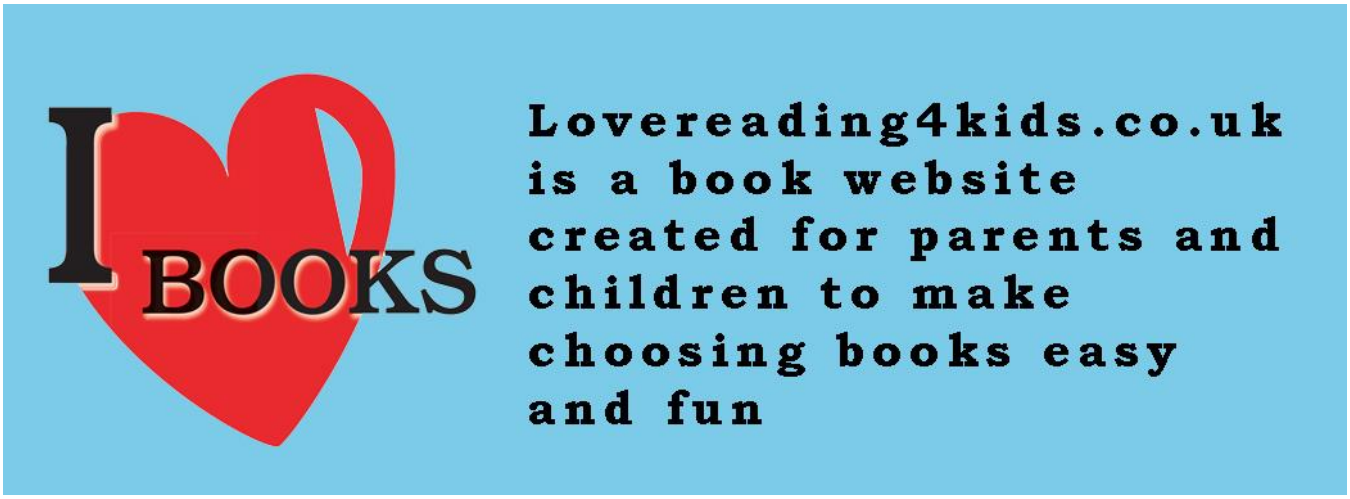


Opening extract from

Here be Dragons

Written by

Sarah Mussi

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Sarah Mussi

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Dedication

To Y DDRAIG GOCH,
The Red Dragon of Wales

It is said that Y DDRAIG GOCH protects and defends those who truly love and cherish the ancient, beautiful land of Wales. It is said that He bestows a Blessing on them. And upon his enemies He lets loose the ancient Dragon's Curse. This is what is said.

From Welsh Tradition


Here be Dragons
Their side of
Y Lliwedd
Crib Goch
Glyder Fawr
Snowdon


the mountain
Yr Aran
Dinas Emrys
N
Snowdon
Yr Wyddfa
Garnedd Ugain
The Devil's Bridge
Clogwyn Du'r Arddu/ The Black Cliff
Ranger Path
Llyn
Moel Cynghorion
Our side of the mountain
Upper Pastures
Halfway House
Llanberis Pass
Snowdon Railway
Llanberis Path
George's cottage
Ellie's farmhouse
Llyn Padarn
Pen-y-mynydd-gwryd Hotel
Llanberis
to Caernarfon

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 llyn[1]*.*

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.

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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.

Act One

Aduwyn gaer yssyd ae kyffrwy kedeu
Oed meu y rydeu a dewisswn
Ny lafaraf i deith reith ryscatwn
Ny dyly 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)

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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 *stoopid* 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.