# Prologue

The sun had left its warmth on the day. A slither of golden light streamed along the line of slate roofs, while the rest of the small cottages lay in semi-darkness within the shadow of the mountain. The pubs were busy with people laughing and smoking both inside and out. Some stood in the road knowing the traffic would be minimal at that time of day. The café and the shops were closing late as the summer punters began to make their way home; the village was settling down after yet another long, hot day of tourists, and now the villagers could relax a little, until the next onslaught of coaches and sightseers.

The dark, grey stone of the buildings nearest the river shimmered. Even the small stone bridge looked alive, as the rays bounced off the grey boulders in the shallow water beneath. Darkness was a while away yet, but for the few birds singing their last song of the day, it was still. The voices carried across the river from the pub, blending into background noise, a gentle hum, not intrusive. The whole place was, for just that moment, frozen and no one else existed.

My blue cardigan dragged along the path, barely remembered as it hung between my thumb and finger. I vaguely acknowledged a shout from the pub "that I should get home quickly or Nan would be worried", but I was busily picking through the day I'd just had; Pirates and princesses.

The den or 'castle', had taken up most of the morning to build, and then hungry, sweating and dirty we'd quickly eaten our packed lunches, only to resume our play of 'pirates rescuing princesses' which had taken up the rest of the afternoon. Our play consisted of swimming and sword fighting, climbing and swinging on the tattered rope the adults said was a severe health and safety risk and lots of running around barefoot, dodging the large cow pats that littered the field.

It was Dafydd who'd finally voiced what we'd all secretly been thinking as the afternoon wore on; it was time to go home and have tea, slump in front of the television, and go to bed. Refreshed we would all meet up tomorrow morning and continue our mission.

It took less than half an hour to get back to the village because we'd played an impromptu game of tick on the way. Arriving on the stone bridge breathless and glowing, we'd waved goodbye, with a few of the boys playfully punching each other in the arms, we agreed a time and place for meeting tomorrow and scattered like rabbits, each to our own homes; or in the case of Chris and his younger sister Annie, to their holiday cottage. My Nan's cottage was one of the last on the outskirts of the village. My stomach growled loudly, my Nan always had something delicious cooking in her oven, I could hardly wait, and my mouth watered.

Nan baked pies and cakes for the locals to buy from her front porch and from her spot in the local market. Many a wedding, christening, or funeral had been graced by her cooking; she

was famous.  Well, famous in this small area of Wales anyway, and that was good enough for me. I was proud of my Nan and wanted to be like her.

I glanced up at the sky and smiled, the whole summer stretched before me; autumn was very far away. So was my family home in Chester where my younger brother Ben and Mum and Dad were happily going about their lives without me.

I didn't care.  I never got homesick. I loved it here in Beddgelert, and waited impatiently for the summer holidays when my family would drive up and leave me with Nan. Every summer I came to stay while my parents had a long holiday of their own. When Ben had been born, I'd expected him to ruin the holidays by coming too, but thankfully, so far he'd preferred to go abroad with Mum and Dad. This year they'd asked yet again if I'd wanted to go with them, this time to Greece. I'd flatly refused.

The four weeks I spent in Wales were the best of my life and I dreamt of living there permanently. Nan never demanded I wash or brush my teeth.  Nan never told me off for being dirty or noisy and never asked me where I was going or when I'd be home.  She had no reason to; everyone in the village knew where we were anyway and kept an eye open for any trouble. Most of the village children had accepted me as one of them, and this pleased me greatly.  I was inspired to learn the welsh language, and each year I became more confident in using it; the locals called me 'Abbie cariad', meaning 'darling Abbie'.

I stopped and leant on the low stone wall and gazed down at the river and smiled. The water glistened like tiny diamonds, blinding me as the last rays of the sun bounced upwards.  The air shimmered and I closed my eyes against it for a moment and turned away.

He stood on the opposite side of the river.  He was watching me; his hands in the pockets of his black trousers.  He wore a white shirt, open at the neck with his sleeves rolled up and he wore braces. His eyes met mine and he smiled at me. I smiled back before remembering the golden rule, 'don't talk to strangers', and guessed that also included smiling, and I hastily turned away, and continued onwards towards Nan's cottage.

I could see her in the distance. She was talking to a woman from the village. Nan saw me and waved. Waving back, I stopped abruptly; something was wrong?  Turning round, I glanced back across the river, a cool breeze brought goose-bumps to my skin, and I clung to my cardigan as I stared across the water; the silence was intense. The very air seemed to be holding its breath as I looked to where he had stood only seconds before; even the birds had stopped singing, but the smiling young man was nowhere to be seen.