sarah shivering underneath as the bus pulls away. I walk towards the bridge as calmly as I can, although my hearts thumping. I try not to make eye contact with the man, so as not to draw attention to myself, but as he passes I can't help glancing at him. He has an odd, vacant expression in his eyes that gives me the creeps. I can understand why Sarah might be afraid of him.

I'm expecting him to be carrying some kind of radio receiver but this guy has only a thin t-shirt and mega-ripped jeans. Is he stalking Sarah or back-packing round the mountains? Will he go down the river bank and find her? Or is she right, will he track the transmitter thing I've planted on the bus?

As the bus passes, he stands still and his empty eyes follow it then he changes direction and walks after it. It's the weirdest thing I've ever seen ... not counting watching someone dig a transmitter out of their arm of course.

I sit on the wall of the bridge until the man disappears round the corner then I head back under the arch to Sarah. At first I can't find her but she appears from the other side of the bridge.

"I thought you might be 'him'," she explains. A red trail traces its way along her arm and runs through her fingers.

"He's gone," I tell her.

"What did you do?" She sits down, rocking backwards and forwards.

"I put the tracker on the bus," I say, "and you were right, El Creepo followed it."

She lets out a long breath. "Thank you."

I sit beside her. There're drops of blood on the ground.

The cut must be really deep. I search in my pocket and dig out a clean tissue.

“Hold this on your arm,” I tell her and I catch a very small smile.

“OK,” I say, “explanation time, Sarah. Start talking.”

CHAPTER FOUR

SARAH STARES AT THE GROUND.

“Right, either you explain what’s going on or I walk straight to the police station and tell them everything I know,” I say firmly.

“Please don’t.” Her eyes are full of tears. Don’t you hate it when girls do that?

“OK,” I say a little more gently. “So ... that man’s after you, right?”

She nods.

“Oh hell, we should go to the police,” I groan. “He can’t go around stalking people. And the transmitter you had in your arm, that’s got to be illegal.” And I curse as it occurs to me the evidence for our story is right now taking the mountain route to the bus station.

“I can’t,” whispers Sarah. “I know you don’t understand ... but I can’t.”

“Why? Are you some kind of escaped criminal?”

She shakes her head. “No, nothing like that.” She gazes at the drops of blood on the stones under the bridge, her blood, but I can tell she’s not seeing the dull stone archway we’re

sitting beneath. “We were on the cliff behind your house,” she says. Her voice is little more than a whisper and I strain to hear her over the gurgling of the river.

“The ridge?” I ask.

“By the trees,” she explains.

“OK. What were you doing there?”

She ignores the question. “It was dark ... really black. I thought I’d got away but he found me. We struggled. I pushed him over the edge and ...”

“Wait, you knocked him off the ridge!” I exclaim. “It must be fifty metres high and there’s a lake at the bottom; a really deep lake. The guy looked a bit rough but, jeez, he’d be in intensive care or dead if he’s fallen that far.”

But Sarah’s not listening, she’s on a cliff top in the dark of the night and she’s so scared she can hardly speak. “Then I ran,” she goes on. “I followed the river down and ... I came to the waterfall.”

I stare at her. If she’s not telling the truth she ought to be an actress but there’re so many unanswered questions, so many things which don’t make sense. Her hand shakes as she holds the tissue against her arm.

“Come on,” I say. “We’ll buy some bandage and get you patched up.”

“No, I ...” Her voice trails off. The muscles in her neck are working overtime in her efforts not to cry.

“OK,” I say. “It’s probably best you don’t appear in the shop like a victim from the chain-saw massacre.” I get up. “I won’t be long.”

Mrs Jones is serving. Her eyes light up when she sees me.

“Joe,” she says. “I’ve heard you’ve got a buyer for the farm.”

Ant has a theory Mrs Jones is a psychic witch. I mean, she hides it well. With her blue rinse and chubby, smiling face she could be your favourite grandma, but how did she know about the sale?

“We might have,” I mutter. “Nothing certain. I need some antiseptic and a bandage, please.”

“Have you been in the wars?”

I can see Witchy Jones looking for signs of injury as she passes the bandage across the counter to me.

“Not for me,” I mumble but I don’t say more. If Ant’s theory’s right she’ll know the truth anyhow.

I’m almost expecting Sarah to be gone and this has been some kind of dream, but she’s propped against the archway staring at the river. Despite the sun, her face has returned to bloodless white.

I kneel beside her with the bandage. “Ready?” I ask.

She nods and I peel off the blood-soaked tissue. The cut on her arm is jagged and deep and I worry I might throw up; first aid training doesn’t prepare you for real raw flesh.

“This needs stitches,” I tell her. “And antibiotics. I mean, you did it with a broken bottle for God’s sakes. What were you thinking? You should go to hospital.”

She grips my arm. “I can’t do that either,” she says. Her teeth are clamped so hard on her lip it’s turned white. I clean the gash, press the dressing on and wind the bandage round.

“Thank you,” she whispers.

“No prob,” I say. “Are you sure I can’t ring someone to come and pick you up though? I mean, what about your family?”

Her eyes snap to another time, another place. “My mother died.” Her voice sounds wistful. “When I was small.”

“And your dad?”

“He knows where I am,” she says.

“He knows ...?” I splutter.

“Well, not my exact location,” she tells me. “But the general area.”

“How can he let you wander about like this?”

“He didn’t have a choice.” She shrugs. “Will the blood wash in the river?” she asks.

“I suppose.”

She gets up. Her clothes are already wet so she stands at the edge and splashes them with water until most of the blood’s gone. It’s weird and wrong, like one of those war movies where the hero goes through hell to survive, yet we’re in the middle of Wales on a sunny day. The colour’s returned to her face a little but she still glances round every few seconds like she’s expecting someone to jump out and attack her.

“So Sarah, now what?” I ask when she’s finished.

“I go the opposite way to the bus,” she says. She touches the bandage round her arm. “Will you make sure he’s gone?”

I crawl up the bank and peer over. The man’s nowhere to be seen. I motion to her and she joins me at the top.

Sarah checks the road once more before stepping from behind the wall.

“Thanks, for helping me,” she says. She points towards the edge of the village. “I go this way, right?”

I nod and she walks off. “Will you be OK?” I call. She shrugs again and carries on and I think of the refugees you see on the TV. The ones living in combat zones whose homes have been wrecked, the kind who soldier on, even though their world is being destroyed around them. As she nears the corner, she turns. I wave to her and she waves back and I get the feeling she’s not as tough as she’d like to make out.

After she’s gone, I head for the farm and I’m driving the Land Rover up to the track before I realise I never noticed whether Sian was home. Not that there’s any point with her having a new boyfriend.

My trainers and jeans are almost dry now so I finish loading the last of the fence posts and wire onto the trailer. It’s slower and a lot less fun on my own. As I’m passing the house, Nan comes out.

“I’m going to the WI tonight with Rhiannon,” she tells me. “So I thought we’d eat early.”

I won’t argue with that.

“Did the girl catch the bus alright?” she asks as I unlace my trainers.

“She walked,” I say.

Nan’s eyebrows disappear under her curly grey fringe. She puts a plate of Macaroni cheese in front of me. “She couldn’t even use a knife and fork. Too much eating at those fast food places,” she says, as though that’s somehow relevant to Sarah hiking into town. She stops and points at my shirt. “Is that blood?”

I look down. There's a smear of red I hadn't noticed which must have come from when I bandaged Sarah's arm but I reckon Nan's better not knowing the details of the afternoon. "It's paint," I say.

I can see Nan's doubtful. "Put it in the wash," she tells me. She takes a mouthful of Macaroni and chews deliberately, working out her next move. There's something monumental coming and I pray it's not going to be the 'sex-before-marriage' rant. "Have you thought about this offer on the farm?"

I breathe a sigh of relief we're off the subject of Sarah. "Not yet," I say.

"Well, it's time you did," she says. "But don't let Rob or me pressure you, it's got to be your decision."

A car horn sounds. "That'll be Rhiannon," Nan says. She gets up and puts her plate in the sink. "I'll be home after ten."

I change my t-shirt then head outside. The stain on the dirty one is a dark red, almost too dark for blood.

I'm about to start up the tractor when a voice makes me jump.

"Hi there."

I'd not noticed Nan's geologist with the goatee walking across the yard.

"Great weather," he shouts.

I frown at him.

"I'll be back tomorrow," he calls. "Some excellent specimens here."

The bag over his shoulder is bursting. In fact, how he's holding it up beats me.

“What are you taking?” I ask.

“Quartz samples.” He studies me for a moment then he says. “I did ask permission but if it’s a problem ...” He puts down the bag, rummages in one of the pockets on his combat pants, pulls out his wallet and gives me a twenty pound note. “I can pay,” he tells me.

I’m so shocked I can’t speak and he must take my lack of response as an agreement because he slaps me on the shoulder and says, “Good stuff. See you soon.” The bag handles strain as he heaves it off the ground and slings it round his shoulder. “Hey. What kind of music does a geologist like?” he asks.

I shake my head.

“Rock music,” he says and he goes off into howls of laughter. Obviously, that joke is hilarious if you’re a geologist.

“Rock music,” he’s muttering as he walks off.

Boy, we get some weirdo’s passing through sometimes.

I take the tractor and drop off the last of the fence posts. The sun’s low in the sky and there’s a breeze getting up. I pass the Devil’s Claw then turn the tractor across the bottom fields towards Gareth’s farm, noting with satisfaction the tarpaulin over the stacks of hay bales held up during last night’s storm.

“Joe,” Gareth shouts. He’s with three men I guess must be UFO spotters. “The post driver’s in the shed. Help yourself.”

I wave my thanks. One man is unloading a camera large enough for the BBC from his car boot.

“We’re going on a stake out, to see if them aliens show again,” he tells me. “Thought we’d go on your place? We’ll get a good view from the ridge. That OK?”

“No prob,” I tell him. “Don’t let any of them fall into the lake.”

Gareth laughs but I’m remembering Sarah being chased by the dead-eyed guy.

I pick up the post driver and head home. I think about Gareth and the others UFO spotting on the ridge, which turns into, what was Sarah doing on the ridge in the dark? Did she really push the man off? Has her arm stopped bleeding? Is the man searching buses in Corwen? What *was* the transmitter thing? Is Sarah all right? And finally, I shouldn’t have let her wander off by herself with that odd-job, dead-eyed character chasing her.

I’m nearing the tumbledown remains of an old barn on the boundary between the two farms. You know the kind of place, half-collapsed dry stone walls, no roof. Suddenly, three sheep come charging out. Now sheep are stupid creatures. They spook at the slightest thing and these have got it bad. They skitter across the field and disappear through a gate. Next minute, two more burst from the broken wall on the other side. So, what’s scaring them?

The barn isn’t far from the road and sometimes hikers pitch tents inside. Gareth hates that. I remember the man after Sarah, so I decide to investigate. I leave the tractor and peer through what was once a window. There’s no-one in the first room so I climb in to check out the other side. As I jump down, a rock, the size of a football whizzes passed my head so close it grazes my ear.

“Jesus!” I stumble backwards and sit down hard.

“Joe,” Sarah gasps. She backs against the wall.

“Why’d you do that?” I’m shocked but pleased I’ve found her again.

“I didn’t know it was you,” she falters.

“So you decided to smash my brains out with a boulder,” I choke.

“I’m sorry.” She takes a step towards me. “I thought you might be ... well, you know. I’m really sorry. Are you alright?”

I put my hand to my ear. It comes away with blood. “I’ll live,” I tell her. “Why the hell are you hiding in Gareth’s barn?”

She sits on a rock beside me and puts her head in her hands. “I thought ... the man you saw ... he’ll expect me to run ... so I didn’t.”

I’m not sure that’s totally logical.

“And my foot’s sore,” she goes on.

“What have you done now?” I ask.

“My shoes aren’t right,” she tells me.

I nearly ask why she’s wearing shoes which hurt but then I remember she’s a girl. Sian used to buy shoes she couldn’t walk in too.

“Well, you can’t sleep here.” I indicate the crumbling stonework. “It might be warm now but it’s cold at night. Have you eaten?”

She rubs her hand across her forehead like she’s got a headache and suddenly everything seems clear.

“You’re coming back home with me.”

“Your Nan won’t approve.”

“It’s my farm,” I state. “I get to say what happens.” And I realise I mean it. “You can stay until you get yourself sorted.”

“Really?” The setting sun reflects fire in her dark eyes.

“Yeah, really.” I grin at her. “But no more jumping in rivers or slicing bits off yourself and definitely no trying to brain me with lumps of rock, got it?”

“Yes,” she says.

“OK.” As I’m climbing back through the fallen stone wall, Gareth and the other men drive past in his four-by-four heading for the ridge. Sarah sees them too and ducks behind the wall. It’s a move that’s a little too easy, too practised; reminds me of the war movies again.

“Now what are you doing?” I groan. “It’s only Gareth and his alien hunters,” I tell her.

“What?” She does her, melt into the wall impression again.

I laugh. “Yeah, they’re real wack-jobs. I met them earlier.”

“Did you tell them about me?” she whispers.

“Why would I do that?”

She peels herself off the wall.

“Are you coming back to the farm or what?”

“Yes,” she gulps.

“Good.”

We climb on the tractor and chug across the lower fields.

“All this ... belongs to you?” she says.

“Well, the other side of the fence,” I wave my hand.

“You must be ... rich.”

I remember all the red letters. “Hardly,” I say, “and half the farm’s my brothers,” I admit. “But he’s never here. In fact, he wants to sell it.”

I don’t know why I tell her. It must be playing on my mind but her eyes open wide.

“You’re not going to let him, are you?” She gazes across the valley. “They’d have to kill me before I’d lose this.” And she says it so ferociously I decide she’s not exaggerating.

We pass through the gate and I stop to shut it behind us. The last rays of sun are glinting off the For Sale sign by the road and I don’t know what comes over me because next minute I’m yanking it out of the ground and tossing it over the hedge.

“You’re right,” I tell her. “I’m not selling.” Although, for the life of me, I’m not sure how I’m going to make it work.

Ninetyfive percent Human is available on Amazon
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