

RANDOM HOUSE *e*BOOKS



The Power of Dreams

Rosie Harris

Contents

About the Book

About the Author

Also by Rosie Harris

Title Page

Dedication

Acknowledgements

Chapter One

Chapter Two

Chapter Three

Chapter Four

Chapter Five

Chapter Six

Chapter Seven

Chapter Eight

Chapter Nine

Chapter Ten

Chapter Eleven

Chapter Twelve

Chapter Thirteen

Chapter Fourteen

Chapter Fifteen

Chapter Sixteen

Chapter Seventeen

Chapter Eighteen

Chapter Nineteen

Chapter Twenty

Chapter Twenty-One
Chapter Twenty-Two
Chapter Twenty-Three
Chapter Twenty-Four
Chapter Twenty-Five
Chapter Twenty-Six
Chapter Twenty-Seven
Chapter Twenty-Eight
Chapter Twenty-Nine
Chapter Thirty
Chapter Thirty-One
Chapter Thirty-Two
Chapter Thirty-Three
Chapter Thirty-Four
Chapter Thirty-Five
Chapter Thirty-Six
Chapter Thirty-Seven
Chapter Thirty-Eight

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About the Book

When all hope is gone, are dreams enough ...?

After losing both her parents, sixteen-year-old Merrion Roberts is left to bring up her baby sister. Unable to cope alone, she teams up with Rhonda Rees, a trained milliner, who also has a young baby. They share rooms in notorious Tiger Bay in Cardiff, struggling to make ends meet. In time, though, they are able to open up a little shop and it seems as if life is looking up for both young women.

But fate soon intervenes and they are reduced to living in even greater squalor, barely able to eke out enough money to support themselves let alone their two children. Meanwhile, Merrion's brother and her childhood sweetheart have both gone to sea and she has almost given up hope of ever seeing them alive again ...

About the Author

Rosie Harris was born in Cardiff and grew up there and in the West Country. After her marriage she resided for some years on Merseyside before moving to Buckinghamshire where she still lives. She has three grown-up children, six grandchildren and three great-grandchildren, and writes full time. *The Power of Dreams* is her twelfth novel for Arrow.

Also by Rosie Harris

Liverpool Sagas

Turn of the Tide
Patsy of Paradise Place
Looking for Love
Winnie of the Waterfront
The Cobbler's Kids
Megan of Merseyside
A Mother's Love
Waiting for Love
A Dream of Love
Love Changes Everything
Whispers of Love
The Price of Love

Welsh Sagas

Troubled Waters
One Step Forward
Pins and Needles
At Sixes and Sevens
Sunshine and Showers
Sing for Your Supper
Love Against all Odds
A Love Like Ours
The Quality of Love
Ambitious Love
A Brighter Dawn

The Power of Dreams

Rosie Harris



arrow books

For Susie and Simon; Michele and Brad with love

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Chapter One

Cwmglo, September 1919

AS AN EXPLOSION shook the narrow, terraced house in Back Street, Cwmglo, sixteen-year-old Merrion Roberts clapped a hand over her mouth to muffle her scream. The baby in the home-made wooden cradle set beside the fire wakened and let out a thin, fretful cry, like the mewling of a frightened kitten.

Merrion picked up her baby sister, not yet a day old, and cradled the infant tenderly in her arms, crooning softly as she tried to rock her back to sleep.

The careworn woman dozing in the wooden armchair facing the fire, her feet resting on the polished steel fender, jerked awake. As her scant eyebrows knotted into a frown, her small brown eyes almost disappeared into her sagging, pudgy face.

'I thought I heard a crash,' she yawned, scratching between the rolls of fat around her waist. 'What happened? Have you dropped something, Merri?'

'Some plates fell off the dresser, Mam. They're all smashed to smithereens. I didn't touch them, though. The whole house shook . . .'

Their dark eyes met, an unspoken fear uniting them like a magnet.

'Frightened this poor little dab almost out of her life,' Merrion said softly, looking down at the squalling bundle in her arms, and rocking her to and fro even more energetically.

'You'd better give her here then, Merri, there's only one thing that'll quieten her down now,' Lora Roberts sighed.

‘Shall I nip out and see if anyone knows what’s happened?’ Merrion asked as, very gently, she transferred the baby into her mother’s arms. ‘It must have been something at the pit – though it seemed almost like an earthquake!’

Lora Roberts nodded uneasily. Her squat, shapeless body sagged dejectedly as she unbuttoned the front of her dress, releasing one of her engorged breasts, and settled the baby to suckle on the distended nipple.

‘Dada says the seam where they’re working now runs right underneath this house . . .’ Merrion’s voice trailed off. Her expressive dark eyes widened in horror as her imagination painted a scene she daren’t express in words.

‘Oh, our Mam!’ she gulped, pushing her dark hair behind her ears, and looking uncertain of what to do next. Her shabby grey serge dress, hiding her budding figure, added to her forlorn, dejected air. The one redeeming feature was the intelligence that shone from the big dark eyes that dominated her sombre oval face, framed by straight, brown hair.

‘Well, don’t stand there gawping! Go and see what’s happening!’ shrilled her mother.

The baby, frightened by the strident sound, and sensing the latent fear, released its hold on the breast and added its own pitiful little wail. Milk spurted in a bluish, white stream, spraying the front of the woman’s dress and leaving a snail trail of damp patches.

‘Duw! Now look what you’ve done,’ she grumbled, with a look of reproach at Merrion.

Irritably, she pushed the baby’s face back on to her breast, holding it firmly in place until the child was sucking once more. Rocking backwards and forwards, she stared fixedly into the fire, refusing to admit, even to herself, that the explosion must have come from the pit where her husband worked.

Through the open door she could hear raised voices, confused, anxious voices, as women gathered in the street outside, seeking news, and exchanging opinions about what had just happened.

All of the families living in Back Street, Cwmglo had a husband, or a child, or even both working at the colliery.

‘It was the pit, our Mam!’ Merrion hesitated in the doorway, her face ashen, her brown eyes wary. ‘I’ll go and see if I can find out what’s happened, shall I? D’you want to come as well?’

‘Don’t talk so daft, girl! I’m in no fit state to go traipsing the streets, now am I?’ her mother snapped petulantly. ‘One day out of childbed and you expect me to drag myself to the pit! Show some sense for once, can’t you, Merri. Get a move on then, girl, if you’re going. Find out what’s happened and come straight back and let me know.’

‘Are you sure that you’ll be all right left here on your own? Shall I call our Madoc to come in? He’s only playing outside in the road.’

The look of scorn on her mother’s face cut short Merrion’s words. She hesitated a moment longer, wondering if she ought to leave her mother alone. She’d not be gone long, she told herself. There’d be no need for her mam to even move out of her chair. She’d be back again in no time, probably before Mam had finished feeding the baby.

Snatching up the black shawl lying on the table, Merrion wrapped it round her thin shoulders and, without another word, left the house.

September sun dappled the rows of grimy back-to-back houses as she mingled with the women clustered in the roadway. Not only their house, but most of Back Street was right over the seam where her father’s team worked, she reflected. The houses looked like a row of dominoes, the windows and doors shining spots against the soot-grimed fronts. If one fell down the rest would collapse like a pack of cards.

‘Your dada’s not at work, is he, cariad?’

‘Indeed he is, Mrs Probert,’ Merrion assured the middle-aged woman who was standing on her step a few doors away.

‘Daro! I heard he’d stayed at home to look after your mam.’

‘Only for one shift.’

‘Duw!’ Mrs Probert’s face screwed up with sympathy. ‘Your mam’s sent you to get some news, has she, then?’

‘Yes, she has. I’m going up to the pit now. Is anyone else going to come along?’

Merrion looked hopefully at the group of women. They were all older than her. Some of them carried babies, enveloped close to their bodies by a shawl or piece of blanket, while others had toddlers clutching at their skirts.

‘Hang on a minute, Merri Roberts, and I’ll come along with you,’ one of the younger women offered. ‘Let me find someone to keep an eye on my little Mostyn.’

Merrion sat on one of the narrow stone window ledges to wait. Ellyn Jones snatched up a very small child from where it was playing in a puddle in the roadway, and disappeared into one of the houses.

She liked Ellyn. She envied her, too. Ellyn was only nineteen, three years older than she was yet Ellyn had been married for over two years. Merrion sighed. It wasn’t surprising really. Ellyn was so pretty: plump, with a round, merry face and curly brown hair. It was the sort of face and figure Merrion imagined her own mother must have had when she was their age. It wasn’t fair, really, she thought, as she kicked at the wall with the heel of her boot. Both Emlyn, who was fourteen, and Madoc, who was only five, took after their mam, so why did she have to be tall and skinny like their dada?

‘Sounded pretty bad, didn’t it?’ Ellyn said worriedly when she rejoined Merrion. ‘My Benji’s down there. Another week and I’d have been back at work as well.’

'I thought you said that you were going to stay at home and look after Mostyn until it was time for him to go to school,' Merrion said in surprise.

'I was, but now Mostyn is almost two I can get him looked after easy enough and we need the money, see. We can't go on living with my mam much longer.'

'Why's that, then?'

'Packed in we are, like hens on a roost. Benji, me and little Mostyn have only got a curtained-off half of our Jinny's bedroom.'

'Number ten is coming empty.'

'Really! Old Granfer Thomas's not dead, is he?'

'No, but he's moving out. He's going to live with his son over at Govilion, so I've heard.'

'There's nice it would be!' she sighed. 'I only wish we could afford the rent of his place!'

'You could always let out a couple of rooms. Don't forget Betsy James is getting married next month to Harri Pickering and so they'll be wanting somewhere to live.'

'Even then I don't think we could afford it. Anyway, we'll see. Bad luck to make plans. Fate always steps in and ruins them. Like this explosion that's happened today,' she added gloomily.

'There mightn't be anyone hurt,' Merrion said hopefully.

'Daro! There's daft you talk, girl. Have you ever known of an explosion when someone wasn't killed or maimed?'

Merrion didn't answer. Guilt drove every other thought from her mind. If her dada had been hurt in the explosion then it was all her fault. If he hadn't had to change shifts last night because Flossie Price had sent for him when Mam had started with the baby, he wouldn't be down there now.

She should have been there to help look after her mam when she went into labour. She'd known Mam was near her time because she'd been having twinges, and bad backache, for several days. She ought to have been there. Instead, she'd been with Roddi Jenkins and they'd been so

engrossed in each other's company that they'd forgotten all about the time. They'd stayed kissing and cuddling until it was dark and the stars were out and the moon riding high. Then it had been guilt about her mam that had made her insist it was time for her to go home, even though Roddi wanted her to stay out a bit longer.

She was in love with Roddi. He was so good-looking, tall and broad, with dark red wavy hair, hazel eyes. He had a voice like honey that made her heart beat faster every time he spoke to her. He had a very determined square-jawed face and a strong character, too. He'd refused to go down the pit like his brothers. Instead he'd taken a job as a groom at Pennowen.

When they were on their own he talked to her about his longings and dreams for the future. Although Roddi loved animals, looking after them was not what he wanted to do for the rest of his life. One day, he avowed, a faraway look on his face, he intended to go to sea.

His hazel eyes mesmerised her, and whenever he confided in her she felt all shaky inside. When he took her in his arms and kissed her she could hear her own heart thudding. She tried not to dwell on what they did after that because she knew it was wrong. If her mam or dad ever found out they'd stop her from seeing Roddi again and that would break her heart.

Being married to Roddi had featured high in her dreams ever since she was ten years old and he had told her he was going to marry her when they were old enough. His talk about going to sea worried her greatly, though. She couldn't bear the thought of being parted from him for months at a time.

By the time she'd reached home Flossie Price was coming out of their house and she began to feel guilty. Flossie was enveloped in the striped apron that covered her from chin to ankle which she always wore when she attended a birthing,

‘Where’ve you been, girl? You must have known your mam was near her time,’ Flossie had bawled at her.

‘She isn’t all on her own, is she?’ Merrion had asked uneasily. ‘Is my dada at work?’

‘No! I sent your Uncle Huw to fetch your dada home. Your Madoc’s a couple of doors up at Polly James’s house. Polly said he can bed down with her young Darri tonight.’

‘What’s my mam got this time, then, Mrs Price?’

‘It’s a little girl, Merrion, and your mam’s had a long hard time, so get along inside and see what you can do to help. Why you weren’t here when she had it is beyond me. Disgraceful, I call it. Out with that Roddi Jenkins, I suppose, if I know anything at all about it.’

Merrion had tried to shut her ears to Flossie Price’s tirade, but the words had stung. What was more, they’d gone on ringing in her head even after she fell asleep.

She’d had troubled dreams all night – or rather, nightmares. She’d been trying to drag a loaded coal truck up an incline, only it wouldn’t budge. Then suddenly the truck had taken on a life of its own and come thundering after her. She’d had to run, and run, because she knew that if she stopped the clanking metal wheels would go right over her.

She’d been in a cold sweat when she’d wakened, afraid that the horrible dream was some sort of warning; frightened out of her wits in case it meant Fate intended to punish her, and now there’d been an explosion in the pit where her dada was working.

‘Sometimes I think those who are killed outright when there’s a pit accident are the ones who are best off,’ she burst out as they walked towards the pit, ‘especially when it’s a man with a family to support.’

‘What on earth are you talking about, Merrion? I don’t understand, whatever do you mean?’ Ellyn gasped in a shocked voice.

‘Well, if he’s badly injured, then he might be laid up for months and not be able to work. Fancy having to pawn your belongings to pay the rent or having to rely on friends and neighbours for bread and handouts to feed you and your family,’ she babbled.

‘May God forgive you, Merrion Roberts! What terrible things you’re coming out with and no mistake,’ exclaimed Ellyn, the colour draining from her round cheeks.

‘Well, it’s the truth and all your protests won’t make a scrap of difference,’ Merrion declared, her chin up defiantly.

She knew she’d shocked Ellyn, she’d even frightened herself with her wild statement, but she wasn’t going to admit it.

‘If your da’s one of those who’s been injured then you’ll just have to accept it, and learn to live with it, cariad,’ Ellyn Jones said gently, her plump hand resting on Merrion’s thin arm. ‘And I’ll have to do the same, see, if my Benji’s been hurt.’

Merrion’s mouth trembled. She shook off Ellyn’s comforting hand and stared straight ahead, clenching her teeth together and blinking hard to stop herself crying.

Silently, she promised herself that if her dada was all right then she’d change her ways. No more gallivanting off to be with Roddi Jenkins! She’d spend every spare minute she had helping out at home to try and make things a bit easier for her mam. She’d even make sure that five-year-old Madoc was not only on time but clean and tidy when he went off to school each morning, and that he went to Sunday school each week.

They walked on towards the pithead in awkward silence. She wondered if Ellyn was still shocked by her outburst. She glanced at her sideways and saw that Ellyn was looking as prim, and starchy, as someone twice her age.

The houses seemed to march with them like one-legged soldiers. She counted the scrubbed front steps that gleamed like sentinels. There were one hundred of them in all. Her

breath was coming more quickly by the time they reached the top and Ellyn Jones was puffing like a pit pony.

As they neared the pit entrance a number of other anxious women joined them from the houses they passed. In the fading light they looked ghostly with their white pinnies over their dark dresses, and their woollen shawls around their shoulders.

Merrion answered their many questions about her mother and the new baby automatically, but the closer they came to the pit gates the more churned up her insides felt. If her dada had been injured then it was all her fault. He should have been the one to stay home with Mam and the new baby, and he would have done if she hadn't begged to be allowed to do so. It had been her way of trying to make up to her mam for not being there the night before and now look what had happened.

As they trudged up the deeply rutted track towards the long low building that served as an office, Merrion's heart sank even more. Lowering clouds had massed over the top of the mountain obscuring the patchy September sun, and turning the sky as grey as her mood.

Chapter Two

MEN OF ALL ages were gathered in the yard at the pithead. Shoulders hunched, their hands thrust deep into their trouser pockets, they shuffled their feet impatiently. Scarred, coal-streaked faces were set in grim lines and their dark, Celtic eyes had a worried, haunted look as they waited in silence for the inevitable words of doom.

‘What happened, then? Does anyone know? We heard the explosion in Back Street,’ Ellyn Jones commented.

‘And felt it!’ Merrion chipped in.

‘There’s been a cave-in. We’re still waiting for news,’ one of the men told them.

‘Bad like, is it?’ asked Ellyn anxiously, pulling her shawl tighter around her shoulders.

The man nodded, then he stared hard at Merrion, pushing back his greasy cap and scratching his head. ‘You’re Bryn Roberts’s girl, aren’t you?’ He frowned. ‘Still growing, I see. So tall now that for a moment I didn’t recognise you! So how’s your mam, then?’

‘Fair to middling, Mr Pope. She had another babba, last night.’

‘So your Uncle Huw told me. I understood he came and told your dad that he was needed at home?’

‘It was only for the one night – while Mam was having it. He came back to work this morning.’

‘And you stayed home instead?’ Gareth Pope asked.

‘Yes, that’s right.’ Her voice dropped to a strained croak. ‘My dada . . . have you seen him . . . or is he . . .?’

‘No need to start worrying,’ Dai Williams, one of the older men, said quickly, patting Merrion’s shoulder.

'A lot of them have stayed down to help with the rescue work, see,' one of the other men butted in, turning to his companions for confirmation.

'Do they know who's trapped, then? Have they given out any names?' Ellyn asked worriedly.

'Give them a chance, girl!'

'It's only just blown!' Dai Williams pointed out.

'Daro! The boss-men are still scurrying around the place like a bunch of scalded cats.'

'Half of them don't know if they're on their ass or their elbow and you ask if they've given out names?' Gareth Pope added scathingly.

'They won't know for certain who's trapped down there until they've moved some of the rubble,' Dai agreed, pushing back his cap and scratching his head.

'There's bound to be casualties, mun, it's a gallery roof that's caved in!' a burly chap added.

'Everything rocked in Back Street,' Merrion told them. 'It felt as if it was happening right under my feet. Dada said the seam where he's working runs beneath our house,' she gabbled on.

'Daro! I can see why your mam sent you down here,' one of the men commented sourly. He spat ferociously on to the ground and then rubbed the back of his hand across his mouth. 'A right little comforter you'd be to have around the place talking like that,' he muttered moving away, his mouth pursed up into a silent whistle.

'Dada wouldn't have come to work today if I hadn't stayed home to look after our mam,' Merrion muttered defensively.

'Come on now, look on the bright side, my little flower.' Dai Williams smiled reassuringly. 'It's much too soon for any of us to start worrying, see!' he added.

'I know.' Even as she spoke a shiver raised goosebumps all down her arms. Her guilt was now choking her. If anything had happened to her father then Mam was bound to say that it was all her fault. If she hadn't been so keen to

stay at home then he would have done so, even though he hated anything domestic. She'd felt so scared, after her bad dream, that she'd jumped at the chance of a day off. Anyway, if she'd refused, Mam would only have started on at him.

'It's your babba, Bryn Roberts, as much as it's mine, remember,' she'd kept telling him all the time she was carrying. 'A little one needs a dada as well as a mammy.'

'I'll play my part, cariad,' he'd assured her. 'I'm still not too old to take it up over Coity or along the Canal bank same as I did the other three. Regular as clockwork I walked with them, so they could get a breath of fresh air in their lungs,' he'd added, puffing out his chest.

'Jawch! and then hang round the Navigation, or the Lamb and Flag, while you down pints of ale with your brother Huw and his cronies,' she'd retorted sharply.

'We were taking a breather, that's all.'

'Well, that might have been all right with Emlyn and Madoc, but it won't do if this one's a girl. I'm having no daughter of mine kicking her heels outside a public house and having her ears filled with the sort of ribald talk that goes on between men when they're supping beer.'

'Never did our Merrion much harm,' he'd responded.

'You've always treated her more like a boy than a girl,' she'd snapped back. 'You'd have let her stay on at school if you'd been let have your way even though we needed whatever pittance she could earn.'

'Well, that might have been so, but things are going to be much easier now. With both our Emlyn and Merrion working, and only young Madoc to provide for then this one can go to school for as long as it likes providing it has the brains for it,' he'd promised.

Merrion's eyes misted as she thought of the way her dada always stuck up for her against Mam. He'd always been the one she ran to when she was in trouble, and he'd give her a quick hug, or a kiss, and make her feel better. Never to her

mam, though. Mam seemed always to be busy with the others. And they'd been boys. Mam seemed to like boys the best.

Perhaps if she'd been pretty, with plump, rosy cheeks and curls down to her shoulders, her mother would have favoured her more. Instead, she'd always been as skinny as a rabbit with dead straight hair and eyes that were too big for her face.

And she'd been clumsy. Always bumping into things, tripping over and dropping things. Her mam said she was either careless or that she did it on purpose, but it only happened when her mam was shouting at her to do something. That was when she came over all clumsy, which only made her mam bawl at her all the louder.

If Dada was around he'd always put a stop to it.

'You'll make our Merrion into a bag of nerves by yelling at her so much,' he'd warn.

'If I don't shout then she takes no notice. Lost in one of her dreams most of the time. Or deaf!'

'Of course the girl's not deaf!'

'Then she's lazy! I've only one pair of hands and all of you to look after, so why can't she help out? It's time she learned that a home doesn't run itself. How on earth is she ever going to manage when she's married and with a family of her own to look after?'

'Lora! That'll do! Hold your tongue, woman, and stop taking your temper out on the child.'

Then, giving Merrion a quick hug, he'd whisper, 'Take no notice, cariad, it's just your mam's way.'

And now he was trapped. She was quite sure of that. He might never be able to stand up for her again; never have the chance to walk up over Coity or Blorengie with the new baby on his shoulder, like he'd carried the rest of them when they were small.

Who would take his place for this baby? she wondered.

It wouldn't be Emlyn, as he was rarely at home. And it couldn't be Madoc, since he was little more than a baby himself.

That left only her!

Minutes stretched like elastic into hours as they went on waiting. Her body was chilled through, her feet became numb, yet the flicker of hope refused to be doused.

Deep in her heart, and in her very bones, Merrion felt sure that her father was dead. Yet, as she stood there with the ever-growing crowd of miners and their families, she continued to hope.

Each time the cage came juddering up from the dark abyss, screeching to a stop as it reached ground level, her heart raced. As coal-grimed figures staggered out of it, coughing and spluttering and gasping for fresh air, she craned her neck to see over the heads of those in front of her, ears straining as names were called out in greeting.

But it was never Bryn Roberts.

Those survivors who could manage to stand upright, stumbled away on the arms of their friends or relatives, back to their homes. Benji Jones was amongst them and the radiant look of love and relief on Ellyn's face brought a lump to Merrion's throat.

Only after they'd washed away the grimy sweat would the men know the full extent of their cuts and injuries. And when these had been bathed and attended to, they would celebrate their safe deliverance and mourn for the workmates whom they knew would never come out alive.

Those who were badly injured, with broken bones and crushed limbs, were piled into an open cart and dispatched to hospital. Their mental anguish at knowing that one of their legs, or arms, would be amputated was far greater than any pain they would suffer at the surgeon's hands, since, for most of them, it meant the loss of their job in the pit.

Forty men were brought to the surface, yet still the name Bryn Roberts had not been called out. None of the survivors even worked alongside her dada.

The grinding cage groaned once more to the top. This time no one walked out when the gate opened. There were uneasy whispers as two bodies were lifted out and laid on the ground.

'Who is it, then?' Merrion asked fearfully of the woman who was standing at her side.

'Tomos Davies and Dic Panto.'

'Are you sure?' Merrion asked in a voice that shook.

'Yes, cariad.' The woman's tone softened. 'They both worked alongside your dad, didn't they?'

Merrion nodded, unable to speak.

She chewed on her lower lip, trying to concentrate every vestige of her thoughts on Tomos Davies. He was a giant of a man; six foot two in his socks, so it was said. He had shoulders broad enough to hold up a roof, her father claimed. This time they hadn't, though.

She rubbed the back of her hand across her eyes, then her attention became focused on an altercation near the cage. Llewellyn Morgan, the pit manager, a wiry looking man in his late forties, stood there facing the crowd and he was holding his arms wide, as if in despair.

He had only recently been put in charge, but his bowed shoulders and sallow complexion told their own story of the many years he'd spent working underground at the coal face.

'I can't do another bloody thing until one of the owners gives the order,' he said, his voice as ominous as his deep-set dark eyes.

'Let some of us go down, then, and see if there is anything we can do,' offered one of the men.

'Out of the question! Far too dangerous, I tell you,' Llewellyn Morgan said angrily.

'For you, p'raps, y'lily-livered bugger.'

‘Getting those two bodies out has almost cost Dan Davies his life,’ Llewellyn Morgan retorted stubbornly. ‘The fumes from the after-damp are overpowering . . .’

‘Then the poor sods still trapped down there will be gassed, even if they’re not injured, unless someone goes down and helps to free them,’ Gareth Pope pointed out.

‘It’s not going down that’s the problem, it’s reaching them when you get there.’

‘You mean because the cave-in has brought the roof down?’

‘That’s right!’ Llewellyn Morgan nodded. ‘There are any number of massive rocks and boulders blocking the way, see!’

‘Give us some picks and shovels and we’ll soon move a few boulders, boyo,’ several of the men affirmed.

‘Daro! It’s not feasible, I keep telling you!’ retorted Llewellyn Morgan heatedly.

‘Well, we can’t just leave them there!’ Gareth Pope protested.

‘How many are trapped?’ Dai Williams asked quietly.

‘My old man must be down there since you haven’t brought him up,’ a woman’s voice shrilled out.

‘Are you just going to leave him there, buried alive? You rotten swine!’ yelled the woman next to her.

‘Look now, Martha Watts, there’s no call for abuse, that gets us nowhere,’ snapped back Llewellyn Morgan. ‘I’ve done everything that’s humanly possible. No one is going to risk their lives by going down in that cage again until I get fresh orders,’ he added stiffly. ‘The owners have arrived and are assembled in the office, talking matters over right this very minute.’

‘Talk! We don’t want bloody talk, mun; we want action,’ the men shouted angrily.

‘All right, all right. I’m on my way in there now to hear their decision. A few more minutes . . .’

‘Duw anwyl! Can’t you get it into your thick skull, boyo, that every minute counts!’

‘With all the fumes down there not even a canary will survive for very long!’ Gareth Pope reminded him. ‘We’ve got to do something and do it now. There’s no time for chat, there’re half a dozen or more men still trapped in that hell hole!’

‘We can’t stand by and let our mates die, trapped like bloody rats in a sewer!’ agreed Dai Williams.

Llewellyn Morgan didn’t answer. Hunching his shoulders against the angry tirade he scurried back to the office, firmly shutting the door against the furious buzz of discontent in the yard.

Chapter Three

THE MUTTERINGS GREW louder. A thin drizzle of rain added to the misery of those waiting. The men turned up the collars of their threadbare jackets, wound their mufflers tighter around their throats, and pulled down the peaks of their caps to shield their faces. Women hitched their shawls higher around their shoulders, and hugged their bodies with their arms.

Merrion pushed straggles of wet hair back behind her ears and wondered what she ought to do. Mam must be out of her mind with worry by now, she thought uneasily. She'd been gone hours, and there was only young Madoc at home to fetch and carry for the baby. Yet how could she return home until she knew whether or not her dada was safe.

Her thoughts became jumbled as she tried to come to terms with what was happening. Supposing, just by chance, Dada hadn't been in that part of the pit where the explosion had taken place? He might already have gone on home, safe and sound.

There's daft you are, girl, she scolded herself. He'd still be hanging around here with the rest, anxious to do what he could to help those still trapped.

But then he'd want to let Mam know that he was safe. He'd know she'd be worried silly and he'd not want that in case it might curdle her milk and then the new babba would sicken.

If he'd gone home, though, then the moment Mam had said 'our Merri's gone to the pithead looking for you', he'd have come striding back to fetch her.

She chewed at her lower lip, wondering what to do for the best. She'd count to twenty and if Llewellyn Morgan hadn't come out of the office by then she'd run home and tell her mam that there was no news yet, and then come straight back.

When she reached twenty she still lingered. She'd wait a bit longer, she decided. She'd count up to twenty again. This time she'd do it very slowly and take a deep breath between each number. She'd reached fifteen when the office door opened and Llewellyn Morgan emerged.

A murmur ran through the waiting crowd as they waited anxiously for him to tell them what was happening.

'What are they planning on doing next, then, boyo?' Gareth Pope demanded.

'Sent you as a messenger to break the news to us, have they?' a voice sneered.

'Making you do their dirty work because they're afraid to show their faces, are they?'

Llewellyn Morgan held up his hand for silence as cat-calls, boos and shouts filled the air. It was as if a signal had been sounded. One by one, men who were starting to drift away came back into the yard.

'If you're ready to listen, then the owners will explain the situation to you,' announced Llewellyn Morgan.

'We want some action, mun, not a load of bloody explanations,' someone shouted.

The cry was taken up, and angry voices and jeers filled the air as Llewellyn Morgan moved back towards the office again.

Before he reached the door it opened and an elderly black-suited man emerged.

'It's bloody Pennington himself!'

'Christ, it must be bad news!' Dai Williams exclaimed, loosening the scarf knotted around his neck.

'What's the bugger think he's doing? Why's he getting Llewellyn to move that cart?'

They watched in bewilderment as it was manhandled into place. Then the murmuring started up afresh as Llewellyn Morgan walked briskly towards them. Assertively, he began pushing those in front back until they were standing well clear of the cart.

Led by Pennington, two other well-dressed men clambered up on to the cart, arranging themselves on it as though it was a public platform. When Llewellyn Morgan joined them the mutterings from the crowd grew even more ominous.

Pennington surveyed the miners' coal-grimed, upturned faces disdainfully. It was almost as if he relished the fear he saw in their eyes.

'Men!' He held up a hand for silence. 'I've no need to go into details about what happened here today. We are as grieved as you are since it effects us all. We've done what we can to save as many lives as possible, but the following are still incarcerated.'

'Incarcerated! Darw! You mean they're bloody buried alive down there, don't you!'

'Dic Weeks; Llew Grant; Lewis Jenkins; Dai Davies; Elwyn Hughes; Bryn Roberts . . .'

Merrion felt as if the entire world was swaying, as if the sky and the ground were changing places and she was trying to balance between the two of them. She took a long, deep breath and screwed her eyes tight shut. Slowly she exhaled and opened her eyes again. The world had stopped spinning. A chorus of voices, demanding, threatening, cajoling, cursing, pounded in her ears.

'Duw anwyl!' What are you going to do about getting them out, then?'

'Let some of us get down there right now and see what we can do.'

'It's action we want not sodding speeches.'

Pennington ignored the outcry. 'The cave-in brought down the roof where these men were working,' Pennington

continued, raising his voice slightly, 'so we propose to seal the gallery off. Is that clearly understood?'

Angry exclamations of disbelief swept through the crowd.

'Duw anwyl! You can't do that, mun! That's cold-blooded murder!'

'Some of those men trapped down there could still be alive!' Dai Williams muttered.

'You can't just leave them down there to die, you heartless buggers!'

'Entomb them without even giving any of us a chance to reach them?' Gareth Pope exclaimed in disbelief.

'Rescue is out of the question,' Pennington said pompously. 'We've already tested the air.'

'Don't talk so bloody daft, mun!'

'What is more to the point, the roof's collapsed! The explosion shifted the pit props that were holding it up!' he told them in a cold, dispassionate voice.

'There may still be pockets of fresh air beyond the boulders!' Dai Williams pointed out. There were murmurs of agreement. 'Possibly there's enough to keep them alive for hours . . . days even,' he went on.

The body of men surged forward. 'Play fair, mun! Give us the chance to try and dig them out,' Gareth Pope pleaded.

'It would take two weeks, or even more, to clear that collapsed gallery,' stated Pennington.

He paused dramatically, looking round slowly at the sea of faces and letting his words sink in. 'It would mean two weeks of work for which you would not receive a penny piece! Remember, your earnings are based on the number of trucks of coal that pass the pithead weighbridge.'

He paused again and stared round at the shocked, unhappy faces.

'If we allowed you to clear the gallery some of you could be injured if there was another fall of rock and we can't risk any more lives. Furthermore, it would mean no coal coming to the surface - and that would mean no money for any of