Winners and Losers

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Extract

Chapter One

Joey Evans turned the key that was left permanently in the lock of his family's front door, stepped inside and started whistling, '*A Little of What You Fancy Does You Good*'.

'Quiet! You'll wake Harry.' His eldest brother Lloyd walked in behind him and hung his trilby on the rack in the passage.

'Someone has to warn the lovebirds. You don't want to see anything that will make you blush, now do you?' Joey hung his cap and overcoat next to Lloyd's.

'Unlike you, Victor behaves himself around the ladies.' Lloyd opened the kitchen door. Their middle brother Victor was sitting at the table playing chess with his girlfriend of two years, nineteen-year-old Megan Williams. She was wrapped up in her cloak, Victor in his overcoat and both of them were wearing mufflers and woollen gloves. 'Disappointed, Joey?' Lloyd raised his eyebrows.

'With what?' Victor glanced up at his brothers.

'Joey was hoping that you and Megan would be doing something that would embarrass us.' Lloyd winked at Megan as he sat next to her.

Megan smiled at Lloyd but scowled at Joey. At the age of thirteen she had been sent to housekeep for her uncle, who lived next door to the Evans, after her aunt had died in childbirth. Back then she had become besotted with Victor's younger brother, who was the same age as her. Joey had been, and still was in most of the local girls' opinion, the handsomest boy in Tonypandy, if not the

whole of Wales. It had taken her three years to realize that he was as infatuated with his good looks as his admirers and capable of remaining faithful to a girl only for as long as it took him to catch the eye of another. It was then that she had discovered that Joey's older colliery blacksmith brother, whose height and breadth she had always found intimidating, had a gentle side.

It had been difficult to determine who was the more surprised, her or Victor, when they found themselves in love after a year of outings based on 'friendship'. But it was a love fraught with difficulties, which they tried to put from their minds whenever they were together.

'It's cold enough in here to freeze the cockles of a man's heart without you giving me one of your frigid looks, Megan.' Joey dived out and retrieved his overcoat.

'We raked out the fire after Dad and Sali left for the meeting,' Victor explained.

'You would have been warmer playing chess on the picket line. At least we have a brazier going down there.' Joey pulled on his gloves and joined them at the table.

'But we wouldn't have been able to see to Harry if he woke up.' Megan moved her rook and took Victor's bishop.

'Poor kid's probably frozen to his bed.' Joey studied the board.

'Sali wrapped a couple of hot bricks in flannel and put them at his feet when she tucked him in. She also left a couple of egg sandwiches for you two in the pantry.' Victor moved his queen.

'You suicidal?' Joey demanded.

'Victor's conceding the game because he knows my uncle and his brothers probably walked up from the picket line with you and they'll be wanting something to eat.' Megan wrinkled her nose. 'Not that I've much to give them.'

'Can't a man make a bad chess move?' Victor protested.

'Not when he doesn't usually.' Megan took Victor's

queen and put his king into checkmate. 'But then you don't always let me win. It was a draw until this one.' She left the table and blew Victor a kiss from the door. 'Night, all.'

Lloyd heard Megan talking to Sali and his father in the passage as he set up the board again. 'Thanks for babysitting Harry, Victor.'

'Megan and I didn't have anything else to do.' Victor left the table and went to the pantry. He was surprisingly light-footed for a man of his size. Six feet six in his stockinged feet, broad-shouldered, finely muscled and well built, he towered above most men in the valleys.

'You would have had plenty if it was summer and warm enough to sit on the mountain,' Joey suggested archly.

'That's my girlfriend, not one of your tarts you're talking about.' Victor spoke softly as he always did when he was angry.

'I didn't mean anything. You've been courting Megan for two years—.'

'And while her father withholds his consent, that's all I can do.' Victor set the sandwiches in front of his brothers and lifted a couple of plates from the dresser.

'Good meeting?' Lloyd asked his father when he came in.

'That depends on what you mean by "good". Just about every Bible-thumping church and chapel minister in the Rhondda has managed to wangle themselves a place on the Distress Committee. There's so many on it, I doubt they'll agree long enough to make a single decision. Still, the amount of time they'll waste arguing amongst themselves shouldn't leave them with much spare time to bother any poor soul intent on committing a few harmless sins.' Billy Evans fished his empty pipe out of his pocket before he sat down. 'We would have been home half an hour ago if the Methodists and Baptists hadn't tabled a formal complaint about Father Kelly's soup kitchen.'

'They object to him feeding people in the Catholic Hall?' Lloyd asked in surprise.

'No, but they think he gets more donations than they do.'

'Of food or money?' Lloyd enquired.

'Both,' Billy Evans said drily.

'Now I wonder why people are happier to give to Father Kelly than the chapels.' Lloyd grabbed Sali's hand and pulled her on to his lap as she walked through the door.

'Because he feeds everyone who walks through the door without asking what denomination they are and because his volunteers work hard to bring in as many donations as they can?' Sali suggested.

'None of them works as hard as you, sweetheart. You look tired. You've been overdoing it in your kitchen lately.'

'I have not, and it's not my kitchen, it's Father Kelly's.' Sali had been the Evans' housekeeper for over a year and Lloyd's lover for eight months. It was a relationship that had been welcomed by his father and brothers, who already treated her as if she were one of the family, which she very soon would be as they had booked Pontypridd register office for their wedding. Lloyd insisted their marriage go ahead the Saturday before Christmas, despite his workload as one of the strike organizers. It was the earliest date possible due to circumstances they had kept secret from all but a very few people in Tonypandy.

'Without the food and money you persuade people to donate, Sali, all Father Kelly would have to serve is bread and water without the bread.' Mr Evans set his empty tobacco pouch on the table out of habit. He hadn't bought any tobacco since the onset of the strike. 'Is Harry asleep?'

'And before you say you don't know, we heard you creep up the stairs after Megan left,' Lloyd teased Sali.

Sali didn't rise to his bait. 'Harry's sleeping like an

angel. He didn't give you and Megan any trouble, did he, Victor?'

'Unfortunately he didn't wake once. If he had, it would have given me an excuse to relight the fire.' Victor filled a glass with water.

Unable to resist a second gibe, Joey said, 'You and Megan could have kept one another warm.'

Knowing how sensitive Victor was about Megan, Billy Evans broke in sharply, 'Joey! Enough! Has Megan heard from her father lately, Victor?'

'Not that she's told me. But then she's hardly mentioned him since he refused to allow us to get engaged at Christmas.' Victor sat at the table and moved a white pawn on the board Lloyd had set up.

'Megan won't be under age for ever, Victor.' Sali moved to her own chair and watched Lloyd move out a black pawn to meet Victor's.

'I've some papers to go through for the committee, so I'll call it a night. Aren't you on early picket tomorrow, Joey?' Billy asked.

'Yes.' Joey made a face.

'Then go to bed and get some sleep,' Billy ordered. 'If I leave you down here, you'll only plague the life out of Victor.'

'What's a brother for, if not to annoy?' Joey answered smartly.

'Joey!' Billy said sternly.

'I'm going.'

'You two coming down to Porth magistrates court with me tomorrow?' Billy asked. Everyone in the town, collier and tradesman, was eagerly awaiting the outcome of an inquest on a miner who had died from injuries he'd received during the worse night of the recent riots.

'I'll walk down there with you,' Lloyd answered.

'Victor?'

'I have one or two things to do first,' Victor murmured evasively, concentrating on the game.

'If those one or two things involve working in the

illegal drift mines the boys have opened up on the mountain, forget it,' Billy warned. 'A man your size is easily recognized, even by some of the idiots in the police. Try it and you'll end up in court facing a fine we won't be able to pay. Did you hear me?' Billy questioned when Victor didn't answer.

'I hear you, Dad.' Victor moved his knight and took Lloyd's pawn.

'Try to remember what I said, will you?' Billy shook his head as he closed the kitchen door behind him.

At half past eleven the following morning Megan tossed the stone she'd used to whiten the flagstone floor into a bucket of freezing water. The kitchen might be ice cold and gloomy, but it was clean. Not as clean as it would have been if she'd had hot water but it was too early to waste precious coals and paraffin by lighting the stove and lamp. She sat back on her heels and checked she hadn't missed any bits. Satisfied she'd done the job as well as she could, given what she had to work with, she climbed to her feet. Heaving the bucket into the sink, she tipped the dirty water down the drain.

The front door opened and footsteps echoed down the passage.

'Megan, you going to the shops?' Megan's neighbour, Betty Morgan saw the freshly scrubbed floor and stopped in her tracks. The slightest speck of dirt carried on to a wet floor made it twice as hard to clean the next time.

'Yes, Mrs Morgan, as soon as I've washed my hands and face,' Megan answered.

Betty Morgan was a grandmother six times over and, although she'd frequently asked Megan to call her by her Christian name, Megan had never plucked up courage to do so, despite the informality that was the rule rather than the exception between neighbours in the Rhondda.

'Then I'll wait for you.' Betty didn't need to explain her reluctance to walk into town alone. Most housewives

had enjoyed visiting the shops in Tonypandy, regarding their outings as a welcome break from the drudgery of housework, but that had been before over a thousand police officers had been imported from all over Britain to control the striking miners who had brought the collieries in the valley to a standstill. The picket lines the colliers had set up around the pits had become battlegrounds. And now that the strike had entered its third month and two regiments of soldiers had been drafted in to support the police, fights between colliers, their supporters and the police frequently spilled over into the town.

Megan rinsed the bucket, placed it below the sink and washed her hands, arms and face under the running tap with a sliver of green household soap. She dried herself on the kitchen towel, rolled down her sleeves, untied her calico apron, draped it over a chair and tiptoed over the wet floor into the passage. Betty was leaning against the open front door, chatting to Jane Edwards who lived next door but one to her and on the opposite side of the street to the Evans.

Megan lifted her black serge cloak and hat from the row of pegs and paused to stare at her reflection in the mirror. She was pale, her eyes unnaturally large. Weeks on a near starvation diet were beginning to take their toll on her just as they were on everyone else in her uncle's family. She pulled the brim of her hat low, fastened the button at the neck of her cloak, picked up her basket, and joined Betty.

'Cold enough for you today, Megan?' Jane asked.

'Freezing, Jane.' Megan had no compunction about calling Jane by her Christian name. A head-turningly attractive brunette, at seventeen Jane was two years younger than her. Gossips had labelled Jane as 'one for the boys' before she'd reached her fourteenth birthday, and she'd set every tongue in Tonypandy wagging when she had married Emlyn Edwards, a fifty-year-old collier, the day after her sixteenth birthday. The old wives in the town had watched her waistline ever since, and they

continued to watch and wait. Because the baby everyone had assumed Jane was carrying had never materialized.

'I was just asking Jane if she'd seen Emlyn lately,' Betty commented.

'You of all people should know strike pay doesn't allow for luxuries like train tickets down to Cardiff, Betty,' Jane scoffed. 'I write to Emlyn once a week and he writes back. But he's not expecting to be let out early.'

'It's scandalous to jail men for withdrawing their labour in an effort to get a living wage.' Betty conveniently forgot that Emlyn had been given a year's hard labour for assaulting a police officer who'd been trying to escort blacklegs into the Cambrian Colliery.

'You two going to the shops?' Jane dropped the rag she was half-heartedly using to wash her windows into her bucket.

'Only to Rodney's,' Megan said, referring to the largest provision store in Tonypandy. 'Can we get you anything?'

'Plenty, but seeing as I haven't a brass farthing to my name and won't have until the strike money is doled out on Friday, I can only take what they're giving away.'

'I can guarantee fresh air and insults from the police but not much else. See you, Jane.' Betty led the way and Megan followed, leaving Jane to her window-washing, although she was smearing not shifting the dirt with her torn piece of old petticoat and cold water.

It took ten minutes for Megan and Betty to walk the short distance to the end of the street. No family had enough coal to keep the fires lit during the day, so the housewives were out in force, scrubbing doorsteps and the pavements in front of their houses because it was warmer, and more companionable outside, than inside stone walls.

They heard shouts coming from the main street when they turned right down the hill. Murmuring a prayer for her uncle who was manning the picket line around the Glamorgan Colliery, Megan quickened her pace.

A crowd of women marched in parade formation down the centre of the road between the tramlines. A horse-drawn cart swerved to avoid them and a load of boots destined for Oliver's Shoes ended up in the gutter. The women were carrying a dummy dressed in a collier's helmet, red flannel shirt, trousers and hobnailed boots, and were shouting loudly, if not melodically:

The colliers will work for three bob a day,
If colliers grumble, Leonard will say,
Pick up your tools and clear away.

'Betty, Megan, join us and show Leonard Llewellyn and the rest of his colliery management toadies exactly what we women think of them,' Betty's sister Alice Hughes, who lived in Clydach, yelled from the front line of the marchers.

'We're busy shopping, Alice.' As they turned to leave, Betty glimpsed a constable heading for the women and deliberately stepped in front of him. He elbowed her in the small of her back and she cried out. Falling awkwardly, she caught her knees painfully on the kerb.

'Mrs Morgan, are you all right!' Megan crouched beside her. A police boot landed on her skirt, effectively pinning her to the ground.

The grinning constable stood over them. 'Obstructing a police officer in the course of his duty is a serious offence . . . ladies.' He spat out the last word.

'I saw that, officer.' Father Kelly pushed his way towards them. 'You hit that poor defenceless woman—'

'She was causing an obstruction,' the officer refuted sullenly.

'You are standing on this lady's skirt,' Father Kelly's companion pointed out coldly. It was the Anglican vicar, Reverend Williams of the mid-Rhondda Central Distress Committee.

'I wasn't aware that I was, sir.' A crowd began to form around them and the officer retreated to the pavement.

'Are you hurt, Mrs Morgan?' Reverend Williams helped Father Kelly and Megan raise Betty to her feet.

'I'll live.' Betty glared at the constable before dusting down her skirt.

'I was about to arrest those troublemakers, when this woman prevented me—'

'Troublemakers now, is it?' Father Kelly interrupted the constable. 'I see no troublemakers in this street. Do you, Reverend Williams?'

'None, Father Kelly.'

'What's the problem here, Shipton?' An officer in sergeant's uniform forced his way through the crowd.

Constable Shipton snapped to attention. 'This woman prevented me from making a lawful arrest, Sergeant Martin.'

'She did no such thing, sergeant,' Father Kelly contradicted. 'She was standing peacefully watching the parade, as we all were. Absolutely no trouble to a soul around her.'

'An illegal parade,' the sergeant stated tersely.

'Illegal is it?' Father Kelly crossed his arms across his chest and squared up to the man. There was something ridiculous about the short, fat priest confronting a police officer a full head taller than himself, but no one laughed. 'Tell me now, Sergeant Martin, when was the law passed that made it illegal for women to walk down the street of their home town in the middle of the day?'

'There are special circumstances—'

'I'll say there are.' Father Kelly refused to allow the sergeant to get a word in edgeways. 'Circumstances your men believe give them the right to provoke and torment the inhabitants of this town, just as you English do the poor souls in Ireland. You won't be happy until you have another riot on your hands. Then you can go to the London papers and say, "Look at those savages in Tonypandy" all over again. And that will give your Home Secretary, Mr Churchill, an excuse to send even more regiments of soldiers here.'

'The last thing we want is another riot, Father.'

Angry murmurs rippled through the crowd around them.

'Really? You could have fooled me with the way your men have treated these ladies.'

'Constable Shipton said they were obstructing him. And obstructing a police officer with the view to prevent him carrying out his duty is a criminal offence.'

'Given the high-handed way some of your men behave, Sergeant, you have to forgive us poor natives a bit of obstructing now and then. You see, obstructing is the only way we have left to show our feelings,' Father Kelly said caustically.

Sergeant Martin beckoned to a group of constables across the road. A dozen marched in formation to join him.

'Constable Shipton, officers, take the name of anyone who hasn't moved on from this unlawful assembly in the next sixty seconds.' Turning his back, he walked away.

Too many strikers had been fined for offences ranging from disorderly conduct to affray and assault for anyone to ignore the threat. Fines meant prison, since no striker had the means to pay them.

'Thank you, Father Kelly, Reverend Williams,' Betty said gratefully. She hooked her arm into Megan's.

'Glad we could help, ladies.' Reverend Williams tipped his hat.

'Go with God and go safely, ladies.' Father Kelly gave them a warm smile before continuing on his way.

Megan and Betty walked along the pavement until a group of uniformed Hussars blocked their path. When it was obvious that they weren't going to move, the women stepped into the gutter. Holding her skirt up to avoid the piles of horse manure and dog mess left by the strays turned out by the families of strikers who could no longer afford to feed them, Megan picked her way down the street, all the while sensing the officers watching them. When she saw a gap in the traffic, she crossed the road

but there were even more police on the opposite pavement.

A queue snaked out of the door of Rodney's Provisions. Megan and Betty joined it. As the procession of women with their collier's dummy moved on out of earshot, an unnatural silence fell, thick and heavy, like a suffocating blanket over the town. When it was their turn finally to step inside the store, Megan started nervously. A sergeant and a constable flanked the door, their backs to the front wall, their hands clasped around the truncheons hanging from their belts as if they were expecting the customers to turn violent. Betty gripped Megan's hand briefly to give her courage, turned her back to them and looked to the counter.

Rodney's, along with every other shop in Tonypandy barring two, had been targeted by the incensed crowd on the night of the worst riot. The mob had only by-passed the chemist's owned by Willie Llewellyn, an ex-Welsh rugby international and local hero, and a pawnbroker who'd had the courage – or insanity – to fire a pistol in the air when they reached his door.

In comparison with some of the neighbouring businesses, the shop had suffered lightly. The mahogany counter that ran the full length of the back wall had been scarred by hobnailed boots, the glass cake case reduced to a metal frame, the marble cheese and butter slabs cracked, but most of the other shop fittings remained intact. And despite losing three-quarters of her goods to the looters and having to pay a carpenter to board her windows and doors until replacements could be made, Connie Rodney didn't bear a grudge against her customers. She couldn't afford to. Even if she put her business on the market, no one would buy it, leastways, not until the strike was settled and the miners started making wages again. So, like the other tradesmen in Dunraven and De Winter Streets, she'd ordered as much replacement stock as her suppliers would credit her with, which

judging by her shelves, wasn't much, and opened for business.

'Half your usual weekly staples, same as last week?' Connie asked Megan when it was her turn to be served. Connie had stopped selling luxuries like jam, cheese, butter, tinned goods, sugar and dried fruit during the first week of the strike. Now that it was heading into the third month, some housewives were even dropping margarine, flour and potatoes from their shopping lists. Fires were needed to boil potatoes and bake bread, and without the rations of coal that were part of a miner's wage, there was no fuel.

'No, thank you, Mrs Rodney.' Megan lifted her empty basket on to the counter. 'My uncle has asked me to buy what we need on a daily basis from now on.'

'Well, we're open six days a week.' Connie gave her a rare smile.

With her long red-gold hair tied back from her scrubbed freckled face and her bright green eyes, nineteen-year-old Megan Williams was an exceptionally pretty girl and Victor Evans also happened to be Connie's favourite cousin.

Megan pulled a scrap of paper from her pocket and glanced at it. 'I'll have your smallest scrag end of lamb, ten pounds of potatoes, a quarter of tea and three loaves of bread, please.'

'Would that be strikers' loaves?' Annie O'Leary, Connie's tall, spare, Irish assistant asked drily. The atmosphere instantly lightened as the women waiting their turn to be served burst into laughter despite the police presence. When the miners had withdrawn their labour, a local baker had produced a half-size 'strikers' loaf aimed at his newly impoverished customers, only to have his cart overturned and the contents vanish into the crowd, which dissipated as quickly as his bread. Even more mysteriously, his deliveryman failed to recognize a single person in the mob.

'The boy could deliver the goods for you, Megan. We'll

be sending the cart out in an hour.' Connie handed Megan's basket to one of her assistants and sent him to weigh the potatoes from the sacks ranged against the wall below the counter.

'I'll take them with me. My uncle and his brothers will want their tea when they get home.' Megan took her purse from her pocket and lowered her voice. 'My uncle also asked me to settle up with you, Mrs Rodney. He doesn't want to put our goods on the slate any more while he only draws strike pay from the union.'

Connie was surprised but relieved. The colliers who were members of the union, unfortunately only slightly more than half of her customers, drew strike pay of ten shillings a week plus a shilling for each child. Larger families who hadn't found it easy to live on thirty-five shillings a week before the colliery companies had cut wages, were finding life during the strike desperate. And workers who weren't members of a union had been left destitute. No striker's family could afford to pay rent. At an average of ten shillings a week it would have left nothing for food. As it was, more and more of her customers were coming in every day asking for their credit to be extended until the strike was called off because they had come to the end of their savings.

An ardent Catholic, Connie had gone to mass and confession three times a week, but since the strike she had taken to walking the short distance to the Catholic Church every morning to pray for an end to the dispute before her own savings and credit with her suppliers ran out.

She pulled a massive leather-bound ledger towards her, checked the account and added Megan's purchases. 'That will be seven shillings and sixpence three farthings.' Anxious not to offend Betty who was being served by Annie, or any of her other customers who weren't in a position to settle their bill, Connie whispered. 'Tell your uncle that I appreciate his paying cash for as long as he can.'

'I'll do that, Mrs Rodney. And thank you.' Megan opened her purse, extracted three half crowns, a halfpenny and a farthing and handed them over. Taking her basket from the boy, she waited for Betty to finish placing her order, before making her way past the queue to the door. The police sergeant stepped in front of her. Megan glanced up, only to immediately look down again when he gazed coolly back at her. He was broad-shouldered, over six feet tall and there was a glint in his pale blue eyes that unnerved her. She was accustomed to living in a houseful of men but not one of them had ever made her feel as uneasy as this sergeant did. Struggling to lift her basket, she clutched her cloak around her, more to conceal than warm herself.

'I've seen you before, haven't I?' The officer's voice sounded rough, harsh in comparison to the soft Welsh lilt.

'I don't think so, sir,' Megan whispered timidly.

'You sure?' he persisted.

'Yes, sir.'

'You weren't out with the men on the picket lines around the Glamorgan Colliery yesterday afternoon?'

'No, sir.'

'Miss Williams was with me all yesterday afternoon, officer,' Betty lied coolly. 'We were at the women's knitting circle.'

'And what was it that you were knitting, Mrs Morgan?' the sergeant enquired.

'Blankets for poor unfortunates, Sergeant Lamb.'

'Why is it that I can never believe a word you say, Mrs Morgan?' He turned his attention from Megan to Betty, just as the older woman had intended. Her husband, Ned Morgan, was a union official and Betty knew the authorities had marked her, along with all the members of the strike leaders' families, as a potential troublemaker.

The queue moved forward; Betty gave Megan a slight push. They sidestepped past the police and out of the

door. A dozen officers had circled a crowd of collier boys on the pavement, three of Megan's cousins among them. A constable Megan recognized as Gwyn Jenkins, a local man, and before the strike a friend of her uncle's, was talking to them.

'Come on now, boys, no one wants any trouble. I'm asking nicely. Leave here and go up the mountain. You never know, if you take your dogs you may even find a rabbit or two to take home to your mothers for the pot,' Gwyn coaxed persuasively.

'Haven't you heard?' one of the wags answered back. 'The bunnies are on strike too. They won't come out of their burrows.'

'Then send the dogs down after them to draw blood.' Gwyn looked from the boy to the officers beside him. 'Please, do as you've been asked, son, and you have my word no one will get hurt.'

The boys gazed impassively back. But just as Megan expected her eldest cousin to do something stupid, the boys turned and headed up the nearest hill.

Betty took Megan's arm. Daring to breathe again, they walked on. It was a freezing, damp, grey November day, but that hadn't deterred a crowd of young men from playing football with a tin can on the only flattened area of mountainside high above the rows of terraced houses. Their whoops and shouts carried down towards them on the wind.

'I'm glad someone can forget the strike, if only for a few hours,' Betty said philosophically, as they crossed the road to avoid yet another group of police officers.

'I wish I could.'

'It must be hard on you, with your uncle not being able to pay your wages,' Betty commiserated.

'If it was up to me I'd be happy to carry on doing the housework and taking care of the family for my keep.'

'Your what?' Betty laughed.

'What passes for keep these days,' Megan amended.

'But ever since I started working for him I've sent ten shillings a week home to my father.'

'Your uncle pays you fifteen shillings a week, right?'

'He did until the strike started. It's the going rate for a housekeeper.'

'It was,' Betty nodded sagely, 'but it seems to me that your father's been getting a lot more than the going rate from a daughter. I used to count myself lucky to get ten shillings a month from my Annie when she was in service before she married.'

'Things aren't easy at home. It's hard trying to make ends meet on a hill farm and aside from Mam and Dad I've two younger sisters and brothers. I don't like to think of them suffering on my account. I know I should look for a paying job, but—'

'They're harder to find than gold in the valleys these days, especially for women,' Betty observed.

'And I'd hate to leave my uncle. Who'd look after his house and family if I didn't?'

'Now there's a job.' Betty pointed to a sign in the window of a large, square four-storey house on the corner of the street. They stopped and read the card propped inside the window:

GIRL WANTED TO HELP WITH DOMESTIC WORK. MUST BE EXPERIENCED COOK, ABLE TO WASH, IRON AND DO GENERAL CLEANING WITHOUT SUPERVISION. ABOVE AVERAGE WAGES OFFERED TO AN EFFICIENT PERSON. APPLY WITHIN.

'I've heard that Joyce Palmer is prepared to pay as much as a pound a week to the right girl.'

'Really?' Megan's eyes rounded in wonder.

'Not that I've spoken to Joyce myself,' Betty added. 'Well, not since the colliery company gave notice to all the miners in the lodging houses they owned and made them over to policemen. No decent woman would have stayed on to wait on them.'

'Mrs Palmer had nowhere else to go.' Megan repeated an observation Victor had made.

'She could have found somewhere if she'd tried,' Betty dismissed. 'Mrs Payne in the Post Office told me that Joyce has taken one girl out of the workhouse to help her, but she's found her a bit slow, and she'd rather not take on another. I can't see any man in the town who sympathizes with the colliers' grievances, let alone the colliers themselves, allowing any member of their family to wait on police or soldiers.' Two officers headed towards them. 'Come on, time we were on our way.'

Megan gripped her basket and trudged on up the hill after Betty. Turning left, they greeted their neighbours again. Megan said goodbye to Betty and turned the key that was kept in the lock of her uncle's house and opened the door. Goose pimples rose on her skin when she stopped in the hall to take off her cloak and hat, but she was afraid of staining her cloak if she tried to do housework wearing it.

She carried her basket through to the kitchen, tied on her apron and filled the tin bowl in the sink ready to wash and peel the potatoes. The strike had made life cold, hungry and uncomfortable, but it had done little to change her routine. Her uncle and his brothers still rose at half past four in the morning, although they no longer had to be at the colliery gates before six in time to go down in the cage. But they didn't linger in the house. In an effort to eke out the last coal ration they had received from the pit, she lit the kitchen stove for an hour in the morning so she could heat water for washing and tea and raked it out until three in the afternoon when it was time to cook the evening meal. She found it hard to do housework in the icy temperature but she didn't doubt that her uncle and his brothers found it just as cold on the picket line.

She poured the packet of tea she had bought into the empty caddy and fetched a swede, half a dozen turnips and a bunch of carrots that her uncle had brought down

from his allotment the day before and put in the pantry. She wouldn't have had to buy potatoes if theirs hadn't been struck by blight. She unwrapped the lamb from the newspaper. It was a very small portion of meat for so many people but the first her uncle had allowed her to buy in two months. At least they would eat tonight. There were plenty in the town who wouldn't.

She'd put the lamb in a pan of cold water to soak and picked up a knife to start peeling the potatoes when she heard someone walk up the stone steps that led from the basement to the kitchen. There was a tap on the door, then it opened.

Victor's massive frame filled the doorway. He smiled and his teeth gleamed startlingly white against his blackened face and filthy clothes. He held up a bucketful of coal. 'You can light the stove early. There's plenty more where this came from, I've just emptied a couple of sacks into your coalhouse.'

'You've been working in the drifts the strikers have opened up on the mountain!'

His soft grey eyes sparkled in vivid contrast to his dirty face. His grin widened as he held his finger to his lips.

'The police will arrest you—'

'They have to catch me first, and even if they do, I'll only get a fine. It's worth risking that to warm a few houses. Mrs Richards in the colliery cottages off the square didn't have scrap of coal and she has four under three years old.'

'If you are fined, no one will be able to pay it and then you'll be put in prison.'

'I wasn't caught, Megs.' He called her by the nickname he had invented for her and no one else used.

'This time,' Megan murmured fearfully.

'Love you.'

'You always say that whenever I'm cross with you.'

'Because it's the only thing that calms you down, Megs. Seeing as how I'm covered in coal dust I may as

well light the stove for you. And if you lay newspaper on the floor I won't dirty your nice clean flagstones.'

Megan opened the cupboard in the alcove next to the stove where she kept old newspapers and sticks for the fire. She picked up a copy of the *Rhondda Leader* from the top of the pile and spread its pages in layers from the basement door to the hearth.

'You didn't go down to Porth to wait for the verdict on the inquest with your father?'

'I had more important things to do.' Victor raked out the remains of the small fire she had doused that morning, laid balls of newspaper over the iron fire basket, balanced sticks on them and arranged the half-burnt coals together with lumps of fresh coal on top.

'Like supply half of Tonypandy with coal?' she suggested.

'I only wish I could.' He brushed his light brown hair from his eyes, griming it even more. 'Your family and mine are lucky, Megs. Strike pay may not be enough to live on but at least we're getting some money. The men with the most children and the lowest wages couldn't afford to pay union dues, and now the pits are closed they can't work either. I can't sit back and watch them freeze and starve to death.'

'You and the others who are risking prosecution won't get enough coal out of the drifts to keep every kitchen stove burning in Pandy, no more than you can feed everyone in the town from what you grow in your garden.'

'No, but I can do my bit.' He struck a match, lit a newspaper spill the children had made and blew on it before touching the balls of paper at the bottom of the fire. They caught immediately, sending spirals of grey smoke curling up the chimney. 'There, you can start cooking that cawl you're making.'

She folded the rest of the newspapers she was holding back into the cupboard and closed the door. 'If you weren't so dirty I would hug you.'

'If there's no one else in the house you could give me a kiss.' His smile broadened in anticipation.

She stooped over him and when their lips met he couldn't resist cupping her face in his hands. As always, she warmed to his touch, instinctively leaning against him. The front door banged and they sprang apart.

Footsteps echoed in the hall, then the kitchen door opened and a short, wiry, middle-aged man glowered at them through piercing blue eyes. His cap was so grimy it was impossible to determine what colour it had originally been, his grubby brown moleskin trousers were tied with twine in place of a belt at his waist and again just below his knees, his red flannel shirt was collarless and his tweed jacket more hole than cloth.

Megan stared at him. He was smaller, more wrinkled and older than she remembered. 'Dad?' she murmured tentatively.'

'So you do remember me, girl,' he lisped through yellow, broken teeth.

She felt that she should have hugged him, but the moment was over. 'What are you doing here?'

Ianto Williams removed his cap to reveal a shock of grey curls. 'I would have thought that was obvious.'

'How did you get here?' She was too taken aback to attempt to make sense of his answer.

'I left the farm at two this morning and rode into Swansea Market on Jones' cheese and cream cart. Then I got a ride on the fresh fish and cockle donkey cart that travels up here from Penclawdd. It'll be leaving before dawn in the morning.' He settled a hostile glare on Victor. 'Your uncle or his brothers in?'

'He and the other men have gone down to Porth,' Megan stammered.

'The children?'

'The younger two are in school, the older boys out playing.' Colour rose in her cheeks as her father continued to stare at Victor. 'This is Mr Victor Evans, Dad. He

lives next door. He brought us some coal and laid the fire for me.'

'I remember the name. You've laid just the one fire?' He eyed Victor's blackened face and filthy clothes.

'I've been working a drift on the mountain, Mr Williams,' Victor explained.

'Isn't that illegal?'

'That depends on your point of view,' Victor replied easily. 'It is good to meet you after all this time, Mr Williams. Megan talks a lot about her family.'

'To you?' Ianto Williams enquired sternly.

'Sometimes.' Victor refused to be intimidated. 'Our families are close and Megan and I are friends.'

'Friendly enough to persuade her to write to me and ask my permission to get engaged to you. And friendly enough for you to be left alone with her in the house after I wrote to her at Christmas expressly forbidding her to see you or talk to you.'

'Victor lives next door, Dad . . .'

'So you said, girl.'

Ignoring Mr Williams' outburst in the rapidly diminishing hope of winning him round, Victor said, 'I would offer to shake your hand but, as you can see, I'm covered in coal dust.'

'I wouldn't shake the hand of a Papist if it was disinfected.'

'I have to cook the dinner, Victor.'

Victor saw the pleading look in Megan's eyes and realized he was making a bad situation worse. Careful to step on the newspaper he retraced his steps to the basement door. 'I've a few more bags of coal to deliver, so I'll be off.'

'Thank you for the coal, Victor,' Megan called after him when he closed the door behind him.

'So that's the Catholic you've been making a fool of yourself with.' Ianto moved in front of the fire to warm himself.

'I haven't been making a fool of myself with anyone, Dad.' Megan gathered the dust-stained sheets of newspaper from the floor.

'No?' Ianto said. 'I suggest you look at yourself in the mirror, girl, before you say another word.'

Megan dropped the coal-smudged papers on top of the coal bucket, went to the sink and picked up the men's shaving mirror. Black imprints of Victor's hands covered both her cheeks and there were coal smuts on her lips. Dampening the corner of a tea towel under the tap, she scrubbed at her face.

'Have you anything to say for yourself?'

'As you said, I did write to ask you if I could get engaged to Victor at Christmas. And it's not as if it's sudden. We've known one another for over five years.'

'And I wrote back telling you that I'd prefer to see you dead than married to a Catholic. And I forbid you to see or talk to him again.'

'Victor's a good man—'

'I'll have no more said about him.' Ianto scraped a wooden chair over the flagstones and plonked it in front of the fire. 'You can make me a cup of tea and give me some bread and cheese to keep me going until tea's on the table.'

'I can make you tea and give you bread, Dad. But there's no cheese. With so little money coming into the house we've had to cut back.' Megan filled the blackened tin kettle, opened up a hob and put it on to boil. 'You still haven't said what you're doing here.'

'As I said when I came in, it's obvious. Your uncle's emigrating and I've come to take you home, not that we can afford to keep you there. You'll have to find another job – and quick.'

'Emigrating . . .' Her voice died to a whisper.

'To Canada. With no job or home to go to, your uncle won't risk taking his two youngest and he's asked your

mother and me to take them in. We've room now that your brothers and sisters have left home. Tea, girl,' he reminded, as she stood, pale and trembling, beside his chair.