The House *at* Silvermoor

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Quercus

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For Phil,

For my parents

and

In memory of my grandfather, Leonard Rees,
who was a coal miner in South Wales

Part One

Chapter 1

Tommy

Summer 1897

''Scuse me, Schoolmaster.'

The bell had just rung to mark the end of our last day of school. The other boys had fled in an instant; a proud stampede. For them, finishing school meant a new stage of life; the chance to bring a wage to their families. Stepping into the shoes of generations, rising to the challenges of our heritage: that's what becoming a man meant on the coalfields. But I lingered.

I watched as Mr Latimer tidied his desk and shook out the jacket that hung on his chair while he delivered his lessons. White chalk dust had settled on top of the coal dust that we all wore and breathed. We swallowed it when we licked our lips. The mingled black and white always gave Latimer a curiously grey and muted appearance.

He looked up. 'Tommy Green. Still here, lad? Do you want something?'

'I'd value a word, sir, just a moment of tha time.'

Latimer continued to shake his jacket and line up his chalks. I fidgeted, unsure what to do with my hands. I didn't even know what enquiry to make. I knew of nothing but coal mining and earls. What should I ask?

'Thank you, sir. It's just, you see, sir . . .' I took a deep breath. 'Tha's always been good enough to say I'm fair at school, sir.'

I hoped he might help me then. Perhaps chime in with, 'You certainly are, Tommy! In all my years' teaching I've never seen such a promising lad. You'll be wasted in the mines . . .'

But he said nothing. He dusted off the blackboard, erasing the proverbs and verses from which we had drawn our final instruction in spelling and morality. I saw my hopes swept off with them.

Over the years, I'd worked hard in school, drawn praise from Schoolmaster. I'd won prizes, three years in a row, and had them presented to me by the smiling earl at Sunday school, with my ma in a bonnet clapping wearily along. It was the closest most of us had ever been to the earl and each time he shook my hand and called me a bright boy. The second time I was prepared to greet him like an old acquaintance but he showed no sign of recognising that I was the same bright boy as before.

The third time, he was accompanied by his six-year-old son.

Young Lord Walter Sedgewick's christening had been held on my fifth birthday and all the villagers had been invited to Silvermoor for the celebrations, which had culminated in fireworks. The fact had always made me fancy an affinity between us. We shook hands too, he as solemn as a little judge. I stared fiercely into his eyes. *Don't you know me?* I pleaded silently. *You were christened on my birthday, we are linked*. But he only looked a little frightened. When I released him, he brushed off a smudge of coal that I'd left on his cuff.

It wasn't only in school that I'd proved myself. I'd also satisfied my father in a dozen small challenges of manhood. I'd shot rabbits – and he clipped me when I cried. I'd stayed locked in the coal house all night when I was nine – to get me used to facing darkness alone, he said. I'd stood over corpses and gazed into their wide eyes – there was death aplenty before me, he said.

I'd dreamed – oh, how I'd dreamed – of leaving Grindley and going far away. I dreamed of meeting people who did and talked of other things besides mining. I dreamed of rooms full of books. But whenever these hopes spilled unwitting from my boyish lips, I'd earn a lashing from my father. So I learned to stay quiet.

When I was very young, my favourite daydream was that one day the earl would come to our cottage and claim me as his own long-lost son and brother to Walter. I would go to live at Silvermoor and ride ponies every day. But when I was older,

and came to understand such matters, I realised that this fantasy could only come about through my mother's disgrace – and *that* could not be unless she were a very different sort of person.

Despite all my efforts to grow up right, life had shown me the same number of avenues that it showed us all – one. To work at the mine. So here I stood, aged twelve, desperately hoping to avert my destiny.

Latimer turned to his next task, the repositioning of books in the wooden cupboard we called a library.

'I just wondered, sir, if there might be . . . if I might . . . ?'

I'd never so badly needed to go to the toilet but I steeled myself. 'Is there more schoolin' to be done, sir? And can I do it? Is there summat I can do in life other than the mines? Canst tha help me, Schoolmaster? Please.'

'So there it is,' he said at last, putting on his jacket. 'Fair at book learning, perhaps, but the important lessons have clearly passed you by. Humility, acceptance, duty. You're a coal miner's son, Tommy, a coal miner's grandson. Do you disrespect them and what they do?'

'No, no!' I hastened. 'It's nowt like that, sir . . . But I know there's a world out there, beyond Grindley. I know there are those as *don't* work underground and I only wondered if there's a way for me to be one of them. I disrespect no one, sir.'

'I see.' He sat down and steepled his hands on the desk in front of him. Years I had sat and watched Mr Latimer at that desk. 'I'm grieved, Green, if I have given you false pride. It's

true that you have come top in class numerous times, but this merely reflects the sad lack of basic intelligence possessed by the majority of Grindley children. It isn't their fault, it's breeding. Someone has to come top, Tommy. In a tiny village school where only the dullest of intellects grasp for a basic understanding, that someone was you.'

I felt a rush fill my head but I did not cry, another thing I had conquered for my father.

'But, but, sir . . . the earl . . .'

He looked at me sharply then. 'What about the earl?'

'He . . . he called us a bright boy. When he give us me prize.'

He snorted. 'He'd hardly call you a dunce at a prize-giving. Merely good manners, Green, not something to take to heart. It's all relative, you understand. Relative.'

I didn't understand, but I struggled to, as was my habit when something was new to me, or difficult. 'Does tha mean I'm *not* bright, Schoolmaster, that I only seem that way compared to some?'

His face lost some of its anger. 'Green, lad. You must understand, the world out there is more complex and difficult than you could ever imagine. Its realms and reaches are not for the likes of you. Here, you may be the star pupil. Out there, you would be nothing. You would be crushed in an instant, as surely as those men were crushed in White Arrow Drift Mine years ago. Does the minister not tell us that we are born into our right place on this earth? Do you doubt God's plan?'

I was tongue-tied. In quite real terms, my tongue had lodged in my throat in a glutinous lump, and I could neither swallow nor speak. I hung my head and I stood there and burned.

'I should think not,' he concluded, as if I had agreed with him. 'Off with you now, lad, and in recognition of your efforts in this classroom I'll not tell your father of this. Mention it again and I'll see to it he gives you a sound thrashing to rid you of your notions.'

It would be the thrashing of my life, I knew. I whispered, 'Then there's really . . . nothing? For me?'

'Nothing,' he agreed.

I turned and left the schoolroom for the last time. At the door no sense or wisdom could prevent me from turning and asking one last question. 'What were *your* father, sir? Was he a schoolmaster too?'

The board duster came hurtling through the air with a wicked accuracy. '*Out*, Green!'

Chapter 2

Tommy

I wended my way home greatly dispirited. Hearing that I wasn't sufficiently bright to make a good fist of aught but this life was as great a loss to me as when my brother Dan died in the pit last year. But I knew I must shake it off before Da got home. He'd often told us that back in the old days, before the law had changed, children were sent to work in the mines at the age of five. His tone suggested a certain nostalgia for that time.

I arrived home to find my brother John sloshing in the tin bath in the yard. 'All right, our Tom?' he asked.

His clothes had been whipped away by Mercy, my eldest sister, who was at the laundry tub, and a pair of clean long johns was slung over the wall. Needless to say, those of us who worked were utterly barred from the house before washing.

I stepped into the back room through the only door we ever used, where Ma was cooking something with bacon. The

housing was better in Grindley than in many a pit village. We had two rooms downstairs and decent sizes at that. Twelve by twelve, one of them. Ernest and Alfie sat on the floor, playing jacks. My middle sister Mary was in a corner, sewing and sulking. She was always sulky since our Jimmy, who was her twin, had started down the pit last year, and she'd never been the smiliest lass to begin with. Grandma was peeling potatoes by the stove. Year round she sat there – she felt the cold.

'Where's our Con?' I asked Ma, giving her a kiss and tearing a piece of bread from the loaf that was cooling on the side. Connie was the little one, my favourite.

'I don't know,' Ma answered, flustered. 'I can't keep track of you all any more. My head's not what it used to be since our Dan went.'

It was true that my formerly calm, clever mother had gone to pieces since we lost Dan. Not in any way that a neighbour would recognise – she continued to cook and clean and sew our buttons and organise us all. But inside our cottage we saw the changes in her. She was often distracted, quick to tears. She forgot things she would never have forgotten before and we all knew that a piece of her was away with Dan.

He'd been the handsomest of us brothers. Only seventeen when he died. No big disaster, no astonishing accident. Just that Ned Vale, the timberer working behind him that day, hadn't shored up the ceiling sufficiently. Or he had, depending who you spoke to. It had never happened before with Ned's props so

maybe it was just one of those things. Down came the ceiling, crushing our Dan. Ned was inconsolable. It was the only time I'd ever seen Da cry.

No report reached the newspapers – that only happened when many lives were lost. The more the better, from the point of view of the papers, who wanted sensational reading. For the miners, too, those stories made greater leverage to campaign for better conditions. But no newspaper could have altered the horror of what happened to him, three hundred feet below ground, alone in the dark . . . the sudden drop of rock . . . Had it been quick – Dan snuffed out in an instant – or had he lain there a long while, knowing death was coming?

The door burst open and John came in from his bath, followed by Mercy, looking red-faced and hot, followed soon after by Grandpa and Connie, who was clutching a small bucket and chuckling with glee.

'I done it, Mamma!' she piped. 'I catched a fish!' She beamed when she saw me, and threw her arms around me, her bucket clonking my leg.

'Ouch!'

'Sorry! Look at my fish, Tommy!' I peered in to see one very small silver minnow dead at the bottom.

'I took her to the stream,' Grandpa explained. 'She wanted to have a hand in the supper.'

'I said thank you to the fish for being caught,' Connie explained, slapping the minnow triumphantly onto the table.

'And to the fish's ma and da for letting me have their bairn. And to the stream for letting me fish in it.'

'Where *does* she get these notions?' marvelled my mother, moving the fish to one side.

After dinner, when the little ones had climbed the ladder to bed and Grandma and Grandpa were tucked into their folding bed under the stairs in the corner of the kitchen, the rest of us sat in the front room, Ma playing the harmonium softly: 'His Mercy Shall Raise Me Up'. Mercy was crocheting. Mary rested her head on Jimmy's shoulder, her face more content now that her twin was home. George and John were playing cards. These short intervals of peace in the evenings meant a great deal to me.

Then my father caught my eye and jerked his head towards the door, lifting a finger to pursed lips.

'Time for a smoke then,' he said, taking up his pipe and heading out.

I waited a convincing moment or two then sauntered after him. He was sitting on the wall, tapping his pipe bowl. Away down the row other neighbours were doing the same. He had swung his legs over to face the street and other people's houses, set in a parallel row to ours. I sat beside him, facing our house.

'I'm takin' you tonight,' he said without preamble. 'I won't take Jimmy now he's down pit. Food's scarce and I need a hand.'

I stayed silent, digesting it.

'Say nowt to tha mother,' Da said unnecessarily. Ma regularly berated Da for taking her sons poaching. Our deaths couldn't come fast enough for him, she accused him each time a new one of us did it. We'd all be shot or hanged, she railed, but there, at least we'd be saved from the mines. Da took no notice but I don't think he liked it.

'I'll not,' I assured him. 'What time, Da?'

'Midnight. There's a good moon tonight. Mind you learn the ways whilst you can see. Now go on. Leave us finish me pipe.'

At midnight I stole from the bed. Ernest's feet were lodged under my chin, an arm of John's was thrown over me and my own left leg was trapped beneath a snoring George. Never mind the hazards of poaching, getting out without waking everyone was my first challenge.

Da was waiting in the yard, grim-faced as usual, and we set off without a word. Even so, it felt like high adventure. It would take a worse father than mine for a boy not to feel the thrill of venturing out in the moonlight with him.

Poaching was illegal, of course, and risky, but I was excited to set foot on the Silvermoor estate again. The glorious memory of my fifth birthday had never faded and my secret fascination with the gentry had not waned. But when we reached the turning for Silvermoor my father kept walking.

'Where are we going, Da?'

'Can't go to Silvermoor a while. I had a run-in last week.'

'Then . . . ?'

He didn't answer. Man of few words, my father.

We walked a couple of miles in the direction of Arden, the next village over. It dawned on me that the next big estate we would reach was Heston Manor and fear stilled my blood. Heston belonged to the Barridges, the other coal-owning family in our area. They owned three mines and worked their men harder than dogs. When we in Grindley told ourselves we were lucky to work for the Sedgewicks of Silvermoor, since there were others far worse, it was the Barridges we meant.

Twenty years ago, there had been an explosion in one of the Barridge pits, caused by firedamp, one of the noxious gases that made life underground so very hazardous. The deputy, a very experienced man, had raised concerns about that stretch of tunnel with Winthrop Barridge, who told him to carry on. Hundreds of men were killed. I could scarcely believe a man could be so uncaring. All those deaths, so unnecessary.

And Winthrop Barridge paid not one penny of compensation to the widows. The very next day they were ordered to leave. So many grieving women and children with nowhere to live and no means at all. It was said that he had a lump of coal for a heart.

The women protested, camping at the edge of the Heston estate. Barridge set his dogs on them. They went to a local newspaper, which made much, for a time, of the greedy and merciless mine owners. Barridge paid them off and the story

died. Those widows and bairns disappeared to who knew what fate, while Winthrop Barridge brought in new men to work his Hepzibah mine and toasted the birth of twin sons with champagne.

The story summed up everything we knew about the Barridge clan. And now we were going to poach on their land.

Heston was empty now. Perhaps God had punished old Barridge for his coal-heartedness, for six years ago his eldest son, the Barridge heir, had met a tragic end. A keen horseman, he'd been thrown from a new mount. Soon afterwards, the Barridges had moved to their other Yorkshire home, which was smaller than Heston but free of bad memories. In our families we could not indulge our losses in such a way.

Heston Manor was a chilling place, fenced, walled, chained and in all other ways forbidden. The woods were thick with game but it was common knowledge that although the Barridges weren't around to roast their rabbits, they didn't want anyone else to get them either. Paulson, their groundsman, was a violent man with a zeal for catching poachers. I'd heard the place was trapped and patrolled nightlong by Paulson, with his henchmen and three great black hounds. Since my father was taking me there, I could only assume that these rumours were greatly exaggerated.

'Now, lad,' said Da, coming to a halt in the shadows. 'Tha's heard the stories of this place? Aye, well, they're all true. There's only so far we dare go, a corner or two that seem to slip old

Paulson's notice. Stick with me and do as I say, you hear me? That man will string you up by the ankles if he catches you.'

I nodded, numb with disbelief that we were about to cross such an inviolable boundary. A tall, thick hedge, bristling with nettle and briar, barred our way like something from a tale. It seemed positively alive with ill intent. But Da showed me a small area where it was sparser. Leaves and more pliable branches had been pulled across, but the moonlight showed it up like the bald patch on Preacher Tawney's head. He combed his hair across it, but it was there nonetheless. Da parted the branches and nodded for me to slip through. He followed and put his hand on my shoulder for a minute while I looked around. We were surrounded by trees.

'Don't be deceived,' murmured Da, close in my ear. 'We're not safe, keep a sharp eye at all times. If you see anyone, even far off, run and get out. They've got dogs like you've never seen. Fastest bastards I ever knew. We've got two paths we can use. I'll show you.'

I nodded, nervous, but probably not as nervous as I should have been. It all felt like a dream. We walked less than half a mile along a very thin path that threaded through the brambles. In Da's traps we found two rabbits and a pheasant. In the weird white light his face wore a look of determined victory. We slung the game in a bag and he showed me how to reset the traps.

'See that pine tree,' he said then. 'The tall, thin one next to

the fat bushes? That's our limit. Go no further, never ever, if you value your life. Understand me, son?'

'I understand,' I whispered. He rarely called any of us that so I knew he was deadly serious.

'I'll show you why,' he said, leading me to the thin pine. The moon had vanished for a moment behind a cloud. When it sailed out again, he pointed. I could see nothing and frowned but he clipped the side of my head and I looked again. Then I saw it. A thin, thin line, like a hair, across the path. I looked at Da in shock.

'That's not . . . ?'

He nodded. 'Shotgun's in t'bushes. That string'll trigger it. They've been illegal eighty years now, but Paulson still uses them. Traps too – this place is crackling with them. So where do you stop, lad?'

'At the thin pine by the fat bushes.'

He nodded. 'Back we go then. You lead, show me you've remembered the way.'

I had a good memory for the countryside and the moon was bright. I only threatened to veer off the path once and Da slapped the side of my head again so the right way was lodged in there good and proper.

The other path took us an even shorter distance; Da was playing it safe, staying well within the boundaries of peril. His traps yielded nothing but a squirrel this time. Da cursed softly and threw the small, broken body into the bracken. He

showed me how important it was to pull the foliage back over the traps, to keep them concealed. 'We don't want Paulson on the lookout in our patch.'

Then he pointed. 'That tump there? That funny hillock just off the path? That's where you stop.' He marched me up to it. I didn't even want to wonder how he had found all this out. Da took up a stout stick and threw it just ahead. I hadn't seen the trap, veiled as it was by ferns, but I saw its grey glint as it sprang shut. It wasn't a small trap like Da's; it was intended for poachers, not game. There was a loud snap and the stick was cracked in two, bits of wood flying up. I swallowed.

'Could be yer leg,' Da said briefly. Then, with our small, hard-won booty, we went home again.

Chapter 3

Josie

April 1898

There was always a sense of rivalry between Arden, which was our village, and Grindley, three miles over. I took quite some foolish pride in coming from Arden because it had the prettier name; as a girl I required nothing more from my place of origin. Looking back, I marvel at my complacency. A miner's daughter I was, a miner's wife I would one day be and Arden was where I lived. All that changed the day I met Tommy Green.

My sister Alice was getting married. I'd been charged with fetching violets for her to wind in her hair, to bring out the colour of her cornflower-blue eyes. Alice and her perfect colouring and angelic face! Why should *she* care about bringing out her eyes? She was only marrying Fred Deacon. He was squat and swarthy and I wouldn't have married him if you'd

paid me five whole pounds. She said she loved him but I think she loved the overwinder's job that would be his when his father died. I think she especially loved the large cottage that came with it.

It was late April. Didn't think of that when they sent me out for violets, did they? The flowers were gone from the lanes by then but I knew where they still grew. I set off to my secret place, a small corner of the old Barridge estate, Heston. They'd have killed me if they'd known I went there, for a fact.

The Barridges were the landowners, our gentry. Our homes, our labours, all belonged to them. Our souls too, some said. Once, the Barridges had lived at Heston Manor, and held balls and dinners and taken part in the usual customs of the wildly rich. But now Heston was empty and abandoned and *forbidden*.

That was one thing I envied the Grindley lot. *They* had gentry they could see and tug their caps to and chatter about. Ours were too far off now for all that. I'd never seen a lord or lady, never glimpsed a shiny carriage. Only the men ever saw a Barridge, for, despite the distance, despite his age and whatever the weather, Winthrop Barridge visited his mines *every single day*. That was not a good thing, they said.

It was known across the county that he was a hard master. Back then I didn't fully understand what that meant. All I knew was that the family wasn't liked, but what was that to me? It wasn't as though I would ever cross paths with any of them.

I sauntered through the lanes, enjoying the weather, until I

came to a rocky incline that rose to an old stone wall. Behind it was a copse of trees, pressing to get out. In one place the wall had crumbled and the gap had been stopped up with a wooden fence but the boards had rotted and it was easy enough to squeeze through. I doubted the gamekeeper ever bothered with this dense tangle; there was estate aplenty to patrol and nothing here but wildflowers and bramble. All I did, once I was in, was look out. I would peer through the wooden boards, observing the sweep of countryside from a landowner's perspective. I would enjoy the peace, which I never got at home, and after a while I would leave.

The woods were full of bluebells and violets this time of year and they were bluer, brighter than elsewhere because the thick trees protected them from the coal dust in the air. It was rare to see pure colour, unclouded by grey. I gathered a coronet's worth of violets for Alice and an armload of bluebells for me then headed home. It should have been such an uneventful morning.

But then I met the gamekeeper coming the other way. I'd never seen him before but I knew him at once, by his gaiters and boots, and his hat bristling with pheasant feathers. And by the shotgun hanging at his side. And the swing of his stride, tramping the lanes as if he owned them. I thanked God that I was back where I had a perfect right to be.

'Good morning, sir,' I said, a little perky.

'Where did you get those flowers, girl?' he demanded.

I flushed. I know I did. With my complexion you can't get away with anything. I hate my red hair and my white skin. Never mind vanity, they're impractical. Now Alice, *she* could tell a barefaced lie and stay just the colour of ripened corn. But what concern could he have with a twelve-year-old girl carrying wildflowers?

He had concern aplenty.

'Did you steal them from Heston?' he boomed. I was suddenly aware of the wide, silent countryside spreading in every direction around me. 'Have you been trespassing, girl? Answer me!'

'They're for my sister's wedding, sir!' I was gabbling. 'Our Alice. She's getting married at one. I'd best get back or me mam will kill me. Nice to meet you, sir. Good day.'

'Not so fast!' He yanked my arm and the bluebells scattered in the lane. The violets were tucked into my pinny pocket so at least they were safe.

'No!' I cried, shocked at the waste, the petty black and white of it all.

'How did you get in?' he roared in my face, still holding my arm. 'Can't you read the signs, girl? Perhaps you can't read. They say, *Trespassers will be prosecuted*. What do you say to that?'

'I weren't trespassin'!' I wailed. 'I swear!'

'Then where did you pick them? Not a great many bluebells in the hedge, are there?'

'Sir, they're nowt but flowers!'

'To Heston flowers you have no right and no entitlement. I ask you again: how did you get in?'

'I were at Grindley, sir! There's bluebells in the lanes at Grindley, only go and see 'em.'

He looked at me disbelievingly. 'You walked all the way to Grindley, to fetch flowers for your sister?'

'I did! For her wedding, sir. A special day.'

He let go of my arm. 'What's your father's name?'

Everything inside me stilled. We all knew the trouble that men like this, men who had the ear of the family, could cause for the likes of my father. I couldn't tell him the truth. 'Broad, sir, Thomas Broad.'

'And your name, girl?'

'Lizzie.'

'Well, Lizzie Broad, you'd best go on back to Grindley, hadn't you, and pick more flowers for your sister? These are all quite spoiled now,' he said, pacing back and forth over my bluebells, crushing their stems and grinding their lovely heads into the ground.

'Aye, sir. I'd best. If that's all, sir.'

'Don't let me catch you this close to Heston again.'

I turned tail and fled towards Grindley, which was in the opposite direction from where I needed to go. After a while I looked back over my shoulder. He wasn't following. He'd turned off the lane and was cresting the hill towards Heston. Even so, I must have run half a mile before I let myself stop

and think about turning back. And when I did I found myself crying. I'd been so cocky and now I felt scared and stupid. God, I hoped that man didn't go to Arden and ask about for a Thomas or a Lizzie Broad, for no such folk existed.

I'd never had anything I'd wanted snatched away from me before, and the reason for that, I realised, was that I never wanted anything. When something as small as wildflowers was denied you, well, there was some sort of shame in that.

The next minute I heard whistling and a lad about my own age strode into view. I gasped in annoyance and dragged my sleeve over my wet face. Was no one at home this Sunday, or in church? Must they all tramp the lanes between Arden and Grindley and get in my way?

'How do?' said the boy, tugging his cap.

'Good day,' I said, giving myself airs because he was a Grindley lad, I'm not sure why. I took my cue from the adults, I suppose. The men always swore that Grindley men were soft, that the Sedgewicks, the family for whom they worked, were soft, that a Grindley lass should count herself lucky to marry an Arden man. (Despite the fact that had never happened in living memory.) In time I came to learn that Grindley folk were as proud to be them as we were to be us, a discovery which astonished me at first.

He smiled as if I'd said something funny, which made me puff myself up all the more. I was especially irritated because I really needed to turn around and start for home. If I did it

now, I'd look as if I were following this young fellow-me-lad. I was quite sure he rated himself enough to think it. He was all down at heel and covered in coal dust, as we all were, but he was good-looking. His pond-green eyes were ever so slightly bulbous – not enough to look strange, just enough to be striking. Froggy eyes, I thought at once; they gave him an open and enquiring look. He was tall – that wouldn't help him down the pit – with dark curly hair and an air about him. That's all I could think then, that he had an air. I hesitated, because I didn't know which way to walk and because I was curious.

'Fine day,' he remarked and his striking eyes still danced on me as if I were a delight – or a great source of amusement.

'Look,' I said. 'I'll be honest. I have to turn around and go home. I need to get back for me sister's wedding and me ma will kill us I've been out that long. But now tha's happened along and I don't want you to think I'm following you. I'm sure the girls in Grindley consider you very fine and all but I'm an Arden lass and we stick to our own. So don't think owt.' And I turned round and marched ahead of him, though I don't know how I thought I'd maintain my lead. He was tall, as I've said, and I was ever so medium-sized.

'Would you like me to turn round so you don't think I'm following you neither?' he called after me, cheekily I thought.

I sniffed. 'I'm sure it makes no difference to me where you go. Enjoy your walk, why don't you.'

He laughed aloud, a surprising burst of sound on that hushed

Sunday morning. 'I'll carry on then, seeing as it's all the same to you,' he informed me and fell into step at my side. 'As we're companions of the road, introductions seem proper,' he said. 'I'm Tommy Green of Grindley.'

I looked at him sideways, getting a little puffed but not wanting to slow my pace. Truth be told, I didn't want him to keep up his same long stride and pull away from me. 'Josie Westgate of Arden.'

'Pleased to meet you. If your sister's getting' married, and your ma wants you home, why were you racing as fast as your little legs could carry you away from Arden?'

'I do *not* have little legs!' I said indignantly, stopping dead, gasping for breath. 'I have perfectly normal legs for a lass my age.'

'A lass of . . . ?'

'I'm twelve year old, Tommy Green, though it's nowt of your business. And I was heading to Grindley, if you must know, because I had a run-in with the old gamekeeper and I had to get away. And are you always so full of questions?'

He stopped too and sighed. 'Aye. I am. Everyone tells me so. Old Paulson do you mean? Him as wears the feathers an' blots out the sun?'

I couldn't help but giggle. 'Aye, him.'

'What's he doing picking on a young girl then?'

'I had bluebells . . .' I hesitated; I hadn't told a soul about my excursions to the forbidden estate so why would I tell a

complete stranger? Yet somehow I wanted to. We came to the place in the lane where my beautiful flowers were spilled and trampled. I gestured at them sadly. 'He thought I'd stolen them from Heston. He were that angry. I told him I'd got them from Grindley lanes to get out of trouble and he said I'd best go back and get some more. So I had to go that way.'

He stared at me. 'And did you? Get them from Heston?' He looked intrigued and admiring and worried all at once.

'See up there?' I pointed and he followed my gaze. 'There's a gap in't wall. I don't go far, only into the woods, but it's quiet and the flowers are beautiful.'

'They *were* beautiful,' he murmured, picking up two or three stems from the ground but discarding them again when he saw how damaged they were.

'Only he called it stealing,' I went on, glad to have someone to confide in. 'And he asked me da's name, so I made it up, and now I'm that scared he'll go to Arden demanding to see Thomas Broad and there's no such man. An' now I'll have to spend the rest of me life in hiding. There's no mistaking me with this hair.' I pulled a long strand of it away from my face and inspected it. As red as it had been that morning. And every morning. 'Oh, well done, Josie Westgate,' I concluded bitterly. 'A nice pickle tha's made of this one.' We were walking again now, matching each other stride for stride and comfortable, as if the differences in our legs didn't matter after all.

'Well, I think you were brave,' he said. 'Don't worry. I reckon he just wanted to put the fear of God into you so you wouldn't go back to Heston. You shouldn't, by the way, he's a nasty man with a crew of nasty men working for him. They're no company you'd want to keep.'

'And how do *you* know?'

'I've been poaching there for months,' he said. 'Me da's told me stories that'd make your hair curl.'

I was horrified and impressed by his daring and astonished at his honesty. 'How old are you then?' I asked.

'Almost thirteen.'

'At surface?' Boys around here left school at twelve, did surface work until they were fourteen, and then they went underground.

'Aye. Crooked Ash.'

'Does tha like it?'

He snorted. 'Like it? Nay, I've no liking for any of it. It's better than it'll be when I go underground, I know that, but if the best you can say about something is, "I probably won't die today," then it's not saying much, is it?'

Now that he said it, I had to agree that it wasn't. His logic was clear but I'd never heard my father or my brother Bert say such a thing. 'But . . . it's our *lives* . . .' I breathed, wondering at his audacity. 'I mean, it's what we *do*, isn't it?'

'Aye, it is,' he conceded. 'But we don't have to like it.'

'Don't we?'

'Coal mining,' he said, adopting the tone of a schoolteacher addressing a class, 'is a mighty industry. For a hundred years now it's been making money, *lots* of money, for our lords and masters. Not so much for us, it must be said,' he added. 'It's dangerous, it's difficult, but the masters don't concern themselves with that bit of it. The dangers and the difficulties, they're for the likes of us. *We* can't expect better, simple folk like us who wouldn't know what to do with a better life if we had it. It's what we're bred for, to risk our lives for them. It's our path to glory.'

I gawped. He had quite the lyrical flight, did Tommy Green of Grindley. I hadn't heard anyone else talk this way, but I did recognise a degree of sarcasm when I heard it.

'Most say it's a fine system, as God ordered it, and perfect in its simplicity,' he went on. 'I say it's a fool of a system and the masters could stand to think a lot more than they do about the men they work to death and what they might want or be capable of. Some masters are better than others, and yours are the worst of all.'

I opened my mouth automatically to defend Arden but something stopped me. I wanted to know. 'If it's so bad,' I interrupted, 'why do so many do it?' In school, when we asked a question, we got a cuff and were told we were stupid. But Tommy didn't make me feel stupid.

'Good question. Because a man must earn a wage. He must be able to support his family. And he's grown up being told

that this is the only way he can do it. So he never wonders what other capabilities he might have.'

I saw him clearly then. 'But you wonder, don't you, Tommy Green?'

'I have wondered, aye. But it's been carefully explained to me that there's nothing to me but arms for hewing and legs for carrying and a head for cracking on a deep stone ceiling. So underground I go when the time comes.'

'And you're scared.'

'Course I am.'

No Arden lad would ever admit to being afraid. But Tommy said it like it was the most natural thing in the world. And now I came to think of it, it was.

I put my hand on his arm, not knowing why. 'Why, Tommy Green,' I said at last, 'are you a . . . a . . . ?' I'd always tried to ignore talk of politics at home. What young girl is interested in that? And I preferred to think that our lives were not so very bad. But now I struggled to remember a word I'd heard the men use, a word I thought referred to the sorts of sentiments Tommy was expressing. 'Are you a . . . revolution?' I knew I was a couple of syllables short, but I couldn't call it exactly to mind.

He laughed again. Not scornful, like my brother, but good-natured as if, despite all his anger, there was something untouched in him. 'Aye, that's me, Josie. A walking, talking one-man, revolution. Change the world I would, if I could.'

'And will you?'

'Nay. I'm nowt but a lad. There's a whole system in place, a century of history behind us. I'll change nothing. I'll go about my work, same as all of us, accepting my lot. Only I did wish I might . . . ah, never mind.'

'What?' I asked. I, who had never wished or dreamed or questioned, badly wanted to know what his wishes were.

'I'll tell you another time. Look, there's Arden. Go and see your sister wed, and stay away from Heston. I mean it. That place is more deadly than you could ever imagine.'

He was right: we were looking down the last slope before Arden and could see the cottages and the schoolhouse and the church tower. The wedding bells were ringing. I would be skinned.

'Well,' I said, sticking out my hand. 'Thanks for the lesson and good luck with your wishes, whatever they may be. Ta-ra, Grindley lad.'

He shook my hand and grinned. 'Ta-ra, Arden lass.' I picked up my skirts and ran. 'I like your hair,' he called after me. It was wriggling around my face like so many red snakes. Cheeky bugger. Like my hair indeed! Alice was the one with the flaxen braids, fair as a princess. If he'd said my eyes, I might have believed him. They were dark as sloes and rather handsome *I* thought. But no one ever called me the girl with beautiful dark eyes. I was always just 'the red-head'.

The violets were limp in my apron pocket when I got back,

their delicate petals so dark and damp they looked as though they were crying. I found my family already on the march to the church. I flung the violets at my mother, who gave me a sharp slap then wound them hastily into Alice's hair anyway; always reluctant to change a plan in the face of circumstance was Ma. She ripped off my apron and stowed it in a bush to collect later. She gave an expressive look up and down my person and shook her head in shame. She drew a comb from a pocket and dragged it through my hair, so that I was in tears all the way through the psalms. Alice married Fred and looked a picture.

Afterwards, when I fetched my apron from the bush, it fell open to reveal a bunch of shining, lovely bluebells.