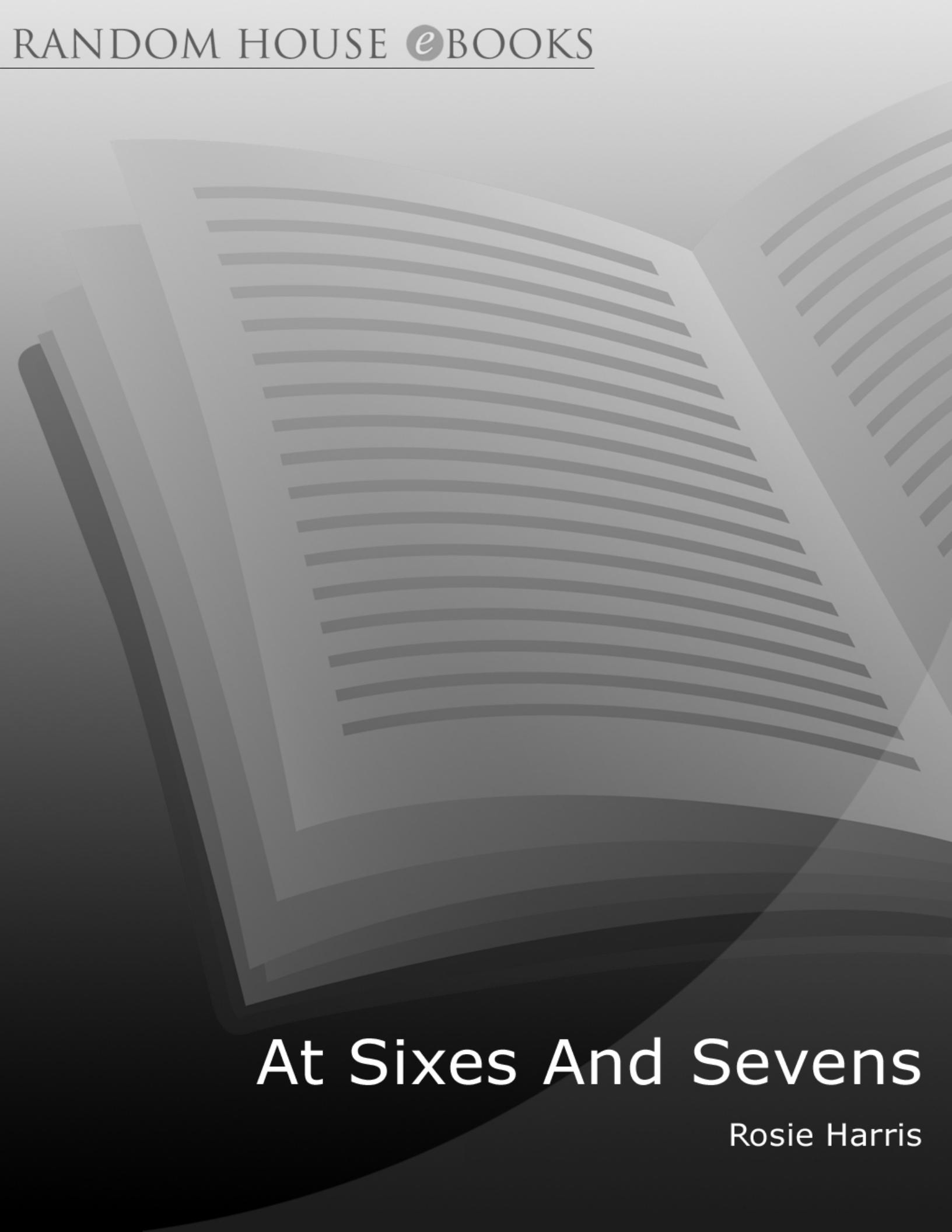


RANDOM HOUSE *e*BOOKS



At Sixes And Sevens

Rosie Harris

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About the Book

Two sisters. One man. One moment that will change all their lives forever...

Living in the shadow of their domineering father, Rhianon and Sabrina Webster plan two very different futures. Edwin dotes on his youngest daughter, beautiful, flighty Sabrina, but it is homely, steady Rhianon who holds their little family together. Until one fateful day when Pryce Pritchard, the man Rhianon loves, gets into a fight and all their worlds are thrown into turmoil. Pryce is arrested - and Sabrina disappears ...

Months later Rhianon chances upon her sister and is shocked to find her pregnant, living in squalid lodgings in the poorest part of Cardiff. When Davyn is born Sabrina will have nothing to do with him, and kind-hearted Rhianon looks after the little boy, patiently awaiting Pryce's release. But when Pryce is finally set free, he brings with him secrets that will devastate them all.

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, and six grandchildren, and writes full time. *At Sixes & Sevens* is her eighth novel for Arrow.

Also by Rosie Harris

Turn of the Tide
Troubled Waters
Patsy of Paradise Place
One Step Forward
Looking for Love
Pins & Needles
Winnie of the Waterfront
At Sixes & Sevens
The Cobbler's Kids
Sunshine and Showers
Megan of Merseyside
The Power of Dreams
A Mother's Love
Sing for Your Supper
Waiting for Love
Love Against All Odds
A Dream of Love

At Sixes & Sevens

ROSIE HARRIS



arrow books

For Kathryn and Davin with love

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Chapter One

SICK WITH SUSPENSE, Rhianon Webster watched helplessly from the doorway as outside on the pavement Pryce Pritchard and Hwyel Barker exchanged punches.

A crowd was already gathering in front of Polly Potter's haberdashery shop in Pontdarw High Street, where Rhianon worked as an assistant, and she wished there was something she could do to stop the two men fighting.

Her heart sank as she saw her sister Sabrina standing in the foreground urging them on, her dark eyes glistening exultantly as the two men traded blows.

Rhianon pushed her way through the knot of onlookers. 'Shush! Don't encourage them, cariad!' she remonstrated, laying a hand on Sabrina's arm in an effort to restrain her sister's excitement as she watched them fight.

Irritably, Sabrina shook her hand away. Straining forward, her voice became hoarse as she continued to urge the two men to even greater antagonism.

Rhianon shuddered. It had been a shock to see Pryce brawling, especially since he was engaged in fisticuffs with her own sister's boyfriend. Normally he was such a gentle giant, not given to scrapping, and loving him as she did she'd hate to see him get hurt.

Hwyel Barker was certainly no match for Pryce Pritchard. Hwyel was thin, slightly built and looked like a schoolboy in comparison with Pryce. Not only was Pryce almost five years older than Hwyel, but his muscles were hardened by years of working as a coal miner. He was

strong and powerful-looking with bulging biceps and work-hardened fists, the legacy of swinging a pick for hours at a time in cramped, back-breaking conditions underground.

Hwyel had the soft, lily-white hands of a pen-pusher and the physique to match. Tall and gangling, he looked almost weedy when matched against Pryce's bulk.

As different as Sabrina is from me, Rhianon thought wryly. At seventeen, her younger sister, slimmer than Rhianon, had dark glossy curls, enormous dark brown eyes, a Cupid's bow mouth and long eyelashes. She was also far more voluptuous and a typical flapper. She wore up-to-the-minute styles, dresses that skimmed her figure, their short floating skirts showing her shapely legs to advantage.

Their father, Edwin Webster, a stern-looking angular man in his early sixties, with receding straight dark hair streaked with grey and piercing dark eyes, frowned on such wanton display of flesh. Yet, because he adored Sabrina, he turned a blind eye to her slavish following of the current fashions.

Rhianon was the plain one. Her thick dark hair was straight and nothing she could do would make it curl. When she'd been very little her mother had rolled it up in strips of rag every night. In the morning it would be all frizzy, but an hour or so later it was as straight as ever.

'A plain Jane, that's what you are and no mistake,' her mother had sighed. 'You don't suit pretty dresses either, whatever am I to do about you?'

'Plain as a pikestaff!' her father agreed. 'Let's pray that the Good Lord has imbued her with piety and good sense, since she certainly hasn't been blessed with beauty.'

Her father was right, of course, Rhianon thought resignedly. As she'd grown older she could see that for herself every time she looked in a mirror.

Her dark eyes were too big for her oval face, and her skin so pale it was almost translucent. Even while she was

still at school, she looked as though she had the cares of the world on her shoulders.

By then, not only had she accepted that she was a plain Jane but so had everyone else. It was her younger sister who fulfilled all her mother's dreams for a daughter who was as pretty as the little girl on the advertisements for Pears Soap.

As a tiny tot, Sabrina's hair hung in fat ringlets framing her little round face. She was delightfully dainty and looked adorable in frilly dresses, lacy white socks and patent-leather shoes.

When she was thwarted she pouted so prettily that her tantrum was immediately overlooked. She was never smacked and hardly ever reprimanded. A raised voice would bring crocodile tears, and her rosebud mouth would quiver alarmingly. In next to no time she was swept up, hugged, kissed and forgiven. More often than not it was by her father, whose stern nature seemed to melt like chocolate in the sun where she was concerned.

The two men were still in the roadway fighting, each blow heavy with hatred. Rhianon dreaded what her father would have to say when the news about this fracas reached him. He abhorred physical violence, preferring to assert his authority with harsh words and an overbearing manner.

To the outside world Edwin Webster appeared authoritative and wise, an upright pillar of society with strong religious leanings. A strait-laced man, yet one who was widely respected. Within his own home he was a domineering, hot-tempered bully, intolerant of everyone except Sabrina.

It was a Saturday morning so there were more people than usual to witness what was taking place, including a crowd of children of school age. They were alternately gasping and screaming at the sight of blood, or, like Sabrina, vigorously cheering on the two participants.

There was also a large group of miners. They were watching with mixed feelings, suspecting that the cause of the tussle between the two men had been fuelled by the strike that had just started.

Pryce Pritchard was the Union official at the Pontdarw coal mine where most of the men in the community worked, and he was highly respected for his learning as well as his brawn.

His blue-pitted face might mark him as a miner, but most of his workmates knew that he had ambitions, and that he was studying at night school to become a teacher. Many of the miners thought it would be better if he became a politician. In Parliament he could air his passion for miners' rights to people who might be able to do something positive to change their dreary lot.

'You could tell them exactly how it is, boyo,' they pointed out. 'With your gift of the gab you could make 'em sit up and listen. Let them know what it is really like back here in the Rhondda valley.'

'You could go down to London and give it to them straight from the horse's mouth, mun!'

'Speak out about the shacks most of us have to live in, without water or sanitation, that are pitched perilously on the crumbling mountainside, boyo!'

'Tell them about the hardships the miners and their families suffer, while the coal bosses live in the lap of luxury.'

'And about the way our young lads have to go down the pits from the age of eight, and work like little slaves. How they have to drag and push the loaded coal trucks along the narrow tunnels, often on their hands and knees.'

'Point out that those youngsters who are too puny to do that have to sit there in the dark, hour after hour, opening and shutting the safety doors to let the wagons pass through. Bloody nightmare for the poor little dabs. Frightened of their own shadows most of them, see!'

‘Open their eyes to the hardships a miner’s wife has to endure, as well.’

‘That’s right, mun, and all for a miserly few shillings a week. Not enough to keep body and soul together as you bloody well know.’

Pryce upheld every word they said. The miners’ cause was so very dear to his heart that he never tired of listening to them or talking about it.

Rhianon had first been attracted to him by the passion and sincerity she heard in his words, as he talked to a group of fellow students at night school.

When he had singled her out from the crowd, sought her company and confided in her, gradually her admiration had blossomed into love.

‘My forebears took part in the Chartist uprising in 1839,’ he’d told Rhianon proudly the first time he walked home with her after night school. ‘Along with colliers from Dukestown, Brynmawr, Nantyglo and a dozen other places, hundreds of them gathered together. Then, at a signal from their convenor, Zephaniah Williams, they marched from Blaenavon to Pontypool where they joined up with another contingent and then marched on to Newport.’

‘In support of John Frost, the Chartist leader?’ she’d asked in awe.

He’d nodded. ‘They carried with them over a million signatures in support of their Charter, but their efforts were scuttled by the intervention of Crawshay Bailey.’

‘He was the most powerful Ironmaster of the day, wasn’t he?’

Again Pryce had nodded, delighted by her knowledge and interest.

‘My great-grandfather was seriously injured in the fierce battle that took place in Newport,’ he went on. ‘More than twenty men were killed and over fifty men were badly injured in Westgate Square. The military started to fire

without warning, see! The soldiers didn't take aim, they just fired at random into the crowd!'

Rhianon soon realised that this bitter memory was one of the reasons why Pryce believed that education, rather than fisticuffs or guns, was a far better solution to the many problems that still beset the mining community.

His attitude was refreshing after listening to her father's religious bigotry. Despite this, she knew that when challenged, Pryce was ready to physically defend his corner, as he was doing now against Hwyel.

Some of the onlookers, however, aware of local gossip, suspected that there was more than mere politics, or miners' rights, involved between the two men.

Sabrina Webster was a siren. With her big brown eyes, her short skirts and her come-hither looks, it was well known that she would give the glad eye to any man who took her fancy. He didn't even have to be young or handsome. She'd lure her victim into thinking she was infatuated by him. She would delight in leading him on and then, in the twinkling of a smile, or the lowering of her long curling lashes, pretend to be so demure that she was shocked by his advances.

Rhianon was the complete opposite. She was friendly towards one and all, but at the same time so reserved that not one of the men would dream of trying to flirt with her. And, of course, they all knew that she had eyes only for Pryce Pritchard.

Most of the men knew Sabrina was a heartless minx and could break hearts as skilfully as most of them could hew coal. It didn't stop them trying though. They fluttered about her like moths around a candle, even though they knew that sooner or later they'd get their wings singed.

Once rejected, the men nursed their grievances and suffered the taunts of their mates in sullen silence. They knew that if they made a fuss, or tried to take any

retribution, they'd have to contend with the blazing wrath of Edwin Webster.

He would accuse them of lying and threaten them with damnation of the vilest kind. He would even stand up in Capel Bethel and chastise them, because in his eyes Sabrina could do no wrong.

Hwyel Barker was an exception; he had never encountered Edwin Webster's wrath. Hwyel's father, Cledwyn Barker, was an elder at the Capel Bethel where Edwin Webster was a lay reader, and both men thought that the other's offspring was an excellent match for their own child.

Hwyel had never faced going down the pit. His father headed an insurance company and Hwyel had been found a position as a clerk in his office the day he left school.

He'd met Sabrina when she had come to work there as a typist. He'd fallen at once for her pretty face and coquettish manner. What started out as a flirtation became a serious encounter for Sabrina the moment she discovered that Hywel was her boss's son.

It had in no way curbed her delight in flirting, of course. Provocative teasing was second nature to Sabrina. Seeing Pryce striding down the high street, when he would normally have been slaving away underground, had been an opportunity that she couldn't resist. She lost no time in taunting him about lazing around while the rest of the world worked.

It had been this quip that had sparked the fight. Pryce was always ready to pontificate about what the Charter had been trying to do and how even now, with the right inducement, much better conditions could be established.

'This is only the first day, but let me assure you this is going to be the biggest strike this country has ever seen,' he'd told the crowd that gathered round him in the high street. 'Even businessmen can play their part, see,' he'd

pronounced, looking straight at Hwyel who was standing on the fringe, Sabrina clinging to his arm.

'You and your dad, for example,' he went on. 'By voting the right man into Parliament, supporting our cause here in the Valleys, you could be invaluable, boyo.'

'Not everyone is a firebrand like you, Pryce Pritchard,' Sabrina responded, laughing and fluttering her eyelashes at him. 'My Hwyel is law-abiding, see!'

'There's no need to break the law, girl,' Pryce told her, 'only to help enforce the regulations that are already law, and then fight to bring in new ones to support our cause.'

'I've never really understood what your cause was,' Sabrina sighed. 'You get paid for what you do the same as Hwyel does.'

The crowd listened in amusement to the spirited exchange between the two of them.

Pryce shook his head. 'Paid, yes, but it is not a fair day's pay for the sort of work we have to do. Your Hwyel, and others like him, wear their white shirts, collars and ties, and sit in comfortable offices. We burrow underground, lying flat on our bellies in muck and water, grappling to make our living.'

Sabrina shrugged prettily. 'You don't have to, no one makes you go down the pit,' she provoked.

'And how else can men here in the Rhondda earn a living? Answer me that?' He looked round at the crowd, which had almost doubled in size since he had started speaking. 'Most of the men have been down the mines since they were mere nippers! They left school long before they could master enough knowledge to do anything other than follow in their own fathers' footsteps.'

'They didn't have to,' Sabrina argued petulantly as the crowd muttered in support and nodded in agreement with Pryce's words. 'They could have stayed on at school longer,' she added lamely.

Pryce shook his head. 'Either you can't understand or won't,' he said impatiently. 'Most of them had to go and work underground because there was no other way they could help support their widowed mother and younger brothers and sisters. Around here the man of the family has usually gone to his grave by the time he is forty! Some die in a fall or an explosion, others are killed by silicosis from the coal dust. As a girl who's lived all her life in Pontdarw you should know all about this without me having to spell it out for you.'

Sabrina shrugged her shapely shoulders. 'That's life, isn't it. If you've got brains then use them and do something else,' she retorted pertly. 'Hwyel never entertained the idea of going down the mine, did you?' she asked, looking towards her boyfriend for support.

'I prefer to use my brain to get a living!'

Pryce regarded him with scorn. 'Darw! Too bloody lily-livered, if you ask me!'

Sabrina bristled. 'Don't let Pryce Pritchard talk to you like that, Hwyel!' she admonished. 'Stick up for yourself, for goodness sake.'

Hwyel smiled smugly. 'I want no truck with riff-raff like him,' he muttered. 'Look where spouting has got him and his workmates. Out on strike, no money, no jobs and no future.'

'So what would you have us do?' Pryce snarled. 'You'd like us to go on being exploited by your kind, I suppose! Parasites who bleed us dry. Your sort exist by preying on other people's fears. They persuade men who have almost nothing to hand over a few coppers out of their meagre earnings each week, so that they can line their own pockets. Oh yes, you assure them that as a result they can rest in their beds at night, knowing that when the end comes at least they won't be tossed into a pauper's grave, because they'll have already paid for their burial!'

The crowd continued to increase, its numbers swelled by men who would normally have been working, but who had found the colliery gates closed and locked when they'd turned up for their shift that morning.

Most of them upheld what Pryce was saying, but there were a few hecklers, men whose plans for the days and weeks ahead had been sabotaged by the strike. Filled with resentment they lent voice to the ensuing argument, stirring up even more anger and indignation.

Rhianon felt deeply troubled. She'd never seen Pryce so fired up before. She had heard him speak so many times, knew how passionate he was about the principles he was fighting for, but now it was as if he was directing all his exasperation at Hwyl. She had lived in Pontdarw all her life and was well able to gauge the mood of the crowd, and she could see they were starting to quarrel amongst themselves as they took sides in the argument going on between Pryce and Hwyl.

For all it was a bright and sunny Saturday morning, the first day of May 1926, when most people were out shopping, or enjoying themselves, the strike was overshadowing their normal pursuits.

Many of the men were waiting for the pubs, or the working men's club, to open around midday. Even though they were hesitant about spending their hard-earned money on drink, since they were unsure of where their next penny was coming from, they knew it was in pub or club that they would be able to garner the latest news about what was happening.

Some of the older men insisted that the strike wouldn't last more than a couple of weeks. Coal was the lifeblood of the nation's industry. Without it factories would be unable to fire their furnaces. Trains needed coal to fuel their engines, the ships down in Cardiff docks relied on coal if they were to sail the oceans. Even the common people in

their tiny terraced houses needed coal to keep their fires going in order to warm their homes and to cook their food.

No, the strike couldn't last all that long, they affirmed, but while it did there would be trouble. Men who were idle and without any money became sullen and hot-tempered, bored and bitter. Rhianon was well aware of this, and she was afraid that if other men joined in the spat then a serious brawl could develop.

She tried once more to grab hold of Sabrina's arm and pull her to one side, but again her sister shook her off. Sabrina seemed determined to fuel the discord between Pryce and Hwyel. Rhianon couldn't see the sense of it, couldn't understand why Sabrina was so intent on doing this. Surely she could see that Pryce was by far the stronger of the two men and that Hwyel was bound to get hurt?

The fight deepened in its intensity. The two men were both breathing heavily, their blows becoming more frenzied. Hwyel was delivering short sharp little jabs against Pryce, who stood facing him squarely, and warding them off with a flick of his outstretched arm. It was like watching a puppy yapping at a bulldog, Rhianon thought.

Then suddenly Pryce retaliated. His massive fist shot out and made contact with Hwyel's jaw, stopping the younger man in his tracks.

Hwyel was winded. He fell back, cracking the back of his head against the edge of the pavement.

'You brute! Look what you've done now!' Sabrina screamed, her face chalk white, her deep brown eyes, minutes earlier gleaming with excitement, now dark with horror.

She pulled back, covering her face with her hands, as blood trickled from the corner of Hwyel's mouth.

Responding to Sabrina's hysterical scream, Rhianon pushed her way through the crowd. She looked anxiously at Pryce, but he avoided her eyes. She dropped to her knees

to check Hwyel's condition. Her voice was shaking as she looked up.

'He's unconscious. Can someone get a doctor or an ambulance?'

The men standing around began to voice off uneasily.

'Rubbish, girl!'

'Knocked out, poor bugger!'

'That was a cracking blow!'

'Silly bugger should know better than to pick a fight with the likes of Pryce Pritchard!'

'Teach him not to mouth off about things he knows nothing about!'

'Shame on you! Pryce Pritchard's twice his size, mun!'

'That'll teach young Hwyel a lesson he won't forget in a hurry.'

Rhianon tried to shut her ears to their comments. She concentrated on loosening Hwyel's tie and undoing the starched collar of his white shirt.

The commotion increased. Women abandoned their shopping to join their menfolk. Tempers began to erupt. There was pushing and shoving, and more than a few blows exchanged before a policeman came on the scene and restored order.

An uneasy hush prevailed as the ambulance arrived and Hwyel was lifted into it.

'Is anyone coming to hospital with him, then?' the driver asked.

Rhianon looked round for Pryce and her sister, but they were nowhere to be seen.

'You'd better go with them, Rhianon!' someone in the crowd called out. 'Your sister's scarpered and so has that Pryce Pritchard.'

'How can I go! I should be behind the counter in Mrs Potter's shop right now, not out here in the road.'

'She won't mind, she'll understand.'

'Come on, this man needs urgent attention so make your minds up,' the ambulance driver said as he started to close up the doors.

'Dammo di! What a to-do!' Polly Potter exclaimed as she came bustling over to see what was happening. 'It looks serious to me, so you'd better go with them, Rhianon. It's no good hanging around for your sister, she'd never cope, you know that as well as I do.'

'Are you sure?' Rhianon smiled at her gratefully. 'I'll be back as soon as I can,' she promised.

'You do whatever is necessary, girl, and then when you get back you can tell us how he is.'

'Can you get someone to let Mr Barker know what has happened, and could you let my father know as well?' Rhianon asked her.

'They've probably already heard, cariad,' Polly Potter answered. 'Now up into that ambulance and be off with you and get that poor boyo into hospital.'

Pryce Pritchard stood rock still for a few seconds, waiting for Hwyel to get to his feet again. Only his quick deep breathing, making his broad chest rise and fall like some fast-beating pump, gave any indication as to the stress he was under.

When the man lying on the ground made no move to stand up, and Pryce heard Rhianon say they should send for medical help, he elbowed his way through the gawping onlookers and began to walk away down the road.

Sabrina, who had been watching his every movement, chased after him, calling out his name, ordering him to stop, but he paid no attention. He felt ashamed that he had lost his temper and resorted to violence.

There were amused grins from all sides.

'She'll be giving him a taste of her tongue, and no maybe.'

‘Duw anwyl! I wouldn’t want to be in Pryce Pritchard’s shoes!’

‘Just wait until she catches up with him, right little fireball she can be, mun.’

‘Perhaps someone should go after her then, the temper she’s in she might scratch his bloody eyes out.’

‘You reckon there might be another fight in the offing, then?’

‘It’s more than likely, seeing the frenzy she’s in!’

‘Exploding with anger, I’d say, mun.’

‘Leave them to it, I say, it’s none of our bloody business.’

‘That’s right! There’s been enough damage done for one day.’

‘Pryce Pritchard’s a big boyo, he can take care of himself.’

If Sabrina heard them calling her back, or even if she overheard any of their loudmouthed comments, she paid no attention whatsoever.

Chapter Two

ALL THE WAY to the hospital Rhianon perched uncomfortably on the slatted wooden seat by the side of Hwyel's stretcher. She watched him anxiously. He lay so still, his chest barely rising, his mouth slack, blood still oozing from his head wound.

When the ambulance pulled up in front of the four-storey grey stone building, and Hwyel was trundled inside, she followed down endless bleak corridors.

As he was wheeled into a ward, an officious middle-aged nurse in a stiffly starched green and white uniform, her white cap completely covering her hair and making her face look even more severe, barred Rhianon's way.

'You can't come in here!' she snapped. 'If you wish to wait while we examine him then sit over there,' she ordered, pointing to a row of small uninviting metal chairs in a recess in the corridor.

Time seemed to stand still. The sterile smell of antiseptic made Rhianon's stomach churn.

White-coated doctors, stethoscopes dangling like cumbersome necklets, came hurrying along the corridor, their echoing footsteps breaking the uneasy silence. When they disappeared into the ward, a draught of medicated air wafted out before the doors swung closed.

There was no clock, no way of telling how long she had been sitting there. With each long-drawn-out minute Rhianon's concern because Pryce had left the scene

without a word to her, and her fears for Hwyel's welfare, increased.

Her mind was filled alternately with the memory of Hwyel's skinny figure as he'd squared up to Pryce's manly physique, and the memory of his ashen face, with his cut and swollen eye and the blood trickling from one corner of his half-open mouth, as he lay on the ground.

When the ambulance men had lifted him up there had been a pool of blood on the roadway underneath him. She had thought at first that it was from his mouth, following the knock-out blow that had sent him crashing to the ground. As they lifted him she had seen that he had also cut the back of his head when he'd fallen backwards.

She was concerned about how the fight had started. Pryce was such an important part of her life, loving him as she did, that she was fearful of the consequences for him if Hwyel really was seriously injured, especially since what had happened appeared to have been instigated by her sister. She couldn't understand Sabrina's motive, unless it was to try and ruin her relationship with Pryce because she was jealous of their closeness.

Hwyel might be puny, self-opinionated and flashy with his sharp suits and expensive watch, but his father was a man of considerable standing in Pontdarw.

If Hwyel was badly hurt the blame would be placed fair and square on Pryce's shoulders, and Rhianon suspected that Hwyel and his father would exact retribution.

What form that would take she had no idea, but she was pretty certain that Cledwyn Barker would demand justice. Since he could afford to hire a skilled lawyer, the outcome for Pryce seemed bleak. He would not be able to pay a heavy fine, and she shuddered inwardly and refused to contemplate what the alternative might be.

The news of Hwyel's condition, when it did come, was even more dire than Rhianon had anticipated.

'Mr Barker is still unconscious. He has a fractured skull and several serious lacerations to his face as well as a broken jaw,' the stiffly starched nurse informed her curtly.

'Can I see him?' Rhianon asked.

'Are you a relation?'

Rhianon shook her head. 'No, but he is a friend of the family ...'

'Then I'm afraid it's impossible,' the nurse interrupted brusquely. 'Only his immediate family can visit his bedside. I trust they have been informed about what has happened?'

Before Rhianon could answer there was the sound of hurrying footsteps and Hwyel's father, imposing in his dark pinstripe three-piece suit and highly polished black boots, came striding down the corridor. A pudgy little woman, dressed in a drab navy blue costume buttoned high to her neck, mousy brown hair almost hidden under a coal-scuttle black felt hat, was scurrying along in his wake.

'Rhianon, whatever are you doing here? Where is Sabrina?' Mr Barker asked sharply. Without waiting for her reply he addressed the nurse. 'My son, Hwyel Barker, has been admitted to this ward, so I'd like to see him,' he intoned authoritatively.

'Yes, sir.' Her manner suddenly became deferential. 'If you will come this way, Mr Barker.' She hesitated and looked at the woman who was standing at his side. 'Mrs Barker?'

'Yes, yes, this is my wife. Come along, Mona, don't let's waste any more time,' Cledwyn Barker exclaimed impatiently.

The nurse remained hesitant. 'Your son is still unconscious, and I should warn you that he has received several injuries to his face and head, so ...'

'Oh, my poor boy, my darling Hwyel!' Mrs Barker tottered ahead, making for the ward doors before the nurse could stop her. Mr Barker and the nurse followed quickly behind.

Rhianon waited anxiously for the nurse to return. When she did, she told Rhianon briskly, 'There's nothing more you can do here so you may as well go home.'

'Can't I see him just for a moment? He's my sister's boyfriend and I would like to be able to tell her how he is.'

The nurse's starched cap wobbled precariously as she shook her head emphatically. 'Even if I agreed to let you come in and see him I doubt whether his parents would allow it.'

'Couldn't you ask them?' Rhianon pleaded.

'It's quite pointless, he's unconscious. There's nothing more to be said,' the nurse told her abruptly.

Rhianon bit down on her lower lip. 'He ... he is going to be all right, isn't he? He is going to pull through?'

'You are wasting your time and mine,' the nurse told her impatiently, looking pointedly at the fob watch pinned on the bodice of her uniform. 'There's nothing more I can tell you until he comes round, and that mightn't be for hours, or days even.'

Rhianon stared at her anxiously. 'His other injuries, the cuts, the bleeding ...'

The nurse shrugged offhandedly. 'I've told you all there is for you to know, now you must leave. There is nothing you can do here at the moment. You can come back later, or some time tomorrow, and ask at the reception desk for news if you wish to do so.'

* * *

The days that followed put a strain on all concerned. Edwin Webster was outspoken in his condemnation of what Pryce had done, and Sabrina vociferously supported her father.

For all that, Rhianon noticed that when Sabrina spoke to her about Pryce her attitude seemed to change. From the look in her sister's eyes it was almost as if she was admiring his prowess.

Rhianon felt utterly confused as she listened to her. Some of the things Sabrina said made no sense to her. It seemed as if Sabrina had some sort of understanding with Pryce that Rhianon didn't share, but she assured herself that this was all nonsense, a figment of her imagination.

When she confided her suspicion to Polly Potter the older woman laughed sardonically.

'Your eyes are open at last, are they, cariad! I've warned you to look to your laurels or that young sister of yours would be taking Pryce Pritchard away from you!'

'That's rubbish, Polly, and you shouldn't say such things,' Rhianon defended. 'Why on earth would she want to do that when she has a boyfriend of her own?'

'There's daft you are, girl! Too trusting for your own good,' Polly scolded. 'Anyone with eyes in their head can see why she'd want to do it. Pryce Pritchard is twice the man Hwyel Barker can ever hope to be.'

'Pryce is years older than Sabrina though, he's five years older than me even.'

'What difference does that make, cariad? In fact, that's probably half the attraction. Man of the world, see! Not a skinny young fellow who is little more than a schoolboy.'

'You're wrong, Polly. Sabrina thinks the world of Hwyel!'

'Of his wallet maybe, and the fun he can offer her, but not of him as a person. Stands to reason she'd sooner be on the arm of a man with a physique like Pryce. It's only human nature, cariad.'

'There's more to it than that, Polly. I can't put my finger on it, but Sabrina seems to change when she's talking to me about Pryce.'

'Then don't let them be in each other's company any more than you can help,' Polly warned her.

Rhianon sighed. 'There's not much chance of that, not unless they meet up in the street. My father has forbidden me to bring Pryce to the house.'

'Because of the fight!' Polly said, her mouth pursed scornfully.

'No, even before that. He's never approved of Pryce's radical views, and now with this strike on he won't hear his name mentioned even. Father takes Mr Barker's side over the fight as well, of course. They both put all the blame on Pryce.'

'The sooner that young Hwyel is out of hospital and can explain what happened the better,' Polly opined. 'It's high time he was on his feet again and up and about.'

'From what Sabrina tells me, and she gets the news straight from Mr Barker each day, Hwyel is not doing at all well. He was unconscious for three hours and even now he is nowhere near back to his normal self.'

'Are you saying that your sister hasn't been in to see him then?'

Rhianon looked uneasy. 'No, not yet. The day after it happened she was very keen to do so, but since then she seems to have changed her mind. Now she says wild horses wouldn't get her in there.'

'Funny girl that one,' Polly murmured, shaking her head from side to side so that the jowls beneath her chin wobbled like a pink blancmange.

Rhianon sighed. 'Father sympathises with her. He says it is because she has such a tender nature. She's told him that she can't bear to see someone she loves in such distress.'

Polly snorted. 'A load of old tripe if ever I heard it! What does her boss think about her refusing to go and see his precious son then?'

Rhianon shook her head. 'I've no idea.'

'And what has Pryce Pritchard got to say for himself? Worried stiff he must be.'

Again Rhianon shook her head. 'I've barely had a chance to ask him, I've hardly seen him alone since it happened. Caught up in this old strike, see! Kept busy he is,

drumming up support. As the local Union official he has a lot of organising to do, and he has to speak at so many meetings, not just here in Pontdarw, but throughout the Rhondda, as far afield as Pontypridd and Merthyr.'

'Yes, it's a terrible situation and one that is growing more heated by the day, according to what I hear,' Polly agreed.

'Well, let's hope it is settled soon so that the men can get back to work in the next couple of months,' Rhianon said fervently.

'If they don't then there will be a lot of hardship for their wives and children this coming winter,' Polly Potter declared ominously.

Her concern was echoed by most of the customers who came in over the next few days. Rhianon felt wretched as she listened to them, wondering how it was going to affect her and Pryce. It seemed to be taking up so much of his time that she saw less and less of him.

The strike was still at its height when they received news that Hwyel Barker had taken a turn for the worse.

'Have words with your daughter, and insist she must come to the hospital,' Cledwyn Barker instructed Edwin Webster sternly. 'I've told her countless times that Hwyel is constantly asking for her, but she takes no notice at all.'

Sabrina looked taken aback when her father spoke to her about it, but she remained adamant that she didn't want to visit Hwyel, not while he was in hospital.

For the first time ever, Edwin Webster lost his temper with her. 'You'll go if I have to drag you there,' he thundered. 'How do you think it will reflect on me if you don't go to visit him?' he railed.

'It has nothing to do with you,' Sabrina snuffled.

'Of course it has! You are my daughter. He is the son of one of the elders of Capel Bethel. Now, get your coat on and I'll accompany you to the hospital myself.'