

Suzanna Williams



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For Mum,
who never stopped believing.

Chapter 1

He's closing on the car in front; his foot is pressed hard on the accelerator. He's near enough to see the BMW badge on its boot, for its tail lights to turn the inside of his car a glowing red. He sees the eyes of the driver in the rear view mirror, wide, surprised, confused. He's thought about those eyes every day for the past thirteen years, waiting for this moment.

He blasts the horn, flashes the headlights, grins. Might as well play a little; stretch out the fun.

"Not so sure of yourself now are you, Mr Grass-on-your-own-Grandmother-because-it's-your-Public-Duty?" he mocks. His voice is harsh and triumphant.

They're nearing the river. The engine roars as he pulls out to overtake. He's chosen this car well, enjoys its power. Its owner will be angry when he returns to the car park and finds it gone. As he pulls alongside, he grits his teeth, takes a grip of the wheel and swings it hard towards the BMW.

* * *

Lee's head smashed sideways into the car window. The sound of twisting, tearing metal screamed in his ears as the bumper of the red car beside them tore into the driver's door.

A red car? But he was sitting in the living room watching the football match.

He squeezed his eyes shut. The image remained. Windscreen wipers clunked rhythmically revealing a narrow country lane, shiny and black from the February rain.

Screams echoed in his ears.

He opened his eyes. It made no difference. The football match had disappeared.

“John! The car!”

“I can bloody see it, Sylvia.”

Again the red car veered crazily towards them. Strapped in the back seat of the car, Lee glimpsed the silhouette of the driver, baseball cap, cigarette glowing, then the two cars connected with a violent jolt.

More screaming, louder, desperate.

“What’s he doing? Why doesn’t he pass?”

The driver braked hard and steered away from the collision but the tyres broke away, taking their own direction, shrieking like souls in hell. A hedge loomed in front.

Where was this? Who were these people? What on earth was happening? Lee’s heart pounded, sending blood racing round his body in shuddering waves.

Branches clawed at the car but failed to catch them. They burst through the shrubbery and careered down a steep embankment. The car bounced over the rough ground, shaking him so violently he felt his brain might splatter inside his skull.

“The river!” yelled the woman.

The man yanked on the steering wheel.

“The tree!” she howled.

The seatbelt grabbed him, forcing the air out of his lungs in a single gasp. The sound of bending metal and splintering glass filled the night as the car rammed into the trunk of a huge

oak tree. The windscreen disappeared. The roof buckled, the bonnet crushed, the door twisted. Finally, the airbags detonated; two deafening explosions ripping through the darkness leaving wisps of white powder winding upwards into the frosty air.

The smell of burning rubber from the tyres mixed with hot oil in a toxic cocktail as the engine ruptured and bled into the night. The windscreen wipers twitched on the dashboard until, in a spray of electric sparks, they too became still. Only the slight hiss of steam escaping from the fractured radiator broke the silence.

“Mum ... Dad,” said a trembling voice.

The impact had crushed the car roof in such a way that the driver’s mirror pointed straight at Lee, but instead of his own reflection, he saw the face of a girl, her dark eyes wide and frightened. Her scream pierced his ears, reverberating around his head.

“Are you all right?”

The face of his foster mother replaced the girl’s terrified eyes.

“You must’ve been dreaming,” Joan said. “You were sort of twitching and breathing funny.”

“Yeah?” Lee rubbed his eyes, trying to shake the images of the car crash from his mind.

“You had me going there for a minute,” added Derek. “Thought you were having a heart attack.”

“Err ... no ...”

Joan returned to her armchair, plumping up the faded floral cushions before sitting down. “How’s that girlfriend of yours?” she asked. “I’ve not seen her for a few days.”

“Ex-girlfriend,” said Lee.

“Oh.” Joan looked like she was hoping for details but thankfully she didn’t push for them. ‘Not wanting to get serious’ had seemed like a lame explanation even as he’d said it and Kirsty had definitely not taken the news well. But getting attached to people was always a bad idea ... that was something his sixteen years had taught him.

Joan sighed. “You should turn in for an early night,” she told him. “You look tired.”

“Uh huh.” He ran his hand through his hair. The girl’s screams still rang in his ears. The car crash had seemed so real; so much more than images, so much more than a dream. There’d been sounds and smells and feelings, feelings that somehow weren’t his own. It had been one crazy-arse nightmare.

Several hours later, he woke to the sound of hushed voices downstairs. He knew what that meant. His foster parents, Joan and Derek Webb, had picked up another stray. He wondered whether he should get up and wedge his backpack against the bedroom door, but it was cold and he couldn’t be bothered to get out of bed. Anyway, even the skinny kid who had scarpered with his CD player, Joan’s handbag and half of Derek’s fishing rods hadn’t stolen anything on the first night.

He sighed. Of course, not all the kids who came to the house were psycho. There’d been the little boy whose dad had busted his nose. He’d called Lee ‘big brother’ and pestered him to play football, which had been sort of cool, and there was the lad who’d taken the overdose. He’d been OK in a quiet way but he’d left in an ambulance and hadn’t returned. That was the trouble really. Just when he got used to someone, they left. Not like Lee. He’d been there two years.

He heard the front door open and close as the social worker left.

Good.

Lee never liked the social workers.

Then came footsteps on the stairs. Joan kept the bed in the adjoining room permanently ready for its next emergency occupant.

“The bathroom’s across the landing,” he heard Joan say.

The door clicked shut.

Silence, then muffled sobs.

He turned over but it was always the same when someone new arrived. It reminded him of his mother lying in the hospital bed with the social worker hovering behind him, waiting to bring him through this very same front door in the middle of the night. He pulled the duvet over his face and fell into an uneasy sleep.

It took the alarm clock three attempts before Lee finally dragged himself out of bed next morning. It almost felt like he hadn’t slept at all. He lingered in the shower, trying to wash the memories from his mind until the water ran cold. He retrieved his school uniform from its usual place on the floor, pulled a hoodie over his school sweatshirt and jammed his feet into his trainers.

Thirty-seven Highfield Road stood on a tree-lined street on the edge of Shrewsbury. The warm aroma of toast and coffee drifted through the large Victorian semi, reminding him that, as usual, he was absolutely starving.

“Morning.” Joan handed him a plate holding several thick rounds of cheese on toast. “We had a new arrival last night.”

“I heard,” he muttered. Joan never seemed to learn he had zero interest in the problems of the people who passed through.

“Her name’s Paige,” Joan went on.

“Paige?” He said through a mouthful of toast. “Since when do we have girls staying?”

“Now, don’t go getting any ideas,” said Joan. “Social Services don’t like doing mixed placements but they’re so short of emergency homes at the moment.”

He took a swig of his hot chocolate.

Ideas? What planet did Joan live on? Anyway this girl was probably about five, or else a total loser. After all, why else would she end up at Highfield Road?

“Paige’s been in a car crash,” Joan said. “It killed both her parents but Paige only got a bump on the head. It’s a miracle, really.”

A car crash? The images from the night before overloaded his brain, as fresh and clear as reality but completely senseless.

“She’ll be staying until her uncle arrives from Scotland,” continued Joan.

His stomach twisted with a stab of jealousy, threatening to throw out his toast. *An uncle. Real family. Not just a gran who lives in a nursing home and only remembers me on good days.* He took a deep breath, allowing the scents of the kitchen to unwind the knot in his stomach.

“Shouldn’t Paige be in hospital or something?” he asked.

“Well, she’s not hurt physically,” said Joan. “And the hospital’s so short of beds ...”

“Short of beds, short of homes.” He bit into the toast. “The world stinks.”

Joan sighed. “Make Paige welcome. You know what it’s like.”

He shrugged. “Don’t expect I’ll see much of her,” he replied. “She’ll stay in her room until you can coax her down, like all the others. Then she’ll go.”

No sooner had the words left his mouth than he heard light footsteps on the stairs. He raised an eyebrow. “Or, she could just come straight down for breakfast.”

The kitchen door opened.

“Come in, Paige.” Joan’s hand automatically reached for the kettle.

Lee almost choked on his toast. Paige’s eyes looked puffy from crying, but there could be no mistake about it. This was the same girl he’d seen in his dream the night before.

How was that possible?

“What would you like for breakfast, Paige?” Joan asked.

“I’m not really hungry, thank you.” Paige glanced round the kitchen and ended up studying the floor tiles.

“You’ve got to keep your strength up at times like this,” fussed Joan.

Paige pushed her thumbs into the pockets of her designer jeans. “Maybe a slice of toast then.” She sat on the very edge of a chair at the opposite end of the table, her long dark hair falling over her smart jumper which Lee guessed cost more than all his clothes put together. Definitely not their usual loser.

“Mary Grantham, the social worker, will be round later,” Joan told Paige.

Lee frowned. He didn’t like Mary Grantham but it wasn’t really the woman’s fault. Someone had had to be with him when his mother died and she’d drawn the short straw.

Last night’s image of the car crash replayed in his head like a video he couldn’t turn off.

“Was it a red car?” he blurted. Immediately he wished he hadn’t said it. Joan started slapping butter on the toast with a ‘what-kind-of-a-question’s-that?’ look on her face and Paige’s brown eyes stared at him as though he’d suggested the car had wings.

Stupid thing to say, he told himself. But he did see Paige in the accident. He did see the red car. His mind spun with a million questions all coming down to the same one – how?

He peered at Paige over the top of his mug. Maybe it was the expensive clothes but she had a killer figure, curvy yet toned and even with a tearstained face she was pretty in a soft, gentle sort of way. But as for why he should have seen her in the accident ...

“You’re going to be late.” Joan’s voice jolted him out of his thoughts. “And didn’t the headmaster give you a warning about wearing trainers at school?” she continued, glaring at his feet.

“Shoes’re in my bag,” he said. “I can put them on if anyone insists.” *Like that’s important.*

Joan tutted. “What are your plans after school? Will you be doing ... what’s it called ... you know ... that running thing with Andy?” she asked.

“Parkour,” he told her for what seemed the thousandth time. “It’s a proper sport, remember? Like gymnastics, but outside.”

“Yes, yes.” Joan dismissed the explanation with a wave of her hand. “But will you be home early or late?”

“Early. Andy’s got a driving lesson.”

Joan frowned. “Andy seems to have been learning to drive forever,” she said. “It must be costing a fortune.” She dropped the butter knife in the sink. “How’s your car fund coming along anyway?”

Lee's stomach tied itself into a hangman's noose around his breakfast. "Umm, yeah, good," he blustered.

OK, so when he'd started saving money from his Saturday job it had been for a car, but that was before his gran told him his dad had gone to Australia. Did she really know his father's identity when his mum had always insisted the man had been a stupid one-night stand and his birth certificate read 'father unknown'? Or had Gran's memories become so distorted she was confusing him with someone else? Lee's visits to the nursing home had become fact finding missions whilst the five hundred and twenty pounds which had been his car savings were now his Australia fund ... he'd just never told anyone. He watched Joan stirring milk into a cup for Paige. He didn't need telling his plan was doomed to fail.

Joan placed a plate of toast and a cup of hot chocolate in front of Paige. "Mary's trying to contact your uncle," she told her. Lee saw Paige's bottom lip trembling. She reached for the chocolate, took a sip and swallowed hard.

You'll be all right. You've got your uncle. He gulped down his jealousy with the last mouthful of hot chocolate and picked up his backpack, leaving Paige pushing the toast round her plate.

Chapter 2

He's sitting in a corner of the café on the motorway services, the last stop before home. A collection of empty coffee cups and a half-eaten sandwich sit on the greasy table before him. It's busy and the place resounds with the clanking of coffee cups and noisy children for whom the journey has already been too long. A bored-looking waitress is clearing the tables. Her eyes are ringed with dark circles.

"You finished?" she asks him, through a mouthful of gum.

"Finished?" A slow smile spreads across his face as he gets to his feet. "Hell, I'm only just getting started."

* * *

Paige stood with Joan on the church steps. She couldn't believe it had been a week since the accident. She still couldn't believe it had happened at all. Rain streaked down relentlessly out of a dull, grey sky. The sort of rain which wasn't much to look at but wet you to the bone. A miserable day for a funeral. A miserable day for anything.

She shivered.

"Should we go inside?" asked Joan.

"Not yet."

The coffins are in there. Mum and Dad. The longer she could stay outside the better.

Hands slid round her waist.

“Hi, babe.”

“Gavin?” She twisted round, managing a small smile. “You’re here,” she said. “I thought you had exams.”

“Only mocks.” Gavin tossed his long blond fringe out of his eyes and planted a quick kiss on her cheek. “I’m doing them tomorrow instead.”

Tears welled up in her eyes. What was she going to do without Gavin when she moved to Scotland with Uncle Roy?

“Hey, don’t worry about it, babe.” Gavin gave her a squeeze. “It’s given me an extra day to revise,” he said with a grin.

Paige blinked rapidly. Worrying about Gavin’s exams had never crossed her mind.

Gavin kept one arm round her waist. “You look nice, hun,” he said. “You should wear black more often.”

“What?” Had he missed the whole reason for her outfit? She turned to face him but Gavin’s attention was on a shiny new car pulling alongside the church wall.

“Wow, it’s the latest Audi,” he said. “Are they friends of yours?”

Three men got out wearing dark city suits and serious faces.

She shrugged. “I guess they’re from the bank where my father works ... worked,” she corrected and to her horror, her voice cracked as she said it.

Gavin’s mobile rang.

“Hey, Chris. Look, I can’t talk; I’m at this funeral. No, I’ll be back in an hour or so. There’s no prob. I’ll meet you at lunch.”

Paige pulled at his sleeve. “Aren’t you staying afterwards? I thought ... ”

“The squash match, babe,” Gavin interrupted. “It’s the semi-finals. Did you forget?”

“Forget?” she murmured. Like she had nothing else on her mind?

Paige shifted from one foot to the other, trying to stop shivering, trying to keep her mind off the black hearse and the solemn-faced vicar lurking round the doorway guiding the mourners into the church. It didn’t work.

A small hire car pulled onto the grass opposite the church and a stocky man with thinning hair eased himself out of the driver’s seat; an older weather-worn version of her father.

“Uncle Roy.” She flew down the gravel and threw herself into his arms, tears pricking her eyes. Uncle Roy stood motionless. Then he pulled away.

“Hello there, Tiger,” he said. “Let me put my jacket on?”

“Of course,” she murmured.

Gavin appeared behind her. He waited while Uncle Roy changed out of his windcheater then shook hands. Uncle Roy gave him a brief nod before heading into the church.

Paige followed close behind. A crowd of teachers from the school where her mother had taught sat by the door, sniffing as she passed. A woman in a baggy brown cardigan played mournful chords on a not-quite-in-tune organ. Uncle Roy moved aside to sit down and there, directly in front of her, beside the altar, stood the two coffins. Suddenly, her legs refused to move.

“Come on, babe,” said Gavin. He stood by the front row of seats.

“Can’t we sit further away?” she choked out.

“It’s close family at the front,” said Gavin. “That’s how it works.”

He linked his arm through hers and pulled her along the hard wooden pew just metres away from the coffins. The scent of lilies from the wreaths wafted over her, catching in her throat. Her mum had liked lilies.

Paige looked at Uncle Roy but he stared straight ahead, leaving an uncomfortable space between them.

~

Lee sprawled on the bench under the maths classroom window. He still wore his hoodie and his trainers.

“Doesn’t look like the cover teacher’s turning up,” he said to Josh with a grin.

Josh opened the classroom window and flicked a pen top at two girls walking below. It missed them.

“If I’d been over there,” Josh pointed to the bike shed roof, “I’d have got that top down her t-shirt.”

Lee laughed. “We could jump to the bike shed easy enough,” he said.

“What about over the shed to the wall?” asked Josh. “Think that’s possible?”

“Don’t see why not,” said Lee. “It’s not as difficult as some of the other jumps we’ve done.”

Josh checked round the room. “Still no teacher,” he said.

“Trouble is,” said Lee, “the windowsill’s wet. It’s not safe in the rain.”

Josh pulled his soccer shirt out of his bag and mopped the sill. “There,” he said. “Fixed it.”

Lee climbed through the window and balanced on the ledge.

~

The funeral party moved outside. The rain had stopped but the day remained dull and cold. Paige stood silently between Joan and Uncle Roy as Gavin busied himself with a text message. Her body seemed to have been invaded by butterflies. Their wings trembled and danced in her stomach, fluttering outwards until her whole body quivered. Tears stung her eyes.

She gulped. Her mum would never have approved of her losing control and showing herself up in front of all these people.

Gavin flashed a smile but Uncle Roy appeared as ashen as the grey churchyard beneath the sullen sky. He stood stiffly, his hands clasped behind him, his face expressionless. The butterflies reached her throat and she gave a loud, choking sob.

Joan put an arm round her and she buried her face in Joan's black funeral coat. The fabric smelled warm and flowery. She tried not to think about the coffins, or the newly dug hole in the ground, or the fact she'd never see Mum and Dad again. Paige tried to think of something else, anything else, tried not to cry.

She felt dizzy, light-headed. A sinking feeling gripped the pit of her stomach. No, not sinking, more like falling, as though she'd stepped off the pavement and never hit the road. She could see a white wall. But ... her eyes were shut ...

Her breath caught in mid-sob. She lifted her face from Joan's coat. The wall remained.

I'm hallucinating. I'm going crazy.

Beneath her, she could see shiny grey squares, a roof wet from the February rain. She landed and the world rolled over before she was falling once more, faster, breathless, awkward. This time the floor seemed to rise up and meet her and she felt a sharp pain in her knee. She winced in surprise.

“You’ll be all right.” Joan squeezed her arm, jolting Paige back to reality. “You’ll see.”

Fear gripped every muscle in her body and held her immobile, forcing her to watch as men in black suits with expressionless faces lowered the coffins into the ground.

Things were not going to be ‘all right’. How could anything ever be ‘all right’ again? Her parents were dead ... really dead ... never-coming-back dead ... and she was seeing things that weren’t there ...

... Again.

Chapter 3

He gets back into his car. There's a local paper on the seat next to him.

'Hit and Run Driver Kills Local Couple' reads the headline. 'Daughter Miraculously Escapes'.

Of course, if the Harpers' car had gone into the river as he'd intended instead of hitting a tree, it might have been a different story. Not that it mattered; it had never been about the girl, only her couldn't-keep-his-mouth-shut father. But now he keeps thinking about her.

How ironic would it be to bait the police with the Harpers' daughter?

How appropriate?

How God-damned perfect?

* * *

Derek's clumsy Volvo estate stopped on the double yellow lines outside the City Hospital's A&E Department. Lee hobbled over on crutches, followed by a doctor.

"We've bandaged his knee," the doctor told Derek. "It's a bad sprain."

"Shame you couldn't bandage his brain," sighed Derek. "Jumping out of windows." He turned to Lee. "What were you thinking?"

“It was stupid,” Lee mumbled. He meant jumping in the rain rather than attempting to jump from the maths classroom to the wall, but Derek didn’t need to know that.

And I’d have made it if the Deputy Head hadn’t shouted just as I took off.

“Give me your bag.” Derek reeked of motor oil and the super-strong hand cleanser hastily used to remove the worst of the grime before answering the school’s emergency call. It seemed a welcome, dependable smell after the hospital’s sickly disinfectant.

“He’s to rest for a few days.” The doctor shut the car door.

“Does that mean I can stay home?” Lee asked.

“Definitely not.”

“We’re only revising.” He shot a sideways glance at Derek to check if he was winning. “I could do that anywhere.”

Derek frowned. “I’ve seen your revising,” he said. “It’s mostly in front of the computer.”

”With revision CDs.” Lee tried to sound innocent.

“No,” said Derek, “with parkour videos on YouTube. I wasn’t born yesterday.”

“So that’s a no?”

“Come on. You’ll have finished school in a few weeks.” Derek turned the car into the traffic. “And you don’t want to spend your years in a factory like me.”

“There’re worse jobs.” Lee jabbed the new bandage with his finger.

Derek’s eyebrows shot up. “Worse than a dead-end job with no prospects?”

“Well, at least you haven’t got the stress of running your own business,” said Lee. “That really twists people.”

“I take it we’re talking about your step-father?” remarked Derek.

Lee stared out of the window. “He’d got his chain of fancy hotels, loads of money, but it completely stressed him out. That’s when he used to drink.” It had begun to rain again, tracing miserable grey lines down the glass. “I was glad when he hooked up with his tart, and me and Mum moved out.” He tried to straighten his leg to ease the aching but maybe it didn’t come from his knee at all.

“So what do you want to do when you leave school?” asked Derek. “Or are you going to keep working at the coffee shop forever?”

Lee thought about his Australia fund. No, he definitely wouldn’t be at that shop forever.

Roadwork slowed the traffic to a crawl. Derek glanced at him. “Maybe you could be a stuntman,” he suggested with a grin.

The corners of Lee’s mouth twitched. He could always rely on Derek to make him laugh.

“If we’re being stupid, I used to pretend I was a super-hero,” he confessed. “You know, saving people, saving the world.” He picked at the bandage. “Well, I wanted to save Mum anyway. I wouldn’t need qualifications for that.”

“Now that’s where you’re wrong,” said Derek. “Even Superman went to school. Then he did all that studying in his Ice Palace. Think of the responsibility ...”

Here comes one of Derek’s ‘talks’. Lee stared out of the window, not really seeing anything. Of course, Derek thought all Lee had to worry about were his exams. He didn’t know about seeing Paige in the accident.

Derek’s voice droned on.

And I did see Paige. But how? His mum had always said he had an over-active imagination and, yes, he'd had realistic dreams before, but it's one thing to imagine a girl in a car crash and something else to find out she's real and the crash actually happened. He pressed his hand to his forehead. *That blows holes in Mum's day-dreamer theory.*

"So do we agree?" asked Derek.

"Yeah," replied Lee absently.

Derek means well. He fusses like a real dad. His stomach tightened. *A real dad.* Why would his mum never tell him about his dad? She'd never seemed like the one-night stand type.

"You always jump in without thinking," Derek said. "You've got to learn to think before you act." He sighed. "And that's particularly good advice if you're considering jumping out of a window."

Think before you act. Mum had said that when he'd jumped off the playhouse roof and frightened the primary school teacher. Then she'd laughed.

"I'm afraid that's one of my faults too," she told him. "First your dad, then your step-dad, we've *both* got to start thinking before we act."

He could still see her shaking her dark curly hair.

"You've got to rely on yourself in this life," she said.

Since her death, he'd learned that lesson only too well. But as for thinking before he jumped ...

"Hey, getting out of the car sometime today would be good." Derek had already opened the front door. "I'm supposed to be in work, you know."

Lee hauled himself out of the car and balanced on the crutches.

“I wonder if I could jump on these?” he said. It was a random idea, but now the hospital painkillers had kicked in and his knee didn’t hurt like hell ...

“What was I saying about thinking?” laughed Derek. “Anyway, I thought it was free-running not free-hobbling.” He glanced at his watch. “The others’ll be home soon.”

Lee grabbed a bag of crisps, two apples and half a packet of chocolate digestives. He put them into a bag and tied them onto his crutches whilst he climbed the stairs to his room. It was the day of the funeral and he didn’t want to be around when Paige and Joan returned. Funerals dragged up way too many memories.

Chapter 4

He's barely inside his flat when the doorbell rings. Immediately he's against the wall behind the door, hands gripping the wooden chair raised above his head.

"I know you're in there," shouts a voice. "I want my rent."

He relaxes, puts down the chair. The chubby, waddling landlady's no threat.

More banging on the door.

"You owe me a month. I can throw you out for this," she calls.

Silence for a moment, then the shuffling outside the door fades away. He hears the lift doors closing.

He lies on the bed. This flat might not be much bigger than his prison cell but it's warm and there's a decent carpet. He rolls over. Alannah's eyes are looking at him.

"Yeah, I know you want to stay here too," he says. "Don't worry. I'll get some rent. I'm fixing everything, remember? Just for you."

* * *

Paige stood in the churchyard. Until that moment she'd half-expected to find everything had been a mistake; her parents would be alive and the accident only a nightmare from the darkest depths of her mind.

The mourners filed past shaking her hand. Most of them shook Gavin's hand too and he smiled and thanked them as

if it had been his mum and dad that had been buried. But at least it meant she didn't have to talk. It felt like the accident had paralysed her brain and the effort of having to think was making her head ache.

The mourners said their goodbyes, their 'we're-so-sorry's and 'if-there's-anything-we-can-do's. They checked watches, made excuses and scurried through the lych-gate.

Back to their lives as if nothing had happened.

Paige had the urge to run after them, to see if *her* life would go back to normal, back to how it used to be. The butterflies in her stomach seemed to leave too. The fluttering in her body stopped. Now she felt nothing.

"We should go," Joan said. "Get out of this rain."

Was it raining?

She clung to Gavin's arm as they walked down the church path. "Can you come round later?" she murmured. Paige felt tears building up and she blinked rapidly. Even so, one escaped and ran down her cheek.

Gavin wiped it with his thumb. "I've got extra coaching with my maths tutor tonight," he groaned. "And I know Dad won't let me out of it. He's well stressed at the moment with stuff at work. I am *so* not going to be a policeman." He laughed. "I'll be glad when these damn re-sits are over." He gave her a kiss. "But I'll give you a call when I'm finished."

She swallowed hard and nodded.

Gavin turned the collar of his coat up against the rain and strode out of the churchyard with a cheerful wave of his hand. Suddenly the day seemed even colder.

Joan linked her arm. "Come on, love."

Uncle Roy had already left the churchyard. He stood by the shiny new hire car struggling to change back into his windcheater.

“I’ll follow you,” he said as Joan and Paige drew near.

“OK,” Joan called.

Paige wanted to say ‘I’ll go with Uncle Roy’, but her mouth refused to speak.

Joan steered her towards her battered Fiesta. During the drive to Highfield Road Joan chatted about baking cakes and her latest Mills and Boon. It filled the silence but not the emptiness. Paige said nothing.

Mary Grantham waited outside the house. Six feet tall and stick thin, Mary’s dark hair, cut in a severe bob, framed eyes that had seen too much of the wrong side of life.

“Help me make some tea, Paige,” said Joan, putting her coat to dry. “Mary and your uncle have some legal stuff to sort out.”

Paige followed her into the kitchen.

Poor Uncle Roy must be really upset. He’s hardly said a word.

Mary’s voice, brisk, formal and fluent, carried from the living room but Paige couldn’t make out her words. Joan put the kettle on to boil and went upstairs to see Lee who’d apparently been sent home from school. Paige picked up a plate of biscuits and headed for the door.

“The thing is,” Uncle Roy was explaining, “I’m an engineer on an oil rig. My job takes me all over the world.”

Paige stood unnoticed by the doorway.

“I work offshore for weeks on end.” Uncle Roy leaned forward. “I’m used to being a free agent, not stuck with a kid.”

“I’m sorry,” said Mary. “Are you saying you want me to make alternative arrangements for Paige?”

Realisation shuddered through Paige as though Uncle Roy had plugged her fingers into an electric socket.

He's going to leave me here.

Anger filled her body until she trembled with rage. It felt better than the emptiness.

“I’m not a ‘kid’.” The plate of biscuits smashed to the floor.

“Oh, Jeez.” Uncle Roy put his head in his hands and a red spot appeared on each of Mary Grantham’s pale cheekbones.

“You’re only fifteen,” said Mary. “We’re simply trying to decide what’s best for you.”

“Without getting stuck with me.”

Uncle Roy loosened his collar. “I just meant ...” he stammered.

“I know what you meant.”

“It’d be best if you stayed here until we find a permanent placement for you,” Mary sighed.

“Best for who?”

“Well, best for you, of course. You can stay in your old school with your friends.” Mary glanced at her notes. “You can go to your gymnastics club and karate and ...”

“Fine,” cut in Paige. “I get the picture. I’ll stay here out of everybody’s way.” She glowered at Uncle Roy. “I trusted you. But if you don’t want me ...” She stopped. If he didn’t want her, what would she do?

“It’s not like that.” Uncle Roy’s face glowed red. “I ...”

“That’s exactly what it seems like to me,” cried Paige. Tears filled her eyes and she tried to blink them away.

“I’ll make sure you have an allowance and I’ll pay for your gym and everything,” blustered Uncle Roy.

“I don’t care about your money,” said Paige.

Joan came to stand in the doorway behind her. “Paige is welcome to stay here as long as she wants,” she said.

“Well, obviously we’ll be looking to place her permanently somewhere suitable,” said Mary. “And I’ll sort out trauma counselling as soon as I can. Doctor McGaratty is very good in these cases.”

“I don’t need to see a doctor.” A new kind of panic gripped Paige and she fought the sobs building inside her.

“It’s nothing to worry about. It’ll just be someone to talk to,” soothed Mary.

“Well, I’ll talk to Joan then,” said Paige, knowing full well she wouldn’t. She didn’t know how she held back the tears. She couldn’t let them see her cry. They really would think she needed to see a doctor.

“If you’re done, I’m going to my room.” Her voice came out in little more than a whisper.

Joan tried to catch her arm but Paige pushed past her. She ran upstairs and threw herself on the bed.

ShockWaves is available on Amazon.

Suzanna Williams

Other books by Suzanna Williams



Teenager, Joe Kendrick, thinks he's got problems. The farm he's looked after since his father's suicide is failing and his brother wants to sell it, his girlfriend has dumped him and his normally down-to-earth Nan starts muttering about seeing UFO's. And all Joe wants is to live a 'normal' life.

Then he saves suicidal stranger Sarah from drowning. What Joe doesn't know is that Sarah is a human/alien hybrid, sent to test viability of life on Earth, and, as she's survived, hostile aliens are already planning their attack.

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