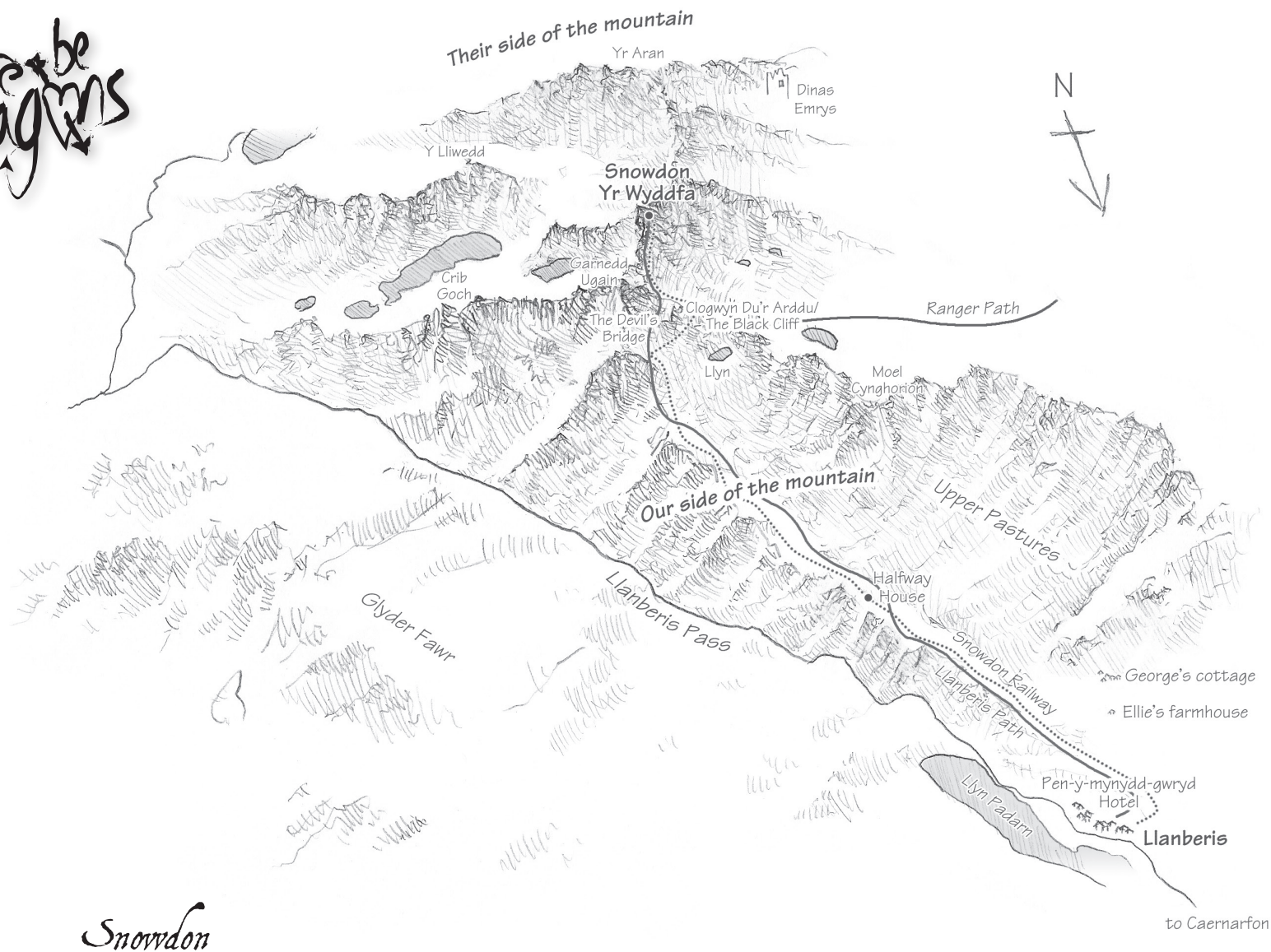


Herbe Dragons



So It Was

*The girl turns her face to the summit. Above her the air shudders.
Just thirty paces. If she can only reach the safety of the rocks.
Heart pounding, blood hammering, she poises herself.*

Run.

*She races forward. She leaps from the ground, stumbles past
the stony crags of the lair, bursts through the drifts of dark
snow. The air shivers around her; she tears through it, swerves
past the cliff edge above the llyn¹.*

That dark fearful cliff edge.

*An appalling shriek rents the air. The sound of teeth crashing,
talons scraping. She imagines the yellow eyes searching for her.
Soon they will know she's gone. They will nose the air, catch her
scent. Soon they will come for her.*

1. Welsh for lake.

Get to the rocks.

Steps crash behind her, mighty footfalls. She hears ragged breath at her back. A fetid stench slams into the dawn. They are coming.

Up ahead the rocky cave opens. Ten metres away. Ten metres of cliff edge. She weaves in between the clumps of snow-bound heather, ducking, leaping, twisting. The ground is icy, smooth, treacherous. She slips, rights herself. A booming, a shrieking tears at her ears.

They know she's gone.

Just one chance now.

Just run.

Just pray.

Just make it away from the old fortress of Dinas Emrys.

A deafening roar splits the dawn.

Hurry.

She sprints. The path turns. She skids out of control. She's falling. She screams, her arms outstretched. She hits the ground, tumbles forward.

'Help!' she cries weakly, 'Oh somebody help me!'

And the earth beneath her feet gives way. Heart bursting, body falling, twisting, turning; down she plummets over the cliff edge. Down into the gully beneath.

So It Is

Act One

Aduwyn gaer yssyd ae kyffrwy kedeu
Oed meu y rydeu a dewisswn
Ny lafaraf i deith reith ryscatwn
Ny dily kelenic ny wyppo hwn
Yscriuen brydein bryder briffwn
Yn yt wna tonneu eu hymgyffrwn
Pereit hyt pell y gell a treidwn.¹

From *Etmic Dinbych ~ The Book of Taliesin*
The Mabinogion (AD 1275)

1. Translated from the Welsh:

*A pleasant caer [stronghold] there is, which princely ones adorn
There were liberties there which none human could desire
I will not speak of its privilege, which I observed
For he who knows not these forms of royal precedence has no right to a bard's fee
In the writings of Pryderi, supreme one of Prydain
There at the slope's end where the waves make a roar about it
Long may it last, for there is the mountain chamber which I dared visit.*

One

**Infinite love is the only truth.
Everything else is illusion.¹**

It was Christmas. Although, you'd hardly have known it. I was at home pinging my friends in front of the telly. The telly wasn't actually working, of course. Nothing was. The only entertainment that morning was the snow. Since 5 a.m., the whole of North Wales had been issued with a severe weather alert.

You need to know what a severe weather alert means when you're me, Arabella (Ellie) Morgan, living in a remote farmhouse on the slopes of Mount Snowdon with only your mum. It means life comes to a standstill.

Totally.

1. David Icke.

Yes, that's right. Nothing. Actually. Happens.

There is no electricity. No fairy lights. No heating. No way to charge your phone. No hot water. No COMPUTER. No hope of watching Dr Who. No hope of a Christmas dinner. In fact, There is No Hope.

What kind of sad Christmas is that?

Sorry. Correction: There was one hope – the generator might fire up.

The generator had not fired up.

Mum and I had spent two hours in the barn trying to coax it into life, and failed, miserably. Plus that Christmas morning, it wasn't only the snow and the electricity. An hour or so after the severe weather alert had pinged up on our phone apps, the emergency services rang, closely followed by a call from the Llanberis Mountain Search and Rescue coordinator. That meant there was some *stupid* hiker, who'd planned on spending Christmas morning on the summit of Snowdon (like you do).

And hadn't made it.

It also meant my mum (support member for the rescue team) was going to have to get out on to the mountain and do a sweep of all our top pastures and the slopes behind our farmhouse, as soon as it was daylight, to see if she could eliminate those areas from the main search.

And of course, she couldn't go alone (LMRT Handbook. Section 32: '*Emergency rescue searches in Severe Weather Alerts must be manned by a minimum of eight.*')

Great.

I wonder who the seven others were going to be.

Ha ha.

Since the farm failed, (for obvious reasons, like, um, yes, would that be snow? Not to mention being halfway up the highest peak in Wales, plus all those new restrictions on where your sheep can graze/can't graze/might not be able to graze in future ...), being a mountain guide, and servicing campers, is how Mum keeps us going. I don't know why we can't just leave, and go back and live in that nice little flat in central London (we were so happy there). But I guess that's another story, and probably something to do with Dad and the accident, and how he loved Snowdon, and how Mum has to help rescue everyone, because nobody rescued him.

Anyway there I was, 25th December, crouched with Mum in front of a log fire, sipping tea, feeling sorry for myself.

'You'll come with me, won't you?' said Mum.

Of course I would. Apart from Section 32, if we were lucky enough to find the hiker, Mum couldn't cope alone.

'It's just that, what with it being Christmas, Terry's gone to his mum's and Rhys's got his kids over, and I think Owen

drank too much last night, and it'll take ages for them to even get up here to give me a hand and ... '

'It's ok,' I said.

'And I just never expected ... '

'I'll come,' I said.

'There's a full team out over on the Ranger Path with a medic, and the RAF helicopter's out too, but the visibility ... and it's just to eliminate this side and ... '

'I'll come,' I repeated.

'Thanks Elles,' she said.

As soon as we could, we got ourselves sorted: ice axes, crampons, whistles, compass, head torches, blizzard bags, thermal mat, space blankets and all the usual daysack stuff. We put away the fluffy slippers, new iPad, box set of series 6 of *Merlin & Morgana* – which we couldn't watch anyway. Sob. We called the rescue team back and told them we'd search the Llanberis Path from our farmhouse up towards Clogwyn Du'r Arddu, (FYI – that's Welsh for Arthur's Black Cliff). They said they'd get another team out to catch us up and take over; that their information led them to believe she took the Ranger Path anyway.

I re-read my pings and wrote my last message to the girls. '*Gotta go now, babes XXXX.*' But before I could click the phone off, my mate Rhiannon pinged me straight back.

Rhiannon

Ok, hon. My cuz ze 1 an only Darren is down for the hols, so hoping we can all hook up – maybe later? Will u c George 2day? Need Xmas fun. Ta ta FN.

Mum was at the door impatient to go. I slipped the phone in my pocket. Pinging Rhi back would have to wait. Who knows what the day held?

We left Ceri – our border collie – to guard the house, and set out. She wasn't very thrilled about that and neither was I, but she wasn't fully trained yet as a search and rescue dog and the weather, you know. The sky was still dark and the snow was driving down. Mum led and I trod in the path she cleared. Soon my fingers were numb, and I swear there were icicles on my eyelashes. The farmhouse disappeared behind us like it was part of a vanishing trick, and we were left marooned in a sea of white. If not for our head torches, compass and maps we'd have been as lost as the hiker.

The wind was rough too, gale force. It didn't blow at a constant velocity. You couldn't lean into it as you climbed and make steady distance. It broke at you suddenly in violent fits with such gusts of high speed that it sent snow flurrying into your face and knocked you clean off your feet.

Mum was great though. She kept turning round and

smiling her thanks and encouraging me. I guess she knew other teenagers were waking up to Christmas stockings and sparkly lights – or better still, not waking up till afternoon. I guess she knew I wished I were one of them.

My phone pinged again. Rhiannon? I dug it out my pocket. But it wasn't her.

Recent updates between Ellie and Sheila:

Sheila

Rhiannon's cousin is lush. Hands off.

I rolled my eyes, annoyed, and pinged her right back.

Ellie

Look no hands.

I shook my head. Sheila always does that. If there's ever any new face, anywhere within a zillion miles of Llanberis, she tries to bag him first. Like, was I even interested in Rhiannon's whatever cousin from wherevers-ville, anyway?

But what if he'd been nice? Was nice? Did that mean I'd have to wait until Sheila'd finished pawing him over and announcing him not fit for human consumption? Right there and then I wished I could meet someone that nobody

else in the village knew about, someone they'd *never* know about ... someone that Sheila couldn't get her claws into first, anyway. I turned my head towards the ancient craggy summit and sent up a silent prayer. *By the powers hidden in the mountain send me someone Sheila's never heard of.*

Mum turned and saw I'd fallen behind. She beckoned me to hurry up. I shoved my phone back in my pocket. First no electricity, then the call out – and now Sheila.

It was only 7 a.m. and already Christmas sucked.



It was as we broke out of the cloud bank above the valleys, that I first saw him. I think. I couldn't be sure. Everywhere was thick with driving snow. But through the dawn, I'm sure I saw a figure. There he stood, in front of Garnedd Ugain on the very rim of the great knife-edge way above the Llanberis Pass, in a dangerous place that Mum and I call the Devil's Bridge. I rubbed my eyes, but by the time I'd looked again, new banks of mist had swirled down.

'Did you see that?' I shouted. 'Up there ... by Devil's Bridge.' Mum turned to make her way in that direction. She pulled out a high-beam torch and shone it into the blizzard towards the Devil's Bridge. Light bounced back from the cloud and dazzled us.

‘A boy!’ I shouted.

Mum shook her head. ‘You must be seeing things!’ she yelled. ‘Remember we’re not looking for a boy.’ She retraced her steps. ‘Keep your eyes peeled for a girl!’ she yelled across the storm. ‘Remember ... description ... alone ... 17 ... didn’t make it to the top ... no information since ... around here maybe ... her phone battery’s probably dead ... if she had equipment, she may still be alive ... maybe.’

I dragged the binoculars out and scanned everywhere. It was tough. The clouds had closed in again behind us and covered everything except the very peak of Snowdon. Sometimes when they rolled back for a split second I could see the café on the summit, but of course that was no help. It’s always closed during winter. Only people who don’t know the mountain think up stupid stuff like: ‘Meet you at the café, on the summit, for a mince pie, on Christmas morning.’

We trudged on, keeping to the path. I never thought, not even for a minute, about the coincidence – about Christmas, and me wishing, and then the figure by Devil’s Bridge. I just carried on feeling mad at Sheila and stamping down the snow. The uphill gradient was steep enough to ward off the biting cold though, and by the time we’d scoured the upper pastures I was puffed and glowing with the effort.

But we didn’t find her. We debated what to do. Mum was worried that by the time they got a proper mountain rescue team up here, the girl might be dead.

‘Let’s go a bit further then,’ I said, ‘it’s not like we’ve left anything cooking, is it?’

So we headed out for the mountain proper. I kept my head down, searching for any tracks that might show where the girl had lost her way. It was a pretty difficult job, and up ahead was Clogwyn Du’r Arddu, the Black Cliff. I was praying she hadn’t strayed too close to that. There’s something about those cliffs that sends shivers into your chest. I tried to drag my mind away from them, but now I’d banished Sheila from my thoughts there was a curious space left behind. A space I didn’t want their gloom to fill up. I felt the coldness of their shadows reaching out towards us, then the image of that boy slipped uninvited right into my imagination to fill up the gap.

There he was, in my mind, as clear as if he was right in front of me. Standing by Devil’s Bridge, his face turned in my direction. And somehow, miraculously, he zoomed in closer. All the little details about him stood out. It didn’t look like he was wearing much of a jacket for a start, and he was smiling. He was handsome, with fine clear-cut features. He had thick tousled reddish hair, and his smile seemed inexplicably to

be directed at me. Dark eyebrows framed his face, and even though I couldn't have seen it, I got the impression they were knitted together in a frown.

A shiver ran over me. There was something forbidding in the way he was standing there, smiling and not-smiling. I felt I should look away; I should be scared of him, but instead a thrill ran through me, almost like an electric shock. And it seemed like our eyes met. And his were smouldering and filled with something I couldn't quite place; something urgent, I think.

Suddenly he realised I'd seen him. (Although how he could have, I don't know.) For a moment his smile broke, gorgeous, incredible, bright like the sun. Then he seemed to catch himself and grow angry. A gloom replaced all the radiance and, quick as lightning, he whirled away and vanished.

The vision faded.

'There!' said Mum unexpectedly.

I blinked.

'Come on Ellie, stop daydreaming! Look!'

She turned and ran off the path at such speed that my stomach shot into my throat.

'By the white rocks.'

To this day, I don't know how she does it; how she can make out the tiny curled-up shape of a human being amongst snow drifts and boulders.

'Call the team or anyone on duty,' said Mum. 'Sighting on the upper pastures, north side below the llyn. Quick! Give me your compass, mine's at the bottom of my pack. I'll plot our position and I'll light up a flare.'

I unwound my scarf, looped the compass off my neck, gave it her, got on the mobile and called the Mountain Rescue Team. They were already half-way up the Ranger Path, and too far away to help, but the RAF helicopter was en route. If the weather allowed, they could land in minutes.

I gave them the general location while Mum tried to hold on to the map and shout coordinates off the compass. Then she set off a handheld ground flare, so they would know exactly where we were and be able to assess wind speed. (Mum doesn't trust GPS. She reckons it was due to GPS inaccuracy that Dad wasn't saved.) I vaguely wondered why Mum was letting the flare off before attending to the girl.

As soon as I'd alerted the team, I chased after Mum. When I caught up, I immediately saw the problem: the girl had wandered off the path and fallen down a gully. The gully was icy and it needed two of us to get down safely.

'You're the lightest, can you go?' shouted Mum.

I nodded and got out the rope and harness, grabbed the crampons and made sure I could reach the ice axe easily. Mum found a boulder to anchor the rope around.

‘Hold ready?’

I held on and readied myself. Then I started my descent, heart pounding. Poor hiker. Suddenly I felt so shamefaced. She wasn’t ‘stoopid’ at all, she was just a sad girl in a desperate state. I felt guilty too, because I was afraid. Afraid of what I might find. Afraid there might be frozen blood, broken bones.

Afraid she’d be dead.

For all my sixteen years, I’ve seen more dead bodies than I should. It never gets easier. Your heart flares up and beats against your throat, and then you don’t believe it and you try everything, CPR, mouth to mouth, pleading, shaking, screaming – as if you could call their souls back out of the darkness. And the press of frozen lips against yours haunts you, jolts you, just when you think you’ve forgotten.

I’m aching for the day when I can leave this place. Get back to that nice suburban street where people never fall off cliffs and howling winds never rattle you to sleep; where the sound of helicopters landing on stony plateaus is only heard in nightmares. I’m very selfish really. I just want a nice little four-by-four life. Four walls around me, four wheels under me, all designed to keep me safe.

Anyway, I hacked and slid and picked my way down the gully, wind blasting at my back. You know, the very

stones under my feet didn’t even move. They were frozen completely into the cliff.

First, get the thermal space blanket over her. I knew that. I knew the routine. And dreaded it.

Once down the gully, I rushed to the huddled shape. I didn’t know if she was dead or alive. I didn’t stop to check. I crouched beside her. I flung the blanket over her first. Everywhere was misty grey. The snow was thick and she was half sunk in a drift. I started to say ‘It’ll be all right. This is Ellie Morgan, I’ve found you now – the Llanberis Mountain Rescue Team are on their way.’ My words hung in the air like an icy haze. ‘You’ll be fine. We’ll get you home. Try not to worry. Stay very still, until we can get you to the helicopter. Listen, that’s the helicopter now, right above us.’

I shifted from one leg to the other. I carried on chattering out words of encouragement.

I knew I had to examine her. I held my breath, bit my lip. Then I knelt. I tore my glove off. I felt for a pulse. I searched and found nothing. Her skin inside her jacket was icy. I tried again. There it was: faint and thready, but a pulse. The girl was alive! I breathed a rush of relief. I hadn’t realised how much I was praying she’d be alive.

Next, I checked her airways. I didn’t try to move her. She could’ve broken a leg, maybe worse. We’d have to wait

for the helicopter. Mum yelled. I turned. I gave her the thumbs up. I gestured: *What am I supposed to do now?*

Above, the helicopter tried to land. There was enough space, quite a clear, level patch, but a gust of wind tossed the Sea King back into the air, as if it were a sweet wrapper. I was going to have to wait with the girl until they got down.

Mum shouted words of encouragement, but I was worried; sometimes it can take up to five tries and thirty minutes to get a helicopter down. *What should I do?* The girl was barely alive.

I tucked a second space blanket around her, and very carefully tried to prise a thermal mat under her head and shoulders. You lose a lot of heat through contact with the ground, you know. As I tucked the thermal in I noticed that the stones beneath her felt oddly warm. She couldn't possibly have heated them herself. Must be some trick of the cold. I suddenly realised I might need to watch out. Cold can do that, you know. Make you think things are warm when they're not.

Anyway, I tried to huddle in beside her, give her the best chance I could. If I could rouse her, maybe I could get some high-energy food into her.

I rubbed her cold hands between mine. She stirred a little. I rubbed more briskly. Suddenly she opened her eyes.

She looked at me. I started the reassuring routine again, although I hadn't got a clue how seriously hurt she was, or how long it was going to take them to get her out.

'You're going to be all right. You've just hurt your leg. Try to stay still. Llanberis Mountain ... '

'There were monsters,' she said. 'I was so cold ... there was a boy ... *told me to follow him ... somewhere warm ...* '

She was rambling. Shock can affect you like that. Extreme cold can make you hallucinate.

'So cold.' Suddenly she clutched at me, her eyes rolling wildly. '*Monsters!*' she cried. '*Inside the mountain!*' Her face seemed to shrink in terror. '*Had to run ... had to escape from the den ...* '

Her eyes fluttered shut.

I tried to press a small piece of glucose cake between her lips. I carried on with the reassuring; mumbling words out, trying to rub some warmth into her with numb fingers. The girl started to shiver uncontrollably. She raised her head and whispered, '*They were chasing me ...* '

'You're safe now,' I said. It's better not to directly contradict anyone who's in shock. It just adds to their distress. 'The rescue team are here.'

The helicopter tried to land again and failed. Mum kept shouting for me to Hang On In There. Finally, the helicopter

ducked under the gale and, in a short window of calm, it landed. The crew descended and set to work helping the girl. At last they got her into the huge yellow RAF Search and Rescue Sea King.

One crew member was a local man, Cecil Howard, a flight lieutenant. Before he got back into the helicopter he thanked us. He shook his head, a look of disbelief all over his face. ‘*Rydych chi wedi gwneud yn dda*. Hats off to you,’ he said, cupping his hands against the blizzard. ‘It’s a miracle she’s lasted out here on the mountain – must’ve found somewhere to shelter before she fell.’

‘Said – she went down into some kind of monsters’ den. Under Snowdon!’ I shouted back.

Cecil Howard didn’t laugh. He went a nasty dishwater grey.

I raised my eyebrows.

‘Legends,’ he said, shaking his head. ‘*Dim ond mewn chwedlau*. Only. In. Legends.’

‘What?’ I said.

‘There was a girl too, she was lost at night. *Roedd merch hefyd; aeth hi ar goll yn y nos*. Upon The Yuletide ... burn marks ... bites ...’ He shook his head like he didn’t want to believe it.

The wind whipped his words away.

Upon The Yuletide? Sounded like something from the

flipping *Mabinogion*²!

‘What girl?’ I yelled.

‘She was half crazed with terror – *Ofnus!* So they say.’

I couldn’t figure out if he was repeating some old story or referring to a rescue.

‘There was an evil place under Snowdon and a handsome boy who lured her ...’ his voice trailed off. He looked hurriedly around as if the very stones of the mountain might be listening. ‘Old stories, old as the mountain. *Mor hen ag yr Wyddfa*. Old as Dinas Emrys ...’ And then he twisted up his lips and said something I didn’t catch.

The two paramedics had finally got the girl into the helicopter. They’d have given us a lift too, but those Sea Kings are only really designed for four people, plus they needed to get the girl to hospital urgently.

So we saw them off and left. I rescaled the gully. Mum and I hugged each other. ‘Thanks supergirl,’ she said into my hair. We waved goodbye. We’d done our bit. We linked arms for a while before the path divided us. Every now and then I couldn’t help breaking out into a huge grin. We’d rescued her! We’d beaten the mountain! Rescuing someone like that gives you such a buzz. You want to jump up and down and visit them in hospital and have

2. The *MABINOGION* is a collection of Celtic myths from medieval Welsh manuscripts.

all their family crowding round saying, 'Thank you, thank you, thank you!' while you nod and smile and act all cool.

Yep, we'd done it. But there wasn't going to be any hospital-visiting, of course. They'd probably fly her straight to Caernarfon and it was still Christmas Day. And we needed to go back to our No Telly and No Turkey cooking in the oven.

As we hiked homeward I said, 'The girl reckoned she'd been lured into some den or other under the mountain, she was terrified of something down there. Something weird ... said she'd been chased when she tried to escape.'

Mum didn't answer. She didn't need to. Her swallowed laughter told me everything. She shouted, 'That's hypothermia for you. She'd probably read about Dinas Emrys or watched too many episodes of *Merlin & Morgana*.'

I looked up towards the summit of Snowdon. The clouds above us parted. For a brief instant the peak shone in clear sunlight. Snowdon is so breathtaking. I flung my arms wide, happy we'd saved the girl, thrilled by the beauty of the mountain. And that's when a curious sensation rippled over me. It was almost tangible.

A feeling of being watched.

I stopped and swivelled on the spot. I'd definitely felt eyes on me again. I scoured the slopes, wondering who was out there.

My eyes settled on the peak. High above us, standing there on top of a pile of stones, right on the very summit, was a shape: just a blackened matchstick figure. Someone was watching us all right, probably watching the rescue. I yanked out my binoculars and squinted through them.

It was him! That boy. There he stood, the light playing on the mist at his back. He looked almost as if he could lean into it and swoop down. I blinked. Was it really him? How had he got there so quickly? From Devil's Bridge to the summit is a good two hours' climb, more even, in these conditions. I squinted again, seized for a second time by that curious shiver as it rippled down my spine.

But this time he didn't flinch or turn away. He looked directly back at me. He smiled slowly – as if he knew I was scoping him, as if he was challenging me in some inexplicable way. It made the blood rush to my face. I tried to zoom in on him, but, just as suddenly as he'd appeared, he was gone again, swallowed up in a gust of cloud.

I pulled off my glove and felt my cheeks. I was blushing. Hastily I put my glove back on; pulled my scarf tighter. Thank God Sheila wasn't here! I'd never hear the last of it. Plus she'd bag him first. A strange pain knotted itself into my chest at the thought of Sheila bagging him. She could have Rhiannon's cousin; she could have the whole of the

Mountain Marauders (Llanberis's local wannabe rugby team) – who *all* appreciated the virtues of a girl like Sheila – and YES, I know that was catty, but the *thought* of her bagging this strange mountain boy; I shook my head. It was impossible anyway. He wasn't a trophy *anyone* could have. He was in a league all of his own. Sheila was *not* going to get her claws into him. Not my mountain boy. I caught my breath. Why had I thought of him as *mine*? He was just a boy on a mountain. Not mine at all. I'd never even met him! Probably never would.

Not if he stayed up on that summit for much longer, anyway.

And that's when I started worrying: severe weather alerts, sub-zero temperatures, not much of a jacket, out all alone on the mountain. A sudden pang of guilt stabbed at me. We'd come all this way to rescue the girl and neither of us had even thought of checking if he was ok.

Correction: *I* hadn't thought of checking, Mum didn't have a clue he was even out there.

I ran to catch her up – to tell her – to ask her what we should do.

Then I stopped myself.

For some strange reason, this was something I wanted to keep all to myself.

Two

After the rescue we ended up at George's place. We wanted to say HAPPY CHRIMBO and all that, but I think both Mum and I also wanted to tell someone what had happened. It's like that when you save a life. I reckon we'd saved that girl. If we hadn't gone out straight away ... if I hadn't gone too ... if Mum hadn't spotted her. It's a big thing saving someone's life. Maybe I'll be a doctor someday. (When I've finished art college and been around the world, obviously.) Anyway, it's a feeling you want to share. So we took a small detour on our way back.

I thought I'd better let Rhiannon know I was going to see George, after all. So I pinged her.

ELLIE'S PHONE 25th December 10.30

Status: Available *except for Darren, apparently*

Recent updates between Ellie and Rhiannon:

Ellie

Going 2 George's after all. Any message?

Rhiannon

U mean like *Tell George he's the hottest thing since the big bang?*

Ellie

sighs

Rhiannon

Size?

Sometimes I don't know why I bother trying to help Rhiannon with George. She professes to be totally 'crazy' about him, but I don't like her jokes. I think when you *really* like someone, it's kind of special and pure and important – not filled with Sheila-style, rugby-club humour. Maybe I'm just a bit old fashioned. Well, about that anyway.

Unlike George.

Anyway you'll want to know about George, won't you?

Well he's my age, and he's very straightforward (you know, sort of what-you-see-is-what-you-get). His real name is Siôr (John-George). But he says that sounds frilly (he's not at all frilly). So he's just George. And he's ok, for a boy. I guess. Thing is, he's always been nuts about me, right from

the time when we were little and I came for my summer holidays to Snowdon. My gran, Mum's mam, owned the farm, before Mum and Dad moved here. Anyway we played Growing Up And Getting Married (don't laugh). George always used to say, 'You're going to marry me, Ellie.' And if I shrugged him off and imagined myself marrying A Royal Prince – so that we could play I Am The Queen And You Are So My Servant – he'd say: 'It's not allowed for you to marry anyone else.' And then he'd get so sad that I'd have to give in and agree to marry him one day, in order to play any kind of game at all.

Needless to say, these days I don't give in to him (although he doesn't seem to have quite got the message). Anyway George and his gran are our only neighbours. They live in a tiny cottage high on the slopes of Snowdon, even further away from Llanberis than us. They've lived in that cottage, like since forever. Mum says there's always been a Jones family living there, right from the time of the Celts (Mum actually grew up on Snowdon. I only half did. We moved into the farm when I was nine).

Anyway, we thought we'd stop and say We Wish You A Merry, and see if they were doing ok. For sure, their electricity would be down too.

But we needn't have worried. Granny Jones is just about

the most capable person ever. She'd got their generator going, built a huge log fire and everywhere was so warm and cosy. Christmas lights festooned everything (not on of course, because when you're on a generator, that is wasteful), but the tree looked so beautiful it didn't need electricity. And it was great to defrost inside their tiny cottage. George greeted me with his usual bear hug, his arms flung wide in welcome, his smile almost big enough to swallow me down, his crush like a prize fighter. 'Hey, Ellie, Most Beautiful Girl in Gwynedd Who Knows Maybe Even Conwy Too,' he said, 'Will You Marry Me TODAY?'

Which made Mum really laugh and Granny cast despairing looks at her rafters.

'Not today,' I returned, 'Wouldn't want to spoil Rhiannon's Christmas.'

Which made Granny laugh and Mum roll her eyes.

'Stupid,' he said.

George hates it when I tease him about Rhiannon. Long story.

Short version?

Right: He fancies me. She fancies him. He's too nice to tell her there's Not A Chance. She makes me act as go-between. I try to refuse, but then feel rotten because it's like I'm being Dog In The Manger. So I help her. He tries

to misunderstand and acts So You Really Do Love Me, But You Are Too Shy To Admit It's You, So You Are Pretending It's Rhiannon. She buys him expensive things, because she's got lots of cash, because her folks own the big hotel. He groans and gives them to me. I have to pretend I don't know they're from Rhiannon. Of course she sees them at my place, and then it all goes Nuts. I think George may have to emigrate to escape. Or I may.

Needless to say, I never pass on any messages about big bangs or size or anything like that. And that's not just because they are in bad taste and scummy, but because, actually, I'm beginning to think that Rhiannon may not really be the right person for George after all.

And speaking of Rhiannon, my phone promptly pinged and her name flashed up on the screen. Isn't *that* weird, when you think of someone and then the phone goes? Like telepathy really works.

Recent updates between Ellie and Rhiannon:

Rhiannon

Tell George Merry Xmas and Darren's here, and we gotta do something to welcome Darren into the clan. He's lonely.

I pinged her back.

Ellie

OK. Like what?

Rhiannon

Like something which gets me in a dark corner with G.

Ellie

Like hide 'n seek?

Rhiannon

No, like find and eek!

See what I mean? She's definitely not the right person. George deserves someone a lot more sensitive and serious. But all I said was, 'Rhiannon says Merry Christmas and her cousin Darren's in town and would like a friend to hang out with.'

'Oh, Ok,' said George. 'I'll get over to their place and meet up with him.'

See what I mean? That's George all over for you. He's just A Really Nice Guy. He never thinks, even for one minute, that it might all be a Rhiannon ploy.

Much too nice for her.

And that morning he looked really handsome as well, all washed and brushed and in his best (bless), even though there was no way he could get to chapel. Granny Jones had put on one of her beautiful homespun shawls in honour

of Christmas Day. Although underneath that she had a Peruvian knit jumper and a tie-dye T-shirt with a cringe, hippy sort of skirt in purple velvet – you've gotta smile.

As she busied about, congratulating us on finding and saving the girl, she looked more like a funky fairy god-mother than a granny!

But she fed us all right. And wow, her food was good. I polished off eggs and bacon and sausage, along with homemade bread and wild mountain honey.

So there I was stuffing my face, when Granny Jones announced, 'The Pendragons are back.'

George grinned and shook his head. 'Nan doesn't miss a trick when it comes to royalty,' he said.

What Granny Jones meant was the Royal Family, or at least some of their relatives, were down in Caernarfon Castle for Christmas. Snowdonia is practically all theirs. It's like some kind of imperial back yard they have, that stretches inland from their seaboard castle. Anyway they think they own it (they probably do) along with every soul who lives there. Sigh. Feudal times and all that.

'I suppose that means a formal dinner and evening wear at some sort of a reception,' sighed Mum.

Granny Jones nodded and pushed more toast towards her. 'I'd better not,' continued Mum, 'or I won't fit into anything.'

‘I shall go in that,’ said Nan indicating her Welsh outfit hanging up by the door. ‘It keeps them at their distance.’

I looked at George and rolled my eyes.

‘It’s the day after Boxing Day at the Pen-y-mynydd-gwryd,’ said Granny Jones ‘And I’ll be glad if you’ll take me in your car, if the weather breaks.’

George groaned. ‘Do we have to?’

I was thinking: the Pen-y-mynydd-gwryd Hotel equals Rhiannon. There Will Be No Escape For You, George.

‘It’ll be the worse for us all, if we don’t,’ said Granny Jones wagging a pointy finger at George.

Mum smiled. ‘Mrs Jones,’ she said, ‘this is the twenty-first century. We no longer have to tug our forelocks in order to wrestle a living off the slopes of Snowdonia.’

Granny Jones shook her head. ‘Things are stirring,’ she said, ‘tis no coincidence that the Pendragons are home and you rescued a girl this morning. And then there’s the old stories. If the Pendragons come at midwinter, you know what they say ... ’tis best you tug your forelock along of always.’

I raised an eyebrow at George, then crossed my eyes for good measure. I, for one, didn’t have a clue what the old stories said.

‘Y Ddraig Goch is flying over Caernarfon Castle for a reason,’ finished Granny Jones with an enigmatic twist of her lips.

‘Just a flag,’ I said.

‘Still a Red Dragon,’ said Granny Jones.

George shoved two mince pies into his big gob all in one go. I think he was trying to gag himself.

‘And what’s more I heard the Beast is abroad,’ added Gran.

‘The Beast?’ I said.

‘I actually heard a report of a cougar up by Yr Aran,’ said Mum, ‘And Owen says he found two of his sheep ripped to shreds only yesterday.’

‘Probably dogs,’ muttered George, covering his mouth.

FYI sometimes we get reports of big cats living wild in the hills, panthers and the like, and there’s one creature that supposedly lives on Snowdon called the Beast of Dinas Emrys, which apparently emerges once in a century and kills on sight.

‘The Worms of Dinas Affaraon,’ said Gran.

George grinned and made a She-Is-Just-A-Mad-Old-Woman face.

I tried to choke back my laughter, hiccupped on my tea, and sent a spray over the tablecloth.

Mum did that exasperated thing with one side of her mouth. George made scary-monster hands and clawed them in the air towards his nan, then pulled a We-Are-All-Welsh-Nutters face at everyone.

I got the giggles and had to rush out of the room. Rushing out of Granny Jones's room means rushing out of the entire cottage. So I wrenched open the front door and stood in the porch, doubled up, trying not to choke.

Outside the wind howled around the cottage walls, tearing at the slate roof, battering the few shrubs that managed to grow. My laughter died in my throat. *Why on Earth would anyone want to live here?* I looked up in the direction of the summit, suddenly disturbed. And for some stupid, weird reason I felt as if the eyes of that strange boy on the mountain were still boring down through the snow and mist, through the wild wind, and were staring directly at me. But now he was looking straight into my brain, and his smile was fading. My heart started pounding. *He was still out there wasn't he?*

Out there all alone.



All the rest of that morning I was twitchy. Even though we got home and managed to fire up the generator, meaning Christmas wouldn't be a complete disaster, I was still restless.

Mum noticed.

'I'm worried about that boy,' I said. 'The one I saw up by Devil's Bridge. He was out, without a proper jacket.'

'Well there's been no fresh call-out,' said Mum. 'If someone was in trouble, we'd know.'

'But the weather forecast says it's getting worse.' I stressed, imagining him there, alone, freezing.

'Hon, we can't go chasing out after everyone who decides to go climbing in winter. We have to wait until there's a call. And even then we're only volunteers for our patch of mountain.' Mum smiled at me as if to say, *You're imagining things, Ellie, that's what happens after a serious rescue, you get paranoid, feel you can never relax.*

I sighed. I hate it when she talks to me as if I'm six. I know all about post-traumatic stress disorders and responsibility management, and it's not like I've ever stressed about people out on the mountain in general. But sometimes I think she doesn't want me to grow up. She knows that I can't stay up here on Snowdon forever. I'm going to have to move sooner or later. The nearest sixth-form college is in Caernarfon, and even if I could make the trek there and back every day, that'd only be for two years. My friend, Meryl, has the same problem, and she lives right in the centre of Llanberis. Her mum actually put her college prospectuses in the recycle bin! It's only girls like Sheila that'll stay and get a job at the corner shop – on the checkout till. (Mia-ow! You can see I still haven't forgiven her.)

But nothing Mum said could settle me. I paced from room to room in our old farmhouse, really restless, the dark eyes of that boy haunting me. Maybe he'd lost his phone or it'd gone flat, and I was the only one who believed he was in danger up there ...

I didn't know what I could say to convince Mum we should *do* something. And when I thought about it sensibly, it was quite ridiculous for us to set out and look for him anyway. Snowdon is *huge*. He could be anywhere. We'd have no back up and no designated search area.

But by two o'clock that afternoon I was *really* jumpy. I couldn't contain myself. I *had* to do something. 'I'm going up to the train track,' I told her. 'I'll take all my gear and my phone. I'll be ok.'

Mum sighed. She knew I'd be fine. I'm a well-trained mountain girl. Moreover, the train track is really near. What I didn't tell her was I intended to follow the Snowdon Mountain Railway up to the Devil's Bridge. It's ok. It's not as dangerous as it sounds. You can't get lost on the track, going up or down, however misty it gets.

But still she wasn't happy: 'Hon, I promised Jeff I'd go into the village for a drink or something ...' Her voice trailed away. Jeff's her new boyfriend. It's all very fresh. Fresh and intense. Don't ask me how I feel about it,

because I'm trying very hard to be supportive.

'It's quite a walk. If you're not back, shall I go without you? You know you're welcome to come.'

About as welcome as a snowball down your neck.

'Thanks,' I said, 'I just need to check out if that boy went that way. As soon as I see footprints and stuff, I'll come back. I know it's Christmas Day ...'

Mum shrugged.

I went to get my daysack. I checked I had fresh high-energy food, a foil blanket, ice axe, flares, torch, the whole nine yards. That boy might be in trouble. He might be out there freezing to death. Then I pulled on a dry Arctic Extreme down jacket, hat, boots, gloves.

'Take care,' Mum called. 'If anything, just call me, and don't go anywhere near the Devil's Bridge; the snow can shift.'

'Hey Mum!' I said sharply, 'I know!'

I left, before she could fuss any further. I slammed the farmhouse door behind me. Outside, the afternoon was bitter. Cold, deep blue shadows already curled across the valleys. It had stopped snowing, but a piercing wind, laced with ice, was blowing.

I made my way up to the top pasture, where we sometimes put the lambs if the spring comes early. Beneath my feet the snow crunched and where I hit a soft hollow, I sank

thigh deep into drifts. It was supernaturally quiet. All I could hear was the slight crack of snow snapping somewhere beneath the slopes, and the sharp call of a solitary bird. Soon my nose was numb. I pulled my scarf over it and breathed soft, moist, warm air through its woolly knit. Keep moving Ellie, I told myself, keep the blood pumping and you'll stay warm.

Climbing uphill is the best exercise for staying warm, I can tell you. Soon I was nearly sweating, except that you can't really build up a total sweat in sub-zero temperatures. It's also not a good idea to either, because when you cool down so does the sweat, and it cools a lot faster than you.

So I slowed a bit as I saw the Devil's Bridge coming into view. If there really had been a boy up there this morning, snow or not, as sure as hell I was going to find his tracks.

By the time I got to the start of the causeway, the sun was edging fast toward the west. I thought I'd better touch base with Mum. I didn't want her to worry with me out on the mountain after dark.

I pulled out my mobile.

'Mum,' I said.

'Ellie?' said Mum.

'I'm ok.'

Sigh of relief.

'Just letting you know.'

'Ok, I'm going down to Jeff's, then.'

'I'm just going to check for tracks, then I'm heading home.'

Staying out on Snowdon after dark isn't a good idea, not in the middle of winter, even if, like me, you know every dell and brook, every cliff and boulder.

'Ellie, will you mind if I sleep over?'

I sighed. Then tried not to, in case Mum heard. I mean Jeff is 'O-kay'. Not all that. Not that I'd know, anyway. I haven't met the right boy yet. None of the ones in Llanberis make my heart even twitch, let alone flutter. And I'm not going to throw myself at one of the Mountain Marauders (obviously) just because they are the only boys around. I'm saving myself for something more than mud and smelly rugby socks. But since Dad died, Mum's been so sad. And the farm's been such hard work. And Jeff makes her happy. So I shouldn't mind, should I?

'It's just that it's a long walk back, and the weather ...'

'You stay,' I said. 'It's Christmas. If you don't, Jeff'll think he's not important.'

'Thanks, Hon,' she said.

I could hear the happiness in her voice. It was true anyway. If Jeff was going to be an important person in her life, he needed his share of important time slots.

And I truly *didn't* mind. It suited me actually. For suddenly I seemed to be drawn on – almost as if I'd been sucked into an enchanted force field. I decided, against all better judgement, that I was going to explore right up to the far side of the Devil's Bridge, I was going to follow that boy's tracks and see where he'd gone.



I found the tracks all right. There'd been a light dusting of fresh snow on them, but they were definitely there, deep indents on the far side of the causeway. At first they looked scuffed, as if he'd been dancing around, or had parachuted down, but a little beyond the scuffed up area, a straight line of footprints set out for the summit. I knew I should turn round then and head home. It was getting dark fast. But I thought, just a little further. When I get to the shadow of Garnedd Ugain, I'll turn back.

I guess I wanted to satisfy my curiosity. Had it really been him on the summit? And how *had* he got there so quickly? And then there were the tracks. All going one way and not coming back. That meant that unless he'd taken another route down, which was unlikely (and frankly unwise, for all the other routes were much more dangerous), he was still up there.

So I set out. I turned my head torch on, and I made sure a flare was in my pocket. I'd follow his tracks for another five minutes. And if I still couldn't see where they went, or if he'd come down – I'd call up the emergency services myself and explain everything.

Suddenly I got an unexpected rush of pleasure at the thought of rescuing him, of being the one to whisper reassuring words over his broken form: *This is Ellie Morgan, Llanberis Mountain Rescue sort-of-volunteer, I've found you now. I won't leave you. I'll stay by your side.* In my mind I planned it all. *I'd get the RAF helicopter back out, I'd tuck a space blanket gently round him. We'd sit huddled up together sharing our body warmth ...*

Only my plan didn't go much further than that. It was pretty stupid, anyway. The sensible side of me knew that. It was all, really, just an excuse to carry on. It was a way of silencing the voice in my head that was screaming, '*GO HOME NOW*, before you need the emergency services.'

But I didn't. I kept steadily on towards the summit. I was careful though. I stuck to the Snowdon Mountain Railway tracks, where I could get a grip on the steel sleepers. But every now and then I scrambled over the rough land that separated the train track from the hikers' route. Once over the rocks I dodged down to the pathway – just to make

sure his tracks were still really there.

I suppose I was crazy. I should have listened to that screaming voice. It was trying to save me. But I just kept thinking about his dark eyes and him watching me and everything. And as I trudged ever on uphill, I kept imagining rubbing his cold hands and feeling for the throb of his heart. And then that shiver of excitement would go over me again, and the blood would rush to my face and I'd meet the challenge in that smile, and he'd know he'd met his match. (And of course, I couldn't leave him, because he'd need me, and I'd rescue him and ...)

Sometimes I'm so pathetic!

Anyway, five minutes passed and still I kept going. The shadow of Garnedd Ugain fell across my path and yet I didn't stop. I was getting tired, and the cold bit into me. Still I continued. The blue shadows deepened and it became dark. And on I went. It was as if the mountain had cast a spell over me, and I could not help myself. The great spirit of Yr Wyddfa had told me to carry on searching, and I was doomed to obey.

It started snowing again. The clouds banked down on the mountainside. There was pretty much zero visibility. This is it, I told myself. You can't go any further. Just one last check. I scrambled over to the path again to look for his footprints.

And suddenly I couldn't find them.

They just weren't there.

I cast around in a great circle looking for even a tuft of snow-covered grass that was disturbed or flattened. Nothing. Even when there's been fresh snow you can still see the dints. After all, I'd seen them back down the track, and it hadn't been snowing again for very long. It was like he'd been plucked off the mountain. The prints just stopped. Nothing forward, nothing back.

Confused, I cast an even larger circle. All the time searching for some explanation. A wind started, icy raw, like it was blowing straight off the Arctic. I told myself I better stop looking for what wasn't there, and get myself back to the train track straight away.

Give up, I told myself, and I think I was probably ready to, but an unexpected mist descended and suddenly I couldn't find the train track either. I tried to retrace my steps, but it was so hard to see. The wind stung my eyes, the snow seemed to cling to me, every movement started to become painful.

I recognized worrying signs. My mind was numbing up, my lungs aching from the freezing wind ...

I tried to struggle back through the snow in what I thought was the right direction, but I couldn't find anything familiar. I blundered about, beginning to panic. I must have

gone off course. I couldn't believe it. Weirdly, I was going downhill now, when the train track was definitely uphill. I stopped.

When you don't know where you are on Snowdon, don't try to find your way. You'll end up going over a cliff. I know, believe me. I looked for my compass, then remembered I'd given it to Mum.

Oh shit. No compass.

I should call Mum. She was going to be so mad. She was going to think I'd done it on purpose, that I was jealous, that I wanted to spoil her evening with Jeff. But there was no other way.

I'd call her up. I'd dig myself a snow cave. I'd give her an exact time, then I'd set off a flare. It was going to be all right. I wasn't in any danger. I wasn't scared.

I didn't get scared until I pulled out my mobile.

And saw it was dead.

Completely dead.

Somehow, bizarrely, it'd turned itself on inside my pocket. The battery was totally flat.

And that's when I started to get really frightened. No phone. No compass. Shivering. Lost on Snowdon. Severe weather conditions. Mum wasn't even going to realise I was gone until morning. *I was out alone, at night, on the mountain.*

And then I saw him.

He just curled out of the mist. The boy I'd seen on the summit.

He looked at me, his eyes as dark as coal, his face as white as the snowfield behind him.

'Are you lost?' he called. His voice was smooth and warm and melodious.

Close up, he had an unearthly beauty, and I couldn't take my eyes off him.

He smiled at me. 'Are you lost?' he repeated.

I nodded, unable to believe what I was seeing.

'I can take you somewhere warm,' he said. 'If you like.'