

*Excerpt from LAST DREAM STANDING*

A new season, bringing with it the undercurrents of change, descended on the valley. It was fall. Golden leaves blew across the platform of the train station, flitting past luggage and carts and occasionally clinging to someone's hat. The platform grounded Beca as she stood in the breeze, lifting a weary hand and giving an empty wave to the face in the third window. The rugged face, belonging now to a stranger, leaned to catch one last glimpse of her as the whistle blew and the giant metal machine, the answer to everything from prayers to nightmares, began to carry down its track handfuls of lives going somewhere else to do something else. She couldn't blame Stefan for not coming home to tell his father goodbye.

It had been one thing to imagine Garth in Snowdonia, but quite another to watch him give a final tug to the strap of his grandfather's trunk and know that those hands would not be touching her. Yet his staying seemed like madness. She lowered her hand and thought of the night Garth returned Stefan's drawing of her, the gentleness they shared as the glow from a candle trembled across the wall and their hands dipped into the memory of each other. Funny, how hope can dress up as a candle, how it can burn with a brightness that defies all reason, then so thoroughly be extinguished.

The whistle blew and the train was soon in the distance, a breeze bending its smoke until it wafted almost flat across the leaving fields. That was what Stefan had called them, the leaving fields. When did she take her first step away from Garth? She knew that one: the day Howie was born. After that it was one long fish ladder. Then Aldyth's sudden gasp in the courtroom. It had been some time now, but it had stayed with her, pushing her to look, but not letting her see. Aldyth had been reticent to talk about it.

Still, she wished she could feel nothing now for this man whose life was like a barge on the Thames, never seeming to have found its true berth. She kept believing she could love him to wholeness.

She had started to say more before Garth took that last step up the carriage and the doors slammed shut, but sometimes it can be better to pause. At other times you've got to pounce. But it's never better to let things pile up like the black slag, ugly and leftover, that accumulates below the collieries. And that's what she had done. Every miner knows the risk of those grainy black mountains. They can ruin the flow of a river, kill the fragile fish who live there.

The door slammed behind Garth, he found an empty seat and was watching Beca through a window of the carriage. The half wave of her hand was downright unsettling, as if conveying something that had escaped him until now. Something he should know. The kind of thing that could have flipped everything upside down and made it

all new and fresh again; like the difference it might have made had he stepped out from behind the hazelnut that night of *Nos Calan Gaeaf*. Those were the moments that rattled around inside him. Banged into each other.

The train whistle blew, and he heard the slamming of more doors. Smoke began to haze over the carriage as passengers pulled out and lit their cigarettes and pipes. Nobody had the gumption to light up a cigar. The train inched away from the station, and the window slowly erased the form of Beca standing on the platform. He was too proud to swivel for one last glimpse of her; instead, he leaned to see the row of swallows preening themselves along the roof of the station. He would miss the valley birds, the way they floated down to sheep, landing elegantly on flat, white backs.