

ANNA
BELFRAGE

*A Rip
in
the
Veil*



SilverWood

Chapter 1

The radio died first. There was a burst of static and the display went black. The dashboard lights gave up one by one, the steering wheel locked, the engine coughed, and the BMW glided to a stop by a crossroads.

“Hey!” Alex Lind said. “You’re a high-class German car, so don’t go temperamental on me, okay?” She pumped the accelerator and turned the key a couple of times.

“Oh, hell! I don’t have time for this.” She extracted the key, wiped it against her jeans and reinserted it. “Come on, come on, come on...” Nothing; not even a little whirr.

“Shit.” Alex slammed the steering wheel and got out.

To her left the ground rose in waves towards the moors, the heather shifting from dull brown through green to deepest purple, while to her right the land fell away in jumbles of rocks and sheer cliff faces. No signs of civilisation, just the crossroads, very much empty space and five sheep.

“It could be worse,” she told the closest sheep. Yeah, a boulder could have become dislodged from higher up the slope to bounce down the hillside and flatten her into mush. “Not that you care, do you?”

The sheep twitched an ear.

Alex dug her hand into her pocket and produced her mobile phone, new since yesterday.

“See?” She showed it to the sheep. “The wonders of technology.” Somewhere among her contacts was the AA number. Except that her phone was as useless as her car, not a flicker of anything resembling electronic life flashing across its display, no matter how many buttons she pressed.

This was strange; first her car, then her mobile. It was the same with her computer; dead to the world. It didn’t exactly help that it was unbearably hot as well. Sahara heat

in Scotland – okay, that was an exaggeration, but it wasn't far off, with dark brooding clouds hanging like a lid over the ground. She kicked at the ground, sending a small stone to bounce over the tarmac. One of the sheep bleated, two more followed suit, and just like that they were off, five dirty heaps of wool scampering across the road and disappearing down the rock strewn incline.

“Right.” She couldn't stay here all day, so she opened the bonnet. As far as she could see, there were no disconnected cables, nothing to explain why the car had stalled. Alex slid back into the leather seat and took a deep breath. Maybe the car just needed a little rest, and now, when she turned the key, it would purr into life. Nope – and she couldn't even get the top back up. German junk. Next time she'd go for Japanese.

“I hate you,” she told the convertible as she got out. If she – and in particular the PowerPoint presentation on her computer – wasn't in Edinburgh within the hour, Diane would probably fire her. Probably? She'd be out on her ear so fast there'd be skid marks all over Diane's new carpet. She did a quick calculation; walking back to the closest village would take an hour or more, but if she remembered correctly there was a farm a couple of miles ahead. At least they'd have a working phone.

A raindrop plopped down to hiss on the warm metal beside her, was followed by several more. There was a small stand of trees on the opposite side of the crossroads, and when the rain increased in intensity, she put on her jacket, retrieved her rucksack from the front seat, and made for the stunted alders.

She never got to the other side. Immobilising pain – the mother of all headaches – had her coming to a halt, blinking in an effort to relieve the building pressure behind her eyes. Her elbows and the back of her neck prickled, she felt dizzy and nauseous, like she did the few times she tried the roller coaster rides down in Blackpool. Must be the heat, this goddamn heat that was making her sweat like a piece of cheddar left out in the sun. The first thunderclap made her

flinch. The air tasted of iron and salt, and her heart was like a power hammer in her chest.

The road seemed to be flowing beneath her feet, a shifting mass of colours that swirled in tightening spirals towards the centre of the crossroads. Heat hallucinations; she closed her eyes for an instant before dropping them to the reassuring black of the asphalt. It wasn't there. The tarmac melted away before her eyes, replaced by strange bands of greens and blues, bands that rippled and twisted around her feet, dragging her in the direction of a...a hole?

With a ripping sound, a huge funnel opened at her feet, pouring out light so bright it hurt her eyes. And the noise! Chalk screeching over blackboards magnified a zillion times. She raised her arms to shield her face and tried to back away, but the road disintegrated below her, and she slid this way and that, like a drunken figure skater on a slope of ice. Shit! What was happening? An earthquake? No earthquake, just a...a... Alex screamed, scrambling back from the edge of the rapidly expanding void.

The next clap of thunder sent her sprawling into all that light, and for an instant or two she hung suspended, before hitting the ground so hard the air was knocked out of her. The skies opened, and in a matter of seconds she was drenched. She lay stunned, staring at the lightning that lit up the sky. Her hair bristled with static electricity, and her arms and legs were so heavy, almost detached from the rest of her. She tried to move her hand and saw the muddy fingers twitch in response. Mud? She swayed to her feet. How odd; no hole, no dazzling light, definitely no asphalt – just a narrow dirt road.

Thunder growled and roared, and she whimpered as she crossed the muddy track, making for the hillside. She had no idea where she was going, only that she had to...the road, it was dangerous on the road. A bolt of lightning flashed through the sky directly over her head. She screamed for her father when the current coursed through her body, lifted her up into the air, and flung her up the hill where she hit the ground head first.

“This is unacceptable,” Diego Sanderson said, frowning in turn at John Orrock and Diane Wilson. “I’ve come a very long way for this meeting.”

“I’m so sorry, Mr Sanderson.” Diane looked flustered, the pale skin on her chest and neck mottling in reds.

John went over to the window, squinting through the curtain of rain to the trafficked street far below. Alex should have been here by now. He tried phoning her again, aware of their client’s eyes boring into his back. Nothing.

“Huh. So where is she?” Sanderson sat back, his large frame looking cramped in the elegant wooden armchair.

Good question; where was she? It shouldn’t have taken her more than two hours to drive across the moors, and now – John threw a look at his watch – it was almost four hours since he’d heard from her.

“She might have run into car trouble.” Diane looked genuinely concerned, one cheek sucked in. That surprised John. Diane and Alex tolerated each other due to mutual benefit, no more. Alex needed the jobs Diane threw her way to get back on track after that unexplained absence three years ago, and Diane knew a gift horse when she saw one. Still, once they’d been friends – best friends, even – and he supposed that every now and then, they both missed each other.

“If she’s having car trouble then she’s going to be stuck out there for quite some time,” Sanderson said. “Look at the way the rain’s coming down. It sure doesn’t seem as if it’s going to let up anytime soon.”

John got to his feet. “I’m going to look for her, something must have happened.”

“Yeah; she might have drowned,” Sanderson muttered. John threw him a dark look; this wasn’t funny.

Sanderson stood up. “I’ll go with you. After all, without her there’s no point to this meeting, is there?”

“Really, Mr Sanderson,” Diane said, “you don’t have to do this. Let me invite you to dinner instead.”

Sanderson shook his head. “I’ll go with John. That

consultant of yours is travelling around with my new security network in her computer, and I plan on ensuring it's undamaged."

John frowned. "I'll manage on my own, I think."

"I'm coming with you," Sanderson insisted, eyeballing John.

"Fine," John shrugged. "I just have to call the babysitter first."

They were silent on the drive south. Sanderson had requested they stop at his hotel, and was now dressed in jeans and Timberlands. He studied the landscape with an expression of dislike.

"Bleak, isn't it? Far too much space, you know?" He made a face. "Give me inner city Chicago any day."

They crested a small hill and in front of them the road ran in a straight line. No hairpin curves, no major obstruction, just a black line of asphalt that bisected the landscape around them as if it had been drawn with the help of a ruler.

It was growing dark and the rain was still coming down, but now in a relaxing patter. The clouds hung far too close to the ground, and even with the AC on, the heat filtered its way through the metal chassis of the car.

"Jeez, it's hot." Sanderson flapped a map to create a fan effect, grunting when John braked.

"That's her car!" John pointed at a red shape standing halfway up the hill. He threw himself out of the car, slipping as he made his way across the road. "Alex? Alex!" he called, scrabbling up the hillside. "What is it doing here, almost twenty metres from the road?"

"Maybe she miscalculated and drove off," Sanderson said from behind him.

"Alex is an excellent driver, and even if she'd driven off, this is uphill. She wouldn't have gotten this far."

Sanderson seemed to agree, his eyes narrowing as he scanned the vegetation. "No tyre marks, no nothing. It's as if the car was thrown there."

The convertible was empty, the key still in the ignition.

Sanderson's face paled when he put his hand on the leather seat.

"It's dry."

John didn't understand at first but leaned over to touch the backrest. Dry. "But it can't be, it's been raining all afternoon. It's still raining."

"Not here, not here where the car is," Sanderson said.

John broke out in goose bumps and edged closer to Sanderson. "How?"

"I don't know," Sanderson said, colour flooding back into his face. "How the hell should I know?"

Sanderson staggered back a few metres from the car. He looked ill, all of him swaying where he stood.

"It seems kind of staged, don't you think?" he said.

"Staged? How staged? She's had an accident."

"Yeah, right; look at it. Not a scratch on the paintwork, nothing's out of place..." Sanderson seemed about to faint, sweat was beading his upper lip and hairline, and he hugged himself, half bent over as if he were in pain.

"Are you alright?" John moved towards him.

"We must go." Sanderson grabbed John's arm. "Call the police and have them look for her, but we have to go."

John wrenched himself free. "Now that we're here, we might as well look for her. She must be somewhere close, perhaps she's hurt." He threw Sanderson a worried look; the man looked about to collapse. "Why don't you sit down?"

Sanderson shook his head. "It's just a dizzy spell, jetlag or something." He straightened up, unclenched his arms from around his waist. "I'm fine," he said, his statement very much at odds with his ashen face. "Let's get on with it, okay?"

They looked everywhere for her. John's throat was sore from calling her name, his jeans were wet up to his knees after wading through drenched heather and bracken, but he just couldn't stop looking. She had to be here, somewhere. At one point Sanderson held up a rucksack.

"Hers? It's badly burnt – look the zipper has melted together."

John sank down onto the ground, clutching the black computer backpack. Sanderson crouched beside him and hid his head in his hands for a moment before raising his face in John's direction.

"It's dangerous here," he said, heaving himself back onto his feet. "We have to go. Now!"

"How dangerous?"

"It just is, okay? Can't you feel it, how the whole ground is heaving?"

"No," John snorted, "of course it isn't."

"But the stink!" Sanderson leapt down the hillside. John inhaled, surprised to notice Sanderson was right; a stench of heated, scorched metal, of tyres burning, hung in the air.

"Besides, you'll never find her," Sanderson called up from the road. "She's gone."

"Gone? She isn't gone," John bristled.

"Of course she is! As gone as that accursed mother of hers. *Ay Dios mío!*" He moaned and hunched together, hands pressed to the sides of his head.

"Mercedes? You know Mercedes?"

"No, I never had the pleasure. She sort of disappeared before I had the opportunity of meeting her. Oh, Jesus, will you look at that?" Sanderson pointed at the dark, roiling skies. John looked from the clouds back to Sanderson.

"Scared of thunder?" John couldn't help it; he jeered.

"Yes, yes! It scares the shit out of me. Now can we please, please leave?"

John frowned down at where Sanderson was standing. Something was happening to the road, it undulated round Sanderson's feet. He blinked a couple of times.

"I have to find her," he said, relieved to see the road looked normal again. The first clap of thunder rolled across the valley and Sanderson jumped.

"We can come back later, but now let's please go, okay?" There was a frantic edge to his voice, and John took pity on him.

He only got halfway down the hill before the storm broke. No rain, just thunder and lightning that stood a stark

white against the backdrop of clouds. Sanderson swore, kicked at something John couldn't see. With a tearing sound the road cracked open, bright light streaming upwards. Sanderson screamed when he was yanked into the chasm. He clung to the edge, hollering for help. John ran as fast as he could, but before he could reach him, Sanderson was sucked down, still screaming. With a clap the hole snapped shut, the reverberations throwing John off his feet.

For the coming minutes he hung on, incapable of moving when the ground pitched, stones and boulders rolling and bouncing around him. Once the rain began to fall, the air quieted and John sat up. His car stood where he'd left it, the BMW was still halfway up the hill, and the crossroads was just as it had always been, the asphalt dark with rain. The hillside stood pungent and peaceful around him, but of Alex, and of Sanderson, there was no trace. No trace at all.

Chapter 2

Matthew Graham stumbled to his feet. Sweetest Lord! The repeated thunderclaps had thrown him to the ground, near on knocked him senseless. Still; everything seemed to be in working order, even though he tasted blood in his mouth.

He turned his face up to the rain, relieved that the uncommon heat of the last few days had broken. The air still smelled of dust and too much sun, but now there was the fresh scent of water as well, of damp earth and wet bracken. He rubbed at his wrists, running fingers over the visible scars that ringed both of them. Home, he was home, and weeks of looking over his shoulder as he made his way north, were over. Here he was safe, able to melt into the moors and fells of Scotland so as to make him difficult to catch. It almost made him smile. Almost.

He looked about for his few belongings, settled his roll on his shoulder and stood for a while, taking his bearings. Further up the hillside he made out a darker splotch against the drenched slopes. A cave, no doubt small and damp, but far better than spending a night on the drenched ground.

He came to a stop at the sound of birds. Large and black, they flapped and cawed, bickering over something that was lying further down the slope. A dead sheep? One bird landed on the ground, there was a piercing shriek – most definitely human – and Matthew lengthened his stride, yelling at the corbies to be gone.

A woman; on her front, with one arm trapped below her, the other extended by her side. He crouched, not quite sure what to do. She was in a bad way, one foot scorched around the ankle and down to her toes, and on her forehead there was an ugly contusion, blood trickling sluggishly from it.

From the way her breath hitched, each inhalation interrupted by a protesting whimper, he suspected she must have landed on her ribs. He looked down at the road, measured the distance with his eyes. Had she been thrown this far by the thunderstorm? He couldn't think of any other reason for a lass to be lying here in the heather, all alone.

The thought brought him up short, and he spent a couple of tense moments inspecting what he could see of the hillside for her possible companions. Nothing. He chewed his lip. A woman travelling on her own was most unusual, and here, on the empty moor with miles and miles to the closest farm, it was not only unusual, it was puzzling – as was her whole appearance. His eyes flew up and down her legs; what was she wearing? The woman uttered a low, guttural sound. Her head rose a half-inch or so from the ground, the eyes opened. Bright blue eyes attempted to focus before closing again.

“Can you stand, then?” He shook her shoulder. Her eyes snapped open, a wrinkle appearing between her brows. The woman lifted her head and stared at him, a sob escaping her when she drew in a deep breath.

“Oh, shit!” she said.

Matthew retreated, eyes fixed on her.

She blinked. “At least it isn't orange,” she said, waving her hand in the direction of his shirt.

Orange? He tilted his head.

“You know,” she went on, giving him a faint smile. “Like those Hare Krishna people.”

He had no idea what she was talking about, but nodded all the same. Her eyes lingered on his breeches, his bare shins and feet, they stuck on his belongings, returned to his breeches and flew up his shirt.

“Who are you?”

He had no intention of telling her that, at least not yet, so instead he mumbled something unintelligible. Despite an odd accent, the woman spoke good enough English, not Scots, but what did she mean with her comment regarding his shirt? And why was she gaping at him as if she'd never

seen a normally dressed man before? To be fair, he did look somewhat worse for wear. The shirt was old, and the breeches were the ones he'd stolen from the drover a few weeks back, but at least both garments were whole and reasonably clean. The woman sat up too fast, groaned and clutched at her ribs. She vomited, standing on all fours.

"Jesus," she said, making him frown at her careless use of our Lord's name. "What's happened to me?"

"It looks as if you were struck by lightning."

She stared down at the burnt foot, turned her head to the side and retched.

"My shoes," she said, "where are my shoes?"

"Not here."

She struggled to sit up. "I think I remember, so much noise, so much light, and then I was flat on my face."

He nodded and helped her to stand, one arm round her waist to keep her upright. She leaned against him and was sick all over their feet.

"I'm sorry," she whispered afterwards. "I couldn't help it."

"Not to worry, but we have to get out of this rain. You're cold, and need to lie down. Up there." He jerked his head in the direction of the cave.

"Maybe we should call for help." She slid her hand into a slit in her strange breeches.

"Here?" He almost laughed. Who would hear them? And besides, he had no intention of doing anything to attract attention. He studied the bright red object she'd pulled out.

"It's brand new," she said, catching his look.

"Ah," he nodded, eyes stuck on the shiny metal casing. A wee enamelled box, but what might be the purpose of it? She glanced down at the object and made a face.

"Stuff never works when you really need it, does it?" She shoved it back out of sight.

With his help, she limped her way up the hillside, and by the time they'd reached the cave she was trembling with effort. He lowered her to sit, and she mumbled her thanks.

"Were you on the road as well?"

"Aye." He couldn't take his eyes off her legs. No shift,

no covering skirts, only those strange elongated breeches, hugging tight around well-shaped thighs and a round, strong arse. Christ in His glory! He hadn't been this close to a woman in several years, and his blood raced through him, making him ill at ease and elated at the same time. Where was she from, to dress in such an immodest fashion? He'd belt any woman of his before allowing her to so expose herself.

"What?" she demanded. "Do I look strange? Am I green all over?"

He muffled a laugh. "You look very strange, but nay, you're not green"

"Well, thank heavens for that, I would have hated being turned into a frog or something."

"A frog?" He shook his head. "You don't look like any frog I've seen."

A smile flickered over her face, held for a heartbeat or two before becoming a grimace. She raised a hand to her forehead.

"My head; it's killing me." She closed her eyes.

Alex rested back against the cave wall and concentrated on breathing without hurting herself. She studied him from under her lashes, irritated to find he'd gone back to gawking at her. What was the matter with him? Had he never seen a woman in jeans before? She looked closely at him. Tall, broad in shoulders and chest, but thin and with an underlying pallor to his skin – as if he'd been ill, just recently allowed out of bed. His hair was cut unbecomingly short except at the back where some longer strands still hung on, his cheeks were covered by a dark, unkempt bristle, like the one Magnus, her father, would sport at the end of his summer holidays – so far nothing alarming. His shirt though...worn linen that laced up the front, mended cuffs – all of it hand stitched.

Maybe his girlfriend had made it for him, or maybe New Age people believed in doing everything from scratch, in which case they needed a serious fashion update. She

moved, scraped her foot against the rocky ground, and winced.

“Is it alright if I touch you?” he said. “It might ease somewhat if I wash the blood off.”

“Sure, go ahead, touch all you want.” Well, within limits of course.

He looked at her with a hesitant expression. “All I want?”

She made a huge effort to look him straight in the eyes, despite the fact that she could see two – no, three – of him.

“Help me, I’m not feeling too good.” She turned her head to the side and retched, but this time it was just slimy yellow bile that burnt her throat as she heaved. “Damn,” she said afterwards, keeping her eyes closed to stop the whole world from spinning. “I must have hit my head really hard.”

He spent quite some time on her forehead, close enough that she could smell him, drawing in the scent of sweat and unwashed male. She wrinkled her nose. Phew! How about some soap?

“What?” he said. “Did I hurt you?”

“No, I’m fine.” She wasn’t; her brain was banging against her skull, the broken skin on her forehead itched, her ribs were using her lungs as a pincushion and her foot...no, best not think about her foot, because it looked absolutely awful, blisters like a fetter round her ankle and all the way down to her toes. She flexed them experimentally. It hurt like hell.

He poured some more water onto the rag he was using and wiped her face. She liked that, opening her eyes to smile her thanks at him. He smiled back, teeth flashing a surprising white in the darkness of his beard. He sat back on his haunches, a worried expression on his face.

“What?” Did she need stitches? Because she really, really hated needles.

“Your ribs, I have to do something about them.”

“Like what?”

“Bandage them, so that you don’t shift them too much.”

“You’ve done this before?”

“It happens, aye.”

“Oh, so you’re a doctor?”

“A doctor?” He laughed. “Nay, lass, I am no doctor. But setting ribs is no great matter, is it?”

“It is when they’re mine.” She shifted on her bottom. “It won’t hurt, will it?”

“No, but I will have to...err...well, I must...the shirt, aye?”

“The shirt?”

“Well, you have to take it off.”

“Oh.” Where did this man come from? “That’s alright; you won’t be the first to see me in the flesh.” He looked so shocked she laughed, but the pain that flew up her side made her gasp instead.

He pulled his bundle close and rummaged in it, muttering something about having to find something to bandage her ribs with. Finally he extracted what looked like a rag and proceeded to tear it into strips.

He was very careful as he helped her out of her jacket and her shirt, and at the sight of her bra his eyes widened, but he didn’t say anything. She sat up so that he could wrap the torn lengths of cloth around her. His exhalations tickled her skin, and she took short breaths, staring straight ahead as his big, capable hands worked their way around her torso, a gentle touch that sent surprising and quite unwelcome tingles of warmth through her body.

She was aware of his eyes on her skin, on her neck, but mostly on her breasts, quick glances that returned time and time again to the lacy red bra edged with cream that cupped her breasts and lifted them high. She sat up straighter, shoulders pulled back. She peeked at him, met his eyes and looked away.

“What’s this?” He put a finger on the satin strap. Impossible; men that hadn’t seen a bra didn’t exist – not where she came from.

“It’s a bra.”

“A bra,” he echoed, tracing it round her middle. She jerked back, making both of them gasp.

“My apologies.” He raised his hands in a conciliatory

gesture. "I shouldn't... But there, now it's done." He gave her the shirt and averted his eyes as she struggled to put it back on.

Alex closed her eyes, trying to come up with a label to pin on this strange man. Isolated goat farmer? Recluse? Maybe he was an old-fashioned – extremely old-fashioned – Quaker, or maybe the Amish had set up a little colony up here in the Scottish wilderness.

Her thoughts drifted; she wondered where her computer might be, considered crawling out to look for it, but couldn't find the energy. The meeting! Bloody hell, the meeting! And Isaac, she was due to pick him up before five today. Right, she had to, yes she had to...what? Walk? With a foot that looked like a barbecued piece of pork? She slumped against the wall. No; stay here. Yes, just...rest, sit still. John would sort it all out. John would come and find her – of course he would.

It was getting dark. The woman was shivering, and after covering her with one of his threadbare blankets, he disappeared into the night. Everything was wet, and he had to go far afield before he had enough half-dry wood to even attempt a fire. When he ducked back into the cave, she seemed to be sleeping, her head lolling to one side. He fumbled for his flint and knelt down to start the fire, small sparks flying off the steel with little or no effect. Wisps of faint smoke uncurled and faded but no flames took hold, and Matthew evicted a long, very colourful string of curses under his breath, a worried glance in the direction of the woman. Her eyes were wide open.

"What are you doing?" Her gaze drifted from the piled wood to the flint and steel in his hands.

"I'm trying, but the wood's wet, and —"

"Give me my jacket," she interrupted, indicating the red garment. He handed it to her and she dug into one of the outer pockets, grinning as she brandished a small box. "I collect these." She threw it in his direction. He studied the little box, turning it this way and that. She sighed and crawled over to join him by the opening.

“Here.” She took the box and opened it. “Matches.” She held a brittle stick aloft.

His eyes never left her hands as she struck the head of the stick against the side of the box. He had to force himself to remain where he was when the flame sprung forth. Magic, this was magic, and behind his back he made a sign for protection against evil. No wonder he thought her strange, she was a witch or a fairy. She hadn’t noticed his reaction, but was busy putting the flame to the little pile, smiling when some of the drier twigs caught. She raised her eyes to his.

“What?” She frowned, shoving her short, dark hair off her brow. She didn’t look like a witch, her eyes wide as they met his. Still, he muttered a silent prayer – just in case.

“How?” he stuttered, pointing at the little box in her hands.

“It’s just a box of matches.”

“Matches,” he repeated.

She put the box in his hand. “Try.”

He wanted to refuse, and at first he just sat with the box in his hand. Finally, he did as he’d seen her do, pulling out one of those wee sticks with that curious knob on top, and striking it against the side of the box. He dropped it with an exclamation when it burst into fire. She laughed and he scowled. He repeated the procedure, and this time he didn’t drop it, but held it until it singed his fingers before blowing the little flame into extinction.

“Bravo,” she said. He handed back the box but she shook her head. “No, keep it. I’ve got more.”

She smiled a refusal when he offered her a piece of his bread, muttering something about not thinking her stomach could handle it – not yet. She kept on blinking, pressing the heel of her hand to her forehead, and he suspected her head was hurting her something frightful. Every now and then she’d slide her hand into the side slit of her breeches, pull out that wee enamelled box, stare at it and frown.

“Stupid, worthless gadget,” she said at one point, raising her arm as if she intended to throw it. But she didn’t,

returning it to its place before lying down, arms cradling her head. Matthew stretched out beside her. Too close, but what was he to do, given the cramped space?

“What’s your name?” she asked.

“Matthew,” he replied after a while, rolling over in her direction. “Matthew Graham.”

“I’m Alex Lind.” She eased herself up to sit. She licked her lips, and he fumbled in the dark for his water skin, extending it in her direction.

“Alex?” he sat up. “That’s a lad’s name.”

She snorted and drank some more. “No it isn’t, last time I looked I was definitely female and it’s still my name. Short for Alexandra.” She twisted her head in the direction of the opening, exposing her nape, a bare patch of skin highlighted by the severe haircut. She had right pretty ears, tight to her skull and ending in a slight, pink point. Fairy ears...

“What are you?” he whispered, making her turn to face him.

“Just plain Alex; you know, an ordinary woman.”

“No you’re not; in my world women don’t walk around baring their bodies like you do, their hair cut short.”

“I’m not baring my body! I’m fully dressed, for God’s sake!”

He winced at her careless blasphemy. “Aye, there’s cloth all over you, but it reveals more than it conceals.”

“Tough, okay? You’d better learn to live with the times, mister. Just because you’ve chosen to live in some kind of archaic religious context, it doesn’t give you the right to judge the rest of us.”

“Religious context?” he echoed. “Archaic?”

“Well, look at you! You dress like a cross between a Hare Krishna monk and an Amish person, you stare at me as if you’ve never seen a bra before. You must’ve been living in some kind of secluded all male community.”

His mouth twisted into a wry smile. Aye, that was very true. He leaned towards her, trying to see her eyes in the dark.

“What’s a Harray krissna monk? And I haven’t seen a – bra, is it? – before. I would definitely have remembered.”

She was staring at him, hands clenched tight around each other. Matthew gave her a wary look; the lass was gaping as if she'd seen a ghost.

"But you know what a car is, right?"

Matthew shook his head.

"A TV? Radio? A phone?"

He frowned; was this some sort of game? "Nay, I've never heard of any such things."

She gulped and scooted away from him, eyes flying to his bundle, the flint and steel he'd left discarded on the floor. She moaned, hid her face in her arms.

"No," she whispered. "No way. Stuff like that doesn't happen, not in real life."

"What?" He came after her, but she reared back, and the expression on her face made him raise his hands, palms towards her. "I'm not about to hurt you."

"It's not you, it's just..." She broke off to stare yet again at him and his possessions. "Bloody hell, no, no, no." She crawled towards the opening. "The car. My car, it'll be right there, where I left it. This is just a bad dream, an effect of hitting my head too hard."

"What's a car?" he said. She laughed, and then she began to cry instead. He followed her outside, made a grab for her when she slipped.

"My BMW," she said, "it has to be here!"

He had no idea what she was looking for as she limped up and down the slope, but whatever it was, it wasn't where she'd expected it to be.

"A dream, it's just a dream, isn't it?" She looked at him beseechingly, and he had no idea what to say. This was no dream, not unless they were both sleeping and dreaming the same thing.

"It can't be true." To his surprise she placed a hand on his arm. "Too solid," she moaned, "you're too damn solid, you hear?" She hit him, repeatedly.

"So are you, lass, but I don't take to hitting you, do I?" He wrapped his arms around her, pinned down her hands.

"Sorry," she hiccupped before breaking down completely,

a warm weight against his chest. Dearest Lord, but it felt good to hold a woman this close, her hair tickling his nose. It was a near on perfect match, her body a collection of curves that fitted comfortably into his larger and broader frame, her head resting against his shoulder. With an effort he released her. She was still weeping, albeit silently, and he coaxed her back inside, unnerved by her dejection.

“What is the matter, lass?”

She just shook her head, mumbled something he made out as ‘impossible’, and sank down to sit before the little fire. She quieted, drew in a few shaking breaths, and wiped at her face.

Alex dragged a finger through the dirt of the cave floor. Think, Alex, think! There had to be some sort of explanation to all this. Total blank. She snuck him a look, this man in old-fashioned clothes who used flint and steel to light his fire, who’d never heard of things like TVs and cars. This couldn’t be happening to her – to be precise, it couldn’t happen to anyone. Time was a fixed dimension, no bloody variable! But her car; gone! Maybe she was looking in the wrong place, down the wrong hillside. A flare of hope rushed up her spine only to crash into the rational part of her brain, the part that was telling her all the evidence pointed in one way and one way only. Something impossible and incomprehensible had happened to her – but it had happened.

She glanced at Matthew, met eyes framed by a concerned frown.

“Better?”

“Not really.” She took a deep breath; here goes. “What year is it?”

“What year? Don’t you know?”

She hitched her shoulders. “I do, but I just want to check.”

“It’s 1658,” he said, spitting to the side. “Three years since I was thrown in gaol due to the betrayal of my brother and wife, three years spent in chains.”

She closed her eyes; 1658? Panic shrivelled her windpipe to the size of a drinking straw.

“Are you sure?” It came out squeaky.

He gave her an odd look. “Aye, I am. What year do you think it is?”

“Err...” Alex cleared her throat. What on earth did she tell him? The truth? “I’m not sure. It must be the blow to my head, right?” She fisted her hands to stop them from trembling, but it didn’t help, the tremors shivered up her underarms instead. 1658! She had to get back! She had to —

“Oh, God,” she said, “Isaac!”

“Isaac?”

“My son, and...” Just like that she was crying again, this time with loud sobs that tore at her throat. Matthew pulled her close, shushing her as she cried her heart out into his shirt.

“Is he dead?” he said a bit later. He was still holding her, one large hand stroking her over her back.

“No,” she whispered, “he’s just gone.” All of them were gone; none of her people existed here, and the thought of never seeing them again tied her guts into a bundle of painful knots.

“How?”

“Not now, some other time, okay?” She sat up to see his face. “Do you want to tell me? You know, about your brother and wife and all that?” Not that she cared, but at present any distraction was welcome.

“No. I prefer not to think of it at all.” There was a raw edge to his voice that made her suspect he did think about it — more or less constantly.

“Oh.” She threw him a cautious look. He was rubbing at his wrists. “And now? Are you going home?”

“Aye; at last. Not that there’s much to come home to.” He leaned his head against the wall, a harsh sound escaping from his compressed lips.

“You okay?” Well, no, she could hear he wasn’t.

“Okay?”

“Are you alright?”

“Aye.” He turned his face away.

Alex snorted. “Men.”

She rose to her knees and gave him an awkward hug – much more for her own sake than for his. He reared back, all of him stiffening. She insisted, drawing him close. A few moments and he made as if to sit up. She didn’t want him to, she needed someone close, a breathing human warmth to dull the gnawing fear in her belly. So she patted at her thighs, and after a long moment of hesitation Matthew allowed her to settle his head on her lap. Maybe he needed it too.

Alex knew the moment he fell asleep, the large body suddenly so much heavier. Through the small opening she could see the summer dawn begin to lighten the skies, and she studied him in silence, running a finger over his head. What was she to do? And how would she ever get back? Hang around and wait for another thunderstorm?