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To our daughter Jasmine

Prologue

July 1938

Cadi sat in front of her bedroom window admiring the lace roses her mother had painstakingly sewn onto her white cotton dress. The Williamses were a coal-mining family, so by no means had they the money to splash out on a new dress or even material, but Cadi's mother Jill, who was an excellent seamstress, had used her skills to make a dress out of sheets that she had bought from a jumble sale. Determined to make sure her daughter's dress was perfect, she had stayed up late every night sewing each delicate stitch by candlelight and hiding any imperfections with the lace roses she had made from old doilies.

The day of the fete had arrived and Jill had pinned her daughter's fair hair into place, so that the crown of roses would sit perfectly when Lady Houghton inaugurated her later that day.

'This is your day, my darling child, and you are going to be the best Rose Queen the people of Rhos have ever seen,' cooed Jill as she stood back to admire her daughter.

As Cadi was the youngest of the four siblings *and* the only girl, this date had been marked on the Williamses' calendar for many months, and expectations were high. Especially with her father, Dewi, who couldn't wait to see his daughter take pride of place in the parade.

Alun, the youngest of her three brothers, suddenly appeared from around the side of the curtain that separated Cadi's part of the bedroom from her brothers'. He blew a low whistle. 'Blimey! Who'd've thought such a skinny little wretch could scrub up so well?' He winked at his mother. 'You must have a magic wand hidden somewhere.' He chuckled, before being instructed to 'get out' by both Cadi and her mother.

'He's only teasing, Cadi,' said Jill as she held up a mirror for Cadi to inspect her appearance. 'You know what boys are like.'

Twisting her head from side to side in order to see her hair from all angles, Cadi smiled at her reflection. 'I certainly do, and I hope you see what I mean about needing a room of my own. Alun didn't even call out, Mam – I could've been in my vest and knickers, or even starkers, for all he knew!'

'I don't know what you want us to do, darling, because we can't afford to rent a bigger house.' She looked around the musty-smelling room. 'We can barely afford this one.'

'I don't mean to moan, and I know you and Dad work all the hours you can – the boys too – I just wish ...'

'I know, sweetheart, but it won't be for ever,' assured her mother. 'You'll be moved out and married with kiddies of your own one of these days.'

'I'm only fifteen, Mam! I've years ahead of me yet, and I'm not even certain I want kids.' She rolled her eyes. 'Knowing my luck, they'd all be boys.'

A man's voice yelled out to them from the bottom of the stairs; it was her father. 'Are you two going to stay up there all day?'

Jill called back, 'Coming.' She smiled at her daughter, who stood in front of the window, a shaft of sunlight emphasising her silhouette. 'You wait till your father sees you – he'll be that proud.'

She opened the door and they descended the stairs to where Dewi and Cadi's brothers stood waiting. Cadi blushed as her father nodded approvingly. 'By God, we'll have to fight them off with sticks.'

Pleased to see that the rain had eased off and the sun was breaking through the clouds, Cadi started as a familiar voice called out from behind, 'Let's have a look at you then ...'

Beaming, Cadi turned to greet her best friend and neighbour, Poppy Harding. Holding the sides of her skirt, she pulled them out so that Poppy could marvel at the detail of her dress.

'You look beautiful,' breathed Poppy. Stepping forward, she linked her arm through Cadi's. 'We'd best get a move on, there's a lot of folk waiting for their queen to open the fete.'

The Rose Queen Fete was a special day in the Rhos calendar, and everyone who could do so attended. It was a chance for people to let their hair down and forget about work. The girls would wear their finest dresses, and the boys would be on the lookout for a future wife. Deals would be done, new friendships

made and old ones strengthened. Cadi would be seen by people from miles around, something that was very unusual when you lived in such a rural area.

Being a mining village, Rhos was normally a rather drab and dowdy place, but today the houses were adorned with bunting, and baskets of flowers hung outside the village hall and local pub.

‘They should do things like this more often,’ mused Cadi as they passed her old school, which had also been festooned with decorations. ‘It really brightens the place up.’

‘Stuff like this costs money, and Rhos isn’t wealthy, like Wrexham or Chester.’

‘Or Liverpool ...’ added Cadi.

‘Be fair! Liverpool’s a big, important city with a huge port; even Wrexham and Chester can’t compete with the likes of a city with that kind of status.’

‘I know, I’m just saying it would be nice,’ said Cadi. She glanced towards Rhos mountain, which loomed in the distance. In some respects she was lucky to live deep in the heart of the countryside, but to Cadi the mines ruined everything. You couldn’t escape the coal dust, which seemed to invade every part of daily life, whether you worked down the mine or not; as for the slag heaps, they were a horrible blot that marred the landscape. She said as much to Poppy.

‘It’s like they say – coal’s a dirty old business, which is why I’m amazed your mam’s managed to keep that dress so pristine. It’s whiter than a cloud. As for the detail,’ she gently ran her finger over one of the many roses that adorned the dress, ‘your mam’s a genius when it comes to her sewing. I reckon she’s good

enough to work in one of them high-end shops you was on about, last time you came back from Liverpool.'

Cadi nodded knowledgeably. 'Me too – certainly too good to be working for peanuts, but people in Rhos can't afford to pay good money, so Mam ends up burning both ends of the candle to make ends meet.'

'You're very lucky to have someone so talented in your family,' enthused Poppy. 'No one would ever guess your dress had once been used as a sheet. And coal dust aside, how she managed to keep it free from mould, in a house what's riddled with damp, is more than I'll ever know. Hats off to your mam is all I can say.'

'Mam's been wonderful,' agreed Cadi. 'She made a sort of bag with the leftover bits of sheet. Every time she'd finished doing her alterations, she'd pop it in that and tuck it away in the back of her wardrobe.' She gingerly patted her normally unruly bob. 'As for my hair, I've Mam to thank for that too. She's worked so hard, Poppy. I'd never have managed it without her.'

'Mind you, she's had a good muse in you,' said Poppy. 'When I was Rose Queen my poor old mam had the devil's own job making me look half decent.'

A picture of Poppy as Rose Queen entered Cadi's mind. As she was considerably stouter than Cadi, the dress had not been kind.

Cadi shot her friend a reproving glance. 'Don't be so hard on yourself; what with those big blue eyes of yours, and your sleek black hair, you were simply stunning when you were the Rose Queen – everyone said so.'

Poppy squeezed Cadi's arm. 'And that's why you're my best pal, Cadi Williams, cos you always know the right thing to say.'

As they approached the back of the stage, Cadi placed her hand to her tummy, which was fluttering with anticipation. She nodded to a man with a clipboard who had beckoned for her to step forward. She smiled nervously at Poppy. 'Wish me luck.'

Poppy kissed her on the cheek. 'Good luck.'

The crowd of people who had been chattering amongst themselves fell silent as Lady Houghton delicately placed the crown of roses onto Cadi's head, whilst announcing her to be the new Rose Queen. Cadi blushed to the tips of her ears as the crowd erupted into spontaneous applause, and just when she thought she couldn't feel any more embarrassed, a couple of boys in the throng wolf-whistled their approval, causing her colour to deepen.

As the crowd quietened down, Lady Houghton declared the fete open, and people began to drift off to the various stalls.

'So,' said Poppy as she stepped onto the stage beside her friend, 'how does it feel to be the Rose Queen?'

Cadi sighed happily. 'Wonderful. Deep down, I was dreading all the attention, but it's really quite pleasant.'

Poppy laughed. 'Especially when the fellers show their approval, eh?'

Lowering her gaze, Cadi tried to swallow her smile. 'Not necessarily. Besides, it's uncouth.'

'Uncouth my eye!' grinned Poppy. 'I saw your face when them lads whistled.'

'I suppose it's better than the alternative,' said Cadi.

Poppy gently smoothed one of the lace roses on Cadi's dress. 'Your mam's so talented – this is much

better than a new dress. I don't know why you ever thought people would poke fun.'

Cadi touched a couple of stray curls, which had escaped their pins and were now hanging just above her jawline. 'Because my dress is made out of sheets, and Cindy Holland's dress was made out of taffeta. Not only that, but you know what my hair can be like: half the time I look like I've been dragged through a hedge backwards. No matter how hard I try to make my curls behave, they have a life of their own. Quite frankly, I'm surprised I didn't wake up with a face full of pimples.'

Poppy gave her friend a wry smile. 'Cindy Holland fell lucky with her dress cos her sister works in the city. As for you breaking out in spots, I've never seen so much as a blemish on them fair cheeks of yours, never mind a pimple.'

'Like I say, it'd be just my luck. Besides, we all know that if summat's going to go wrong, it'll be me that gets it in the neck.'

Poppy furrowed her brow in confusion, until the penny dropped. 'You're not still harping on about that business with Aled Davies, are you?'

Cadi folded her arms across her chest. 'Yes, I jolly well am! That boy tried to run me over in his honking great tractor, and it's not the first time he's tried to hurt me, neither. Remember when he pulled the chair away as I was about to sit down?' She rubbed her coccyx as she recalled the incident.

Poppy hid her smile behind the palm of her hand. Aled Davies was the son of the local farmer, and he was considered by most to be quite the catch. Cadi, however, had him down as a big-head who believed

himself better than everyone else, something that she now affirmed.

‘I’m glad he’s not bothered coming today because he’d probably do something to ruin it for me.’ She fell into quiet contemplation before adding, ‘Like he always does.’

Poppy gave a shrewd smile. ‘I really believe he didn’t know you were about to sit down when he took that chair away; he wasn’t even looking in your direction – just like when he drove past with the tractor.’

‘Balderdash!’ snapped Cadi irritably. ‘That boy knows exactly what he’s doing. He simply feigns ignorance so that he can pretend it was an accident.’

Believing in fairness, Poppy cut Cadi short. ‘I was there both times, and the first time, Aled was talking to one of his teachers—’

Cadi cut across her. ‘Swot!’

Sighing, Poppy continued, ‘With his hand resting on the back of the chair, he had no idea you were about to sit down because he wasn’t looking at you, and it was the same when he drove past with the tractor – he was busy looking where he was going and it’s just a shame he didn’t see the puddle ...’

‘Puddle?’ cried Cadi. ‘I’d hardly call manure that’s fallen off the back of the muck-spreader a puddle.’

Poppy grimaced. ‘At least he stopped to apologise.’

Cadi folded her arms across her chest. ‘I never heard Aled apologising, and neither did you. You couldn’t have, because he was laughing too hard.’

Poppy turned away as she tried desperately to straighten her face. Poor Cadi had been engulfed in the manure, and unfortunately the overall effect had left

her looking rather comical. 'You must admit it was a little bit funny, and you did get the day off school.'

'That's as may be, but it doesn't take away from the fact that Aled's a mean, spoilt, spotty little oik.'

Tutting, Poppy wagged a reproving finger. 'Spotty little oik? That's not like you, Cadi. Besides, he must be getting on for six foot, so I'd hardly describe him as little.'

'He brings out the worst in me,' pouted Cadi. 'It's the way he struts around like he's the cock of the walk.'

Laughing, Poppy shook her head. 'Honestly, Cadi, how your father ever hopes to marry you off to that boy, I'll never know.'

Cadi's eyes widened. 'Me neither! Dad's convinced the pair of us make a good match – as is Aled's father, by all accounts. I thought arranged marriages went out with the Ark, but that's my dad all over, stuck in the past. Mam too, come to that.'

Poppy frowned. 'I wasn't aware they'd arranged your marriage ...'

Cadi grumbled irritably. 'May as flamin' well have done, the way they carry on.' She rolled her eyes. 'Every time Dad talks about Aled, it's to tell me how lucky I am to have a boy like him interested in me. All I can say is: he's a damned funny way of showing it.'

She cast her mind back to the day that the incident with the tractor and the manure had taken place. She had been standing in the parlour of their terraced house, gingerly removing her clothing.

'I'm sure it was an accident, it's as plain as the nose on your face how much that boy likes you,' said Dewi. 'You should count yourself a very lucky girl to have

someone of his standing taking an interest in you, it's not like he hasn't got his pick of the crop.'

'If that's how he shows his interest, then he can sodding well pick someone else,' Cadi said as she gathered her manure-ridden clothes into a bundle.

'I'm sure he didn't mean it, luv,' said her mother. 'Your father's right: accidents do happen.'

'But why do they always happen to me?' whined Cadi as she half skipped, half hopped across the earthen floor to the small stove where her mother stood, wooden tongs in hand, waiting to place Cadi's filthy clothes into a large pan of boiling water.

Arching his brow, Cadi's father turned to Arwel, the eldest of his three sons. 'Tell your sister: if a boy picks on a girl, it's only for one reason.'

'So you admit he's picking on me,' said Cadi, her teeth chattering with the cold. 'Well, if he wants my attention, he can find a better way than covering me in—'

'Cadi!' squeaked her mother. 'Mind what you say.' She scowled at her husband and son, who were both laughing raucously. 'Stop encouraging her.'

'She's right though,' chuckled Arwel. 'I can smell her from here.'

Coughing into his hand, Dewi composed himself. 'I've told you before, I've seen the way Aled looks at you when you're all stood waiting for the bus.' He placed a blanket around his daughter's shoulders. 'He can't keep his eyes off you. Quite frankly, that bus could pass him by and he wouldn't notice.'

'Probably hatching his next plan,' muttered Cadi, adding sulkily, 'I don't see why he bothers going to

school, considering that he reckons he knows it all already.'

Her mother gave a derisive laugh. 'For goodness' sake, Cadi, the boy offered to help you with your homework because he wanted an excuse to spend time with you.'

'Well, he needn't have bothered,' snapped Cadi. 'I don't need the help of any man – never have, never will.'

Her father rolled his eyes in exasperation. 'I'm surprised you've got the attention of any feller with an attitude like that.'

'Good! Because I don't want the attention of *any* feller, rich or otherwise,' muttered Cadi. She glanced at her mother, who had resumed her sewing beside the table. She loved her mother with all her heart, but she had no desire to end up working from dusk to dawn for little to no money, whilst forever trying to keep her home free from damp and coal dirt, with no heat or hot water, and all because she'd married a miner. No. If that's what marriage brought you, she would rather stay single for the rest of her life.

Now, as she stood up from the gold-painted wooden throne, she held her hand out for Poppy. 'Come on, they'll be announcing the winner of the Most Beautiful Baby competition in a minute, and I have to be there to hand over the prize.'

'You don't even like babies.'

Cadi hastily hushed her friend into silence as they approached the stage being used for the competitions. 'I can always pretend. Besides, I don't mind them if they're not covered in sick and smelling—'

'Like you did, the day Aled drove by,' quipped Poppy.

Shooting her a withering glance from over her shoulder, Cadi forced her lips into a smile as she left her friend to join the mayor.

After the photographer had taken a picture of Cadi handing over the prize to the mother, who was beaming with pride, Cadi returned to Poppy.

'I've got to go and help judge the beauty contest, are you coming?'

'Of course. I don't intend missing out on a single minute of my best pal's special day.'

Cadi linked her arm through Poppy's. 'Pity it's only for one day.'

'That's why you have to make the most of it,' said Poppy, 'and lap up all the attention because, according to me mam, you won't feel like this again until your wedding day.'

'Living where we do, we're lucky we even get that,' conceded Cadi.

In between judging the various competitions the girls managed to visit some of the stalls, trying their hand at both hoopla and the coconut shy; and it was here that Aled finally put in an appearance.

Seeing him standing in line behind her, Cadi took extra care with her aim, determined to be successful, and was annoyed when her last ball refused to make contact with the coconut.

Taking his turn, Aled flashed a smile at Cadi, who was trying to steer Poppy away. 'Going so soon? If you stick around, I can show you how it's done.'

Cadi heaved a withering sigh. 'I'd rather ...' She fell silent as they all watched the first coconut fall from its perch.

Aled grinned smugly at her as he juggled his next ball between his hands. 'It's all in the aim.'

Pulling Poppy away, Cadi waited until they were out of earshot before hissing, 'Can he really get any more obnoxious?'

Poppy shrugged. 'It's not his fault he's good at it.'

'But the way he gloats,' insisted Cadi, 'you heard him.'

Poppy look back at Aled with an air of uncertainty. 'Was he gloating or giving advice?'

Cadi rolled her eyes. 'It's the way he does it, like he's showing off.'

Aled had his arms around a young girl as he helped her perfect her aim. 'Perhaps he's just very confident?' hazarded Poppy.

'Cocky,' said Cadi simply, as she turned to follow Poppy's gaze. 'I remember the time he offered to help me with my homework. Mam reckons it was so that he could spend time with me, but she wasn't there when Aled asked. He was really patronising, like I was some sort of dunce who couldn't add two plus two.'

Poppy looked up. 'What homework was this?'

There was a long pause before Cadi finally admitted that it had been her maths homework.

'But you were always dreadful at maths,' said Poppy. 'Same as me. If I were you, I'd've jumped at the chance.'

'If it were anyone else, I probably would've, but not *him* – he only offered to help so that he could lord it over me.'

Seeing Aled standing with his hands in his trouser pockets, laughing at those who missed the coconuts, Poppy spoke thoughtfully. 'I'll grant you he's a bit of

a show-off, and he is a little big-headed, but aren't most boys?'

'Not my brothers,' said Cadi.

'But ...' Poppy tried to counteract Cadi's comment, but her friend was speaking the truth.

'You always try to see the good in everyone,' said Cadi, 'which is a truly endearing quality, but you're wasting your time when it comes to Aled.'

'I just want everyone to get along,' reasoned Poppy.

'Everyone else does,' said Cadi simply. 'And if Aled ever gets down off that high horse of his, things might be different, but I can't see that happening somehow.'

'People change as they grow up – I'm sure Aled won't be any different.' Poppy looked around the rest of the stalls, some of which were beginning to pack up. 'Come on, we'd best get a move on before everything's gone.'

It was much later that evening when the girls returned to their homes. Reluctantly Cadi had taken the dress off and hung it up in the back of her wardrobe, before she joined her family at the dinner table.

'Your Majesty,' said Alun, making a low bow.

'Tell him to stop being silly, Mam,' snapped Cadi, but everyone, including her mother, was chuckling. She glanced at the faces around the table, all of which were staring at the top of her head. Reaching up, she gently pulled the crown down and handed it to her mother with an embarrassed smile.

'I'll pop a couple of the roses between the pages of the encyclopaedia, as a keepsake,' said Jill.

Alun stifled a chuckle as he took the seat next to Cadi's. 'It's not like any of us is ever going to read it.'

Jill shot her son a withering glance as she carefully placed the roses in the middle of the book. 'Wash your hands, young man, and if you'd done a bit more reading, maybe you wouldn't be working down the pit.'

Dewi gripped his spoon in readiness for the stew that his wife was beginning to dole out. 'Your mam's right, you should listen to her.'

'You've worked down the pit your whole life,' objected Alun.

'Aye, cos I had no choice, but that doesn't mean to say I *like* working down the mines.'

With everyone ready, Dewi said grace, before they all tucked into the hearty fare.

Speaking between mouthfuls, Dewi turned his attention to his daughter. 'Beautiful, you were. I shouldn't be surprised if they didn't ask you to be Rose Queen again next year.'

Cadi beamed proudly. 'You know you can only be Rose Queen once, Dad. That's why I made the most of today.'

'Aye, you're right there, cariad, but look on the bright side: at least you've your wedding to look forward to,' he said as he skewered a chunk of potato with his fork.

Cadi let out a protest. 'Honestly, Dad! You're as bad as Mam. I don't even know if I want to get married, but if I do, it won't be for a long time yet.' *And certainly not to Aled*, she added in the privacy of her mind.

Dewi spoke disparagingly. 'What do you mean: you don't even know? What else are you planning on doing, if you aren't going to get wed?'

Sensing an argument brewing, Jill pointed at the platefuls of food. 'Less talking, more eating.'

Using his fingernail, Dewi picked a piece of mutton out from between his teeth. 'I don't see what's so bad about getting hitched. It's not like you're going to do anything else with your life.'

'Who says?' snapped Cadi irritably. 'I'm not going to work in the bakery for ever. I want more out of life than that. I want to do summat meaningful, a job where I get to call the shots, instead of being told what to do all the time.' Glancing at her mother, she felt a blush bloom on her cheeks. 'Look at Mam! Working all hours, and never any real recognition for her work; she deserves much better, but she won't get that working round here.'

'What do—' Alun began, but Jill had had enough.

'I didn't spend all that time preparing scrag end for it to go cold, so quit your mithering and get on with your supper,' adding as an afterthought, 'For the record, I'm happy with my lot, Cadi Williams. It may not be your cup of tea, but it suits me fine.'

For the next few minutes the room was silent, apart from the sound of spoons and forks scraping against the plates. When they had finished their supper, the men headed down to the pub whilst Cadi helped her mother collect the empty dishes.

'I'm not saying there's anything wrong with what you do, Mam, far from it. It's just not for me. I want a bit of excitement in my life, and a job where people respect me.'

With her hands covered in soapsuds, her mother itched her forehead with the back of her hand. 'Has all this come about because of today?'

'Not entirely, no. I've always known I wanted more out of life. I suppose you could say today simply confirmed it.'

Jill passed her daughter a plate to dry. 'I admire your gumption, but I think you may have difficulty finding what you're searching for.'

'I don't expect to be treated like a queen every day,' said Cadi, 'but I do want to feel like I matter, and I liked it when people asked for my judgement in the beauty contest. It made me feel important, and I want more of that.' She gazed wistfully at the plate she was drying. 'I want people to look up to me and value my opinion.'

Her mother carried the dishwater out of the back door and emptied it down the drain before coming back in. 'Sounds very much like the role of a mother to me.'

Cadi loved her mam and was keen not to upset her. 'Being a mother is a very important role, but not the one for me. I want to do something different – break away from the norm, pave my own way in life, be responsible for myself. Is that really so bad?'

Wiping her hands dry on her apron, Jill placed the cutlery in the drawer. 'Not at all, if you're a man ...' She wagged a chiding finger as her daughter made to protest. 'You may not like it, Cadi, but that's the long and short of it: we live in a man's world, and it's men what call the shots, not women.' She smiled kindly. 'Do you have any idea how hard it would be for a woman to take on the role of a man?'

'I only want a small piece of it,' said Cadi. 'There must be something a woman can do without a man's say-so?'

'If there is, then I've yet to hear about it – apart from being an actual queen, of course.' She gave her daughter a calculating stare. 'Tell you what, though, if there is

summat out there, I reckon you'll be the one to find it; be damned good at it too, I shouldn't wonder.'

'Thanks, Mam. It's nice to know someone has a bit of faith in me.'

Jill removed her pinny and hung it up by the stove. 'Your father loves you with all his heart, but he's very old-fashioned when it comes to marriage and a woman's role in the world. As far as he's concerned, a woman's place is by the sink whilst the man goes out to earn a wage.'

A line creased Cadi's brow. 'Then why doesn't he object to you working as a seamstress?'

Jill laughed. 'Because he's no choice! In case you hadn't noticed, miners don't make a lot of money. We barely scrape by as it is, which is why he's so keen for you to marry Aled. He knows you wouldn't have to struggle like the rest of us.'

'Only I don't need to marry in order to have a comfortable life,' said Cadi firmly. 'And I'm going to prove that to him if it's the last thing I do, just you wait and see.'

Her mother lifted a chiding eyebrow. 'And how do you intend to do that whilst living in Rhos?'

A picture of Rhos formed in Cadi's mind. The damp and dismal house she lived in, the slag heap that she could see from her bedroom window, and the rows of identical stone houses that she passed on her way to work in the bakery. Her mother was right: there was nothing for her in Rhos. She turned to face her mother, half a smile forming on her lips. 'I don't, which is why I'm going to leave.'