

# HIDE AND SEEK

A BLETCHLEY PARK  
MYSTERY



RHIAN TRACEY



## Prologue

‘How am I supposed to contact you?’ his father hissed through gritted teeth. ‘You don’t even know where you’re going to live! You’re making a show of me. People will talk.’

Ned had walked in on another argument between his parents. Arguing was all they seemed to do since the war broke out and his mother had started working, much against his father’s wishes.

‘I’ll write as soon as Miriam’s found us digs,’ his mother replied calmly, though her cracking voice betrayed her. ‘I’ll send our forwarding address. And you can post anything to us via the National Gallery, of course.’

What was she talking about? Ned closed the kitchen door behind him and sat down at the table. His mother smiled at him and automatically began slicing bread, even though he hadn’t washed his hands yet.

‘Digs! Hark at her. Digs!’ his father said to Ned, as if it was the most ridiculous thing he’d ever heard.

Of course, he knew better than to respond. His father wasn’t looking for an opinion.



‘And who’s this Miriam when she’s at home?’ his father snapped, crashing his teacup onto its saucer.

Ned had never heard his mother speak about a Miriam before. In fact, he realised, his mother didn’t really have any friends. His father didn’t like strangers in the house. Didn’t much like them outside the house either.

‘A friend who works for the Foreign Office,’ his mother replied. ‘She’s arranged our travel passes. You needn’t worry.’

‘Worry! Of course I’m worried. You’re talking about swanning off to another country. You’re my wife! You’ve responsibilities here, Helen. I’m putting my foot down!’

Ned gasped. Another country? Where could they possibly be going?

‘I’ve signed the Official Secrets Act; you know I have,’ his mother said. Clearly it wasn’t the first time she’d reminded him of this. ‘I really can’t tell you any more than I already have.’

Ned knew from experience that the penalty for breaking the Official Secrets Act was prison – or worse, death by firing squad! Even if you were a child. You kept your mouth shut and got the job done. Or else.

‘That business at the brickyard’s gone to your head. I said it was a mistake, didn’t I? Getting ideas above your station. Working for the National Gallery indeed!’ His father was referring to the top-secret work Ned and his friends Robyn and Mary had uncovered at Bletchley Park. Top-secret work that it turned out his mother had been involved in! She had been working at Bletchley brickyard, helping to keep artwork out of enemy hands by taking it out of London to

an unknown location. And now it seemed they wanted her to get even more involved.

‘I’m sure they can find someone else to fetch their cups of tea,’ his father ranted on. ‘You’ve turned the boy’s head too, with all this war-effort talk. Bad enough that he’s prancing about the gardens, planting flowers like a girl, instead of working with me in the funeral parlour.’

His father said ‘girl’ as if it was a bad thing; the girls Ned knew were just as good as any boy. And he was proud to be an apprentice gardener at Bletchley Park, although he had to admit that Mary and Robyn’s new roles were more exciting. Life had become a whole lot more interesting since he’d first made friends with those two. Robyn had worked with the carrier pigeons up in the lofts and Mary had been a bicycle messenger, roaming all over the park to deliver top-secret mail. Between them they’d kept a close eye on the thousands of adults working at Bletchley – especially a mysterious man they’d nicknamed the Heron. But then Mary was sent away somewhere to learn a new language and Robyn had started spending more time with the motorcycle dispatch riders.

‘Ned will be a real help to me. He’s a big strong lad now, and there’ll be lots to do. And, when we come home . . .’ his mother tried to negotiate.

Ned nodded enthusiastically but one dark look from his father made him stop.

‘Mark my words, you’ll both be home before the end of the week. You don’t even speak the language. And don’t you dare come crying to me when you’ve made fools of yourselves and it’s all gone wrong! Which it will, as anyone



THE BLETCHLEY PARK MYSTERIES

*I Spy*  
*Hide and Seek*

HIDE AND SEEK  
A BLETCHLEY PARK  
MYSTERY



RHIAN TRACEY

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can see.’ His father stormed out of the house without so much as a goodbye, slamming the kitchen door behind him.

Ned’s mother turned to him and gave an encouraging smile. ‘It won’t go wrong. I’m not leaving you behind, Ned. Now, look sharp, love, the train’s waiting.’

His mother gestured to two small cases sitting under the kitchen table. If this train was taking him on an adventure, away from the gloomy funeral parlour and his even gloomier father, he’d follow his mother to the ends of the earth!



1

*February 1942*

Ned nervously watched the Cadbury’s delivery truck reverse carefully down the mountain path. There were large signs everywhere: *Keep Away! Danger!* The driver had told them in no uncertain terms that he didn’t have time to hang about or wait for someone to meet them. So, he was just leaving them in the middle of nowhere.

The truck’s engine cut out and it began to slide in the snow, sending gravel and stones skittering down the mountain. Ned’s mother clutched his arm, digging her nails in. The driver revved the engine and began to descend again, cautiously. Ned peeled his mother’s hand from his arm and held it, giving it a reassuring squeeze, running his thumb over the dent on her finger where her wedding ring used to be. Up until then he hadn’t realised she’d taken it off.

Ned kept his eyes fixed on the distinctive writing on the side of the truck as it backed away from them, remembering the last time he had a bar of Cadbury’s chocolate. When it was first announced that sweets were to be rationed, almost



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*For all the refugees and émigrés who have had to leave their homes. May you always be faced with open doors and open hearts.*



two years ago, he'd run to the shop to stock up. But when he got there, the Dairy Milk bars had already disappeared. The shopkeeper had replaced them with a pale imitation, which made Ned's teeth itch when he bit into it.

Ned shook himself slightly; it was freezing up on the slopes in the bitter wind. He couldn't believe that they'd finally arrived, after their long and complicated train journeys. But now they were here, in this wild, remote landscape, and without a clear idea of what was to happen next.

Ned's stomach growled. They'd not stopped to eat anything on the way to Wales and he was, as usual, absolutely starving. Since the cup of tea and a few slices of bread and jam before they'd left the house, the only things he'd eaten were the Spam sandwiches his mother had packed. The journey had seemed to go on forever, the train had stopped and started so many times. They'd waited for what felt like hours while a troop train had been moved. But no one complained, no one asked any questions. It was simply accepted that the government had taken control of all the railways, ports and roads and would do with them as they wished.

Ned had stared out of the window to distract himself. He'd counted all the cars he could see abandoned by the side of the railway lines following the rationing of petrol. Railway sleepers haphazardly crisscrossed fields to stop parachutists from landing. Roadblocks were here, there and everywhere. Shop names were scrubbed out ready for enemy invasion, which was all anyone could talk about on the wireless. He'd stared out onto anonymous station

platforms, realising he could be anywhere. Having never really travelled far from Bletchley, Ned had expected to feel rattled. But he was brimming with excitement. He was escaping! It was his turn for an adventure, and he was more than ready for it.

Before they got on the train his mother had recommended that he only take small sips from their flask of Bovril. This had paid off because there were no corridors on the train, which meant no toilets. One man had pushed down a window and peed out of it, to the collective horror of the carriage.

'Desperate times, desperate measures!' he said with a deep laugh.

Ned got a gentle prod in the ribs from his mother's knitting needle, for smirking.

'Why don't you look out of the *other* window,' she'd quietly suggested.

Her needles clacked and clicked in time with the other women in their carriage. Everyone was knitting something or other. Two old nosy Noras sitting opposite knitted scarves while scanning the carriage. They didn't look down once at their stitches; it was, he'd had to admit, impressive. No doubt they'd felt they were keeping up morale by making clothes for the troops. He'd fixed his stare on a Ribena advertisement. But of course, this didn't help his bladder and so his mind had wandered back to his favourite topic: food.

His mother had promised him a hot meal once they arrived at Manod – but here they were, and the only signs of life they'd spotted on their way up the wide Welsh valley were sheep, goats and a farm or two. Birds of prey had been



I knew who I was this morning, but I've  
changed a few times since then.

*Alice in Wonderland*, Lewis Carroll



circling menacingly, their hunting spoil by the snow. The lorry driver said he'd seen an eagle. Or possibly an osprey. Ned thought he must have been joking.

On the mountain – which was called Manod Mawr, according to the driver – the steep slate path was framed with tall white grasses and fans of green ferns clumped with snow. Water ran down the mountain in streams as the afternoon sun melted the snow and ice. And there wasn't a barrage balloon in sight, Ned noticed; there wasn't much need to force enemy aircraft to greater heights, he supposed, not out here in the wilderness of Wales. He wondered if the enemy had even heard of Wales.

At the top of the mountain were two rusty bronze gates, standing upright. Another lay across the top. Several bolts and padlocks held them firmly shut.

Ned left his mother's side and ran up to the gates. As he peered through into the tunnel leading into the mountain he was slapped by a bitter blast of air. He tried to see into the gloom, but it was raven black. He looked around him, turning in a complete circle. He'd got used to the blackout, which had started before the war was even declared. But the cavernous darkness in the quarry beyond wasn't like the blackout; it was deep, layered and mysterious.

It felt like the place was deserted. He pressed his face to the cold bronze gates and sniffed deeply, like a dog catching a scent. The air was damp with his disappointment.

'Is someone supposed to meet us? Should I call out?' he asked his mother.

She was shivering and he worried that she'd catch a cold if they stood there in front of the gates much longer.

'They know we're coming. I expect they're busy in there. What do you think, love?' She stared into the void.

'I don't know.' He shrugged, trying to keep the panic out of his voice.

He wasn't used to adults asking what he thought. He rattled the gates, half-heartedly, sending a skinny brown rat scuttling across his feet.

'Ugh!' he cried out, kicking at it. Unsuccessfully, as the rat was far too quick for him.

His scream broke the tension but, rather than being embarrassed, he felt pleased to have made his mum laugh. And the sound seemed to have alerted someone at last. They listened to footsteps coming closer, although they still couldn't see anyone. Ned longed for a torch – he hadn't thought to pack one – but it was too late to worry now.



# Map



out on the mountain. Probably just kids, but you never know. Can't take any risks, not with what's inside. Careless talk costs lives and all that. You've both signed the act?' he checked, giving Ned a stern look.

They nodded and he pushed the gates open. Ned pulled his mum back, just in time to prevent a shower of water tipping down on her from a wall of glossy ivy that was hanging over the top section of the gates.

'Good lad! Quick on your feet! Mind yourselves. It's rained – as it sometimes likes to do in Manod!' Mr Rees laughed.

Ned shivered. If it was always as cold as this he'd have to wear long trousers if it. His mother said she'd packed some of Joseph's old trousers for him, but he'd have to find something to hold them up with, as she'd no more clothing coupons for belts. And he wouldn't mind a waistcoat, or a flat cap, like the one Mr Rees was wearing. This was his chance to reinvent himself. No one here would call him coffin kid or the grim reaper. He'd tell no one that his father was an undertaker, absolutely no one at all.

'Watch your step, it's slippery if you're not used to it. That's sorbo rubber, absorbs the shock.' Mr Rees pointed to the sheeting covering the tracks. 'And don't worry about your eyes, my boy, they'll soon adjust. You'll have miner's vision in no time,' the man chattered on.

Ned nodded confidently and strode out in front of his mother. He was more than ready to tackle whatever lurked in the coal-black underground cavern. His mother had explained to him that artwork from the galleries and

museums in London was being hidden in the quarry, where no one would ever think to look for it.

'Follow me,' Mr Rees said. 'We're glad you've arrived, Mrs Letton. There's a tidy pile of work waiting for you now your project's been approved. It's the talk of the quarry.'

They walked into the mine along what felt like a very narrow railway track. Ned's first instinct was to look around in panic for a train, but then he chided himself. *Of course, a train couldn't fit through a mine!* Mr Rees raised his hand in greeting as they walked past a shed full of men cleaning a canvas, each working on a tiny section with magnifying glasses. His mother said they were in a national crisis, and they were working right on the front: the Heritage Front. It didn't sound anywhere near as exciting as what his brothers were up to, out there on the real front. He hoped Rob and Joe wouldn't be ashamed of him, when they asked him what he'd done to help the war effort.

'Come on, Ned, keep up, we don't want to lose our way,' his mother said, walking briskly to catch up with Mr Rees.

'Welcome to the *Cathedral*,' Mr Rees said grandly. 'We don't let just anyone into the most secret Aladdin's cave in the world, mind!'

They stepped off the track into an imposing cavern, splendidly lit by overhead electric lights hanging from cables and powered by whirring generators. Ned had pictured people wearing old fashioned miners' headlamps working in the dark, but this was far more impressive. It was clear even to Ned's inexperienced eye that the pictures piled up



here were worth an absolute fortune. He recognised one of them from a project on Leonardo da Vinci they'd done at school. It was one of his funny drawings of the insides of people's bodies. Ned had always quite liked those drawings, though it didn't do to say so aloud. His favourite fact about da Vinci was that he had solved the mystery of earthshine, when the Earth and the Moon reflect sunlight at the same time.

The bright lights cast shadows around the large chamber. Everywhere Ned looked were men in suits, just like at Bletchley, but here they were surrounded by frames, canvases and pictures, rather than studying maps and typing letters into strange-looking machines. Works of art of all shapes and sizes were hanging from racks, lined up against brick sheds, being carried out of containers, stacked against one another, crammed together closely, waiting. The subterranean cavern seemed to stretch on for miles, and he couldn't see where the subterranean cavern ended. Ned craned his neck heavenwards trying to find the roof; it was like looking into the depths of space. He heard his mother inhale sharply as she did the same, taking in the unexpected grandness and scale of the cave.

'No turning back now you've seen where *all* our treasures are hidden, Mrs Letton!' Mr Rees said, scooping up a lean ginger cat.

'Who's this?' Ned's mother held her hand out to the cat, which lifted its chin for a scratch.

'This is Martini. She's one of our best ratters,' Mr Rees said, setting Martini back on the ground. He smiled at Ned's

mother as she spotted someone and strode off to hug her, Martini dashing out of her way.

'And you, Ted, keep your mouth shut and your eyes open and you'll do well.' Mr Rees turned to him, without smiling, as the great big gates slammed shut behind them.





### 3

His mother shoed him away to *get used to his new surroundings* as she waltzed off with her friend Miriam. They were going to meet Kaye, who sounded like she ran the place. He'd have been happy to wait for his mother in the warm, but Mr Rees escorted him back to the entrance, like a guest who had overstayed his welcome.

'Here you are, then, Ted. Do your mother a favour, find your digs and get settled in.'

'It's actually Ned, sir,' he said, as politely as he could.

'And stay out of trouble, mind. Follow the white stone markers on Quarryman's Path if you get lost.' Mr Rees passed him a folded-up piece of paper. Martini wound herself around Mr Rees's leg as Ned opened it. Written in a scrawling hand was what looked like an address, but it was in a language he couldn't read. Welsh, he guessed. But Ned didn't want to ask Mr Rees for help reading it, as he didn't have the measure of him yet. He turned around to say thank you, but Mr Rees was already walking along the track back into the quarry, whistling as he went.

Ned stood at the top of Manod mountain, edging close

to the dangerous precipice, and looked down the valley to the thin line of grey houses nestled in the bottom. It seemed like quite a trek down the track but as he didn't have anything better to do, Ned set off at as swift a pace as he could manage while carrying his case.

The snow and gravel scraped and slid under his boots and he stopped for a second to steady himself. When he looked up at the heavy sky, he thought about the solar system once more. He'd spent his time on the train drawing. He had started with the Sun, then Mercury, followed by Venus, Earth and so on, until he got to Neptune. Each time he increased the size and changed colours to separate them.

He visualised them separately orbiting around the Sun, which was the one thing linking them. Himself, Robyn and Mary were not so different. On different paths but all with Bletchley Park at their core.

As soon as he stepped down off the mountain path and onto the hilly street, it was clear to Ned that Manod was a very different place to Bletchley. The blue-grey slate houses here were arranged in neat rows, opposite one another, like a mirror. Two-up, two-down. There was a shop, a post office and a butcher with a blue-and-white-striped canopy over the door. And a pub, Y Manod, next to a church or chapel. It was a big grey building, which looked like a face. The large brown door was a mouth. The wide arched windows either side were the eyes. And a circular glass pane, like a ship's porthole, sat in the middle, like a nose. He could see a group of boys chasing a ball down an alleyway and hesitated, wondering if he could gather the



courage to approach them. But if he opened his mouth, he'd give himself away with his English accent. He stopped and cleared some snow off the bench outside the post office. Perching on the edge, Ned tried to avoid getting his shorts wet and took out the piece of paper Mr Rees had given him.

'You'll have to queue in the post office. I'll watch your case if you want?' a girl offered, taking a seat on the bench next to him.

She looked a few years younger than him. Her dark brown curly hair was held back by slides, keeping it out of her eyes, which were also dark brown. He spotted one or two missing teeth when she smiled. She was about nine, maybe ten at the most. She was wearing a big brown coat with a maroon velvet collar. It didn't look like it was hers, probably a hand-me-down – hardly a surprise when a coat cost nearly twenty clothing coupons.

She swung her bare legs back and forth, waiting for him to reply. Ned looked down at his case, which was being investigated by a huge sandy-coloured dog whose fur was crimped and crinkled. The dog blinked the light snow flurry out of its eyes.

'This is Kip. He's having a rest from work. Don't be scared of him, he's a gentle giant.' She looked over her shoulder then whispered, 'Aren't you, liebbling?'

*She spoke German!* At least he thought it was German; he'd never met a German before. He looked about to see if anyone had heard her.

The dog, Kip, was nosing the opening to Ned's case, nudging it wider, while looking up at the girl to see if she

was admiring his progress. Kip was broad, with a dignified look about him.

'Nothing in there for you.' Ned gently pushed the dog's damp black nose away and closed his case back up.

'How old are you? Where did you come from? Are you on your own?' the girl asked, looking around curiously.

'Um . . . ' Ned wasn't sure what he was allowed to reveal. What was it that Mr Rees had said? *Careless talk costs lives*. Ned got up and tucked the paper away in his pocket. He picked up his case and mumbled a quick *bye*, before marching away from the girl and her dog. He walked past an abandoned red-and-green quarry locomotive next to two rusty wagons and stopped to look back at her. She was still watching him go, as if *he* was the suspicious one, rather than the other way round! He wasn't the one going about speaking German!





## 4

From what he could decipher of the address on the piece of paper Mr Rees had given him, Ned was looking for Ty Ysgol. But was that the name of a road? Or a business? *Ysgol* sounded like *skull*. Could it be a church? Maybe they were going to stay with a vicar? That didn't sound like fun. Not more blinking dead people.

'What are you on about?' A boy on a bicycle said, as he skidded to a stop, flicking up snow sludge onto Ned's bare legs.

'Huh?' Ned said in confusion.

'What about dead people?' the boy continued.

'Nothing. No one.' Ned scolded himself inwardly. He must have been thinking aloud again.

'Where you from, then?' the boy asked. 'Another evacuee? Bringing your germs and lice and disease with you, is it?' He positioned his bicycle across the path so that Ned would have to walk around to get past.

'Um . . .' Ned said uncertainly. 'I don't have lice.'

'Hello there!' came a familiar voice. Ned turned to see his mother appear as if from thin air and sweep up the

path. 'We're staying in Manod while I do some work for the War Office. This is my son,' she added, laying her hand on his shoulder.

'Oh, right. See you after,' the boy said, hopping on his bicycle and pedalling off in the other direction.

Ned turned to his mother and gave her a smile. 'Not sure I want to see him after,' he said. 'He didn't seem that friendly.'

She gave his hand a squeeze. 'He looks about your age. Maybe you'll be pals soon. Shall we go and find the schoolhouse?' she added, looking up and down the street.

Ned groaned. 'I thought I was going to work with you, not go to school!' He did *not* want to go back to school. He hated reading: the words wriggled on the page, and no one could read his spidery writing. Even he sometimes struggled to decipher it.

'Don't worry. No one's going to make you go to school! The schoolhouse is where we're staying – *our digs*.' She grinned.

'Oh! That's all right, then,' Ned said in relief. *Ysgol* was *school*, then, he realised. Why couldn't Mr Rees have just told him that?

They turned the corner of what seemed to be the main road, lined with rows of grey slate and brick houses on both sides. Every now and then there was a gap between the houses leading to an alleyway. Ned spotted lines of washing stretched across them, shirt sleeves waving in the wind. And there in the distance, standing on its own, slightly raised on a grassy hill, was the school. The long, low grey-brick building had an enormous bell in front of it, and a chimney.



'Now, where's the door to Mrs Thomas's quarters, do you think?'

'Quarters?' Ned teased.

'Sorry. Everyone in the quarry talks like that.' His mother grinned.

He followed his mother through an uneven schoolyard. Hopscotch was drawn on the ground in chalk and a football pitch was marked by wooden goalposts at each end. Behind the building the craggy mountain range rose and fell, changing in colour from brown and grey to green and yellow, in contrast to the neat and measured lines of the schoolhouse.

'This must be the door to the *cottage*.' Ned's mother called the place a cottage, rather than quarters this time, and nudged him, emphasising the word.

The cottage was a modest two-storey building tucked away behind the school. Next to it was a coal shed and a privy or a washhouse. Ned wondered how they were supposed to fit inside the cottage and who they'd be living with. But he was here on important war work, he reminded himself. If this was where they were to stay, then he'd make the best of it. It wouldn't do to start worrying about how he was going to get from the cottage to the quarry. Or if his mother would share their new address with his father. Or if his father would find them and insist they come straight back home . . . He counted the planets on his fingers to slow the worries that were crowding his thoughts.

'Shall I knock?' His mother now looked less sure of herself.

'I'll do it,' Ned volunteered.

He stepped forward, rapping confidently on the green door. Peeling paint strips fell as the door shook and immediately a dog started barking, followed by shouts and footsteps. They stood back and looked at each other nervously.

'Are you sure this is the right place?' he checked. 'I don't think they're expecting us.'

Then the door opened and the boy from before was standing there looking sullenly at Ned. 'Lost again, are you?'

'Is Mrs Thomas here?' his mother said with a smile, cutting the boy off.

'Yeah,' the boy said, pushing a dog back from the door. The dog shoved its head through the boy's legs.

'Ah, you're lovely, aren't you! Hello there!' His mother bent down to fuss the honey-coloured dog whose silky ears went back as its dark eyes widened in happiness.

'It's Kip, isn't it?' Ned asked the boy, gesturing to the dog.

'How do you know that?' the boy asked suspiciously.

'I think I met your sister, earlier,' he added, scratching behind the dog's ears.

'She's *not* my sister. Anni has to stay with us. She's a refugee. Wait . . . ! Are you Mrs Letton?' The boy suddenly stood up straighter.

'Yes. We're going to be lodging with you, while I do some War Office work.' His mother held out her hand to the boy, but he didn't take it.

The tension was broken by the appearance of a girl, who pushed past and said brightly, 'Hello again. Are you a refugee too? I told you, Harri!'



‘Shut up, Anni! S’pose you’d better come in,’ the boy said grudgingly. ‘Mam’s out in the yard, in the horsebox.’

‘You have horses?’ Ned asked.

‘No,’ the boy said, looking at Ned like he was stupid.

‘Why’s your mum got a horsebox, then?’ Ned asked.

‘It’s where she plays the piano,’ Harri sneered, as if the answer were obvious.

Anni began to explain. ‘There’s not enough room to swing a cat in here, Auntie Merryn says. She’s always getting interrupted by people knocking on the door. She keeps the piano in the horsebox. But it’s a secret, so no one will bother her. Isn’t that clever!’ Anni said in admiration.

‘Well, if you could run and get her?’ Ned’s mum smiled at Harri, who hesitated.

‘Go on, Anni, you go.’ Harri pushed her gently in the direction of the field.

Anni ran off and Kip crashed into Harri in the narrow doorway in his eagerness to chase her.

‘*Big buffoon!*’ Harri shouted at the dog, as Ned’s mother stepped into the cottage. ‘Are you going to hang around like a bad smell?’ Harri said to Ned, who was hesitating in the doorway.

‘Are you always this welcoming?’ Ned asked.

‘Only to you, English. Only to you,’ the boy replied, marching back into the cottage and leaving Ned to close the door behind him.



5

‘Hello, welcome! Sorry I wasn’t here to greet you. I was practising a new piece for choir.’ Mrs Thomas came bustling into the cottage.

They’d been sitting on chairs arranged around the fire in oppressive silence and looked up in relief as Mrs Thomas took off her heavy damp coat. She draped it over a chair in front of the fire, where it began to steam, then unwound the green scarf from her neck and peeled off her green bobble hat and matching gloves. She set these on hooks around the hearth, to dry. Ned noticed that she wore a patch over one eye; even that was green. As she put the kettle on the hob, Kip stayed by her side and gently nudged her with his large head.

‘He’s not allowed in the horsebox with me when I’m practising because there’s no room. He’s always a bit clingy when I come out,’ she explained, walking across the kitchen with the teacups, Kip weaving in and out of her legs, tail swishing from side to side with happiness.

Mrs Thomas passed everyone a teacup and then briefly rested her hand on Anni’s brown curls and stroked her hair. ‘Anni, get the cakes, cariad.’



Merryn Thomas was a tall woman, strong, neat and tidy. Even her hair, which was long and almost pure white, was straight as a rod. Ned thought she looked about the same age as his mother, although he had never seen such white hair on someone who wasn't old.

'Thanks for taking us in,' his mother said. 'Can I help?' She gestured at the teapot.

'No. Anni's on the case. You must be shattered after your journey. I doubt it was straightforward. We hear on the news that the roads and railways are difficult.'

'It was challenging,' his mother agreed.

'Has Harri shown you your rooms? Harri sleeps up in the attic now, and I thought the boys could—' Mrs Thomas started.

'No!' Harri interrupted before Mrs Thomas could finish her sentence. 'No way, Mam!'

Silence fell again, possibly even more awkward than before. Ned kept his head down and his eyes on the table. Mrs Thomas poured tea and milk and passed cakes around, as if everything was perfectly fine.

'You two could share Anni's old room?' Mrs Thomas blushed but she didn't tell Harri off for being rude.

'It's not Anni's old room, it's my room! At least it was until you shoved me up in the attic, with the bats. And probably rats too. And now you're giving it to them?' Harri muttered.

'Harri! Don't be rude, please.' Mrs Thomas tutted.

'Why can't *they* go up in the attic?' Harri continued.

'Unfortunately, the cottage was designed for a headmaster,

back in 1871, rather than a headmistress with children! Mrs Thomas carried on smoothly.

'A child. Not children.' Harri sniffed. 'And not three children!'

'Hush, now! That's enough, Harri,' Mrs Thomas snapped, her patience finally running out.

Ned shifted uncomfortably, taking in this strange place full of secrets and silences.

'I don't know if you'd want to, Ned, but there is the nook?' Mrs Thomas suggested.

'With the dog?' Harri burst out laughing, but it wasn't a nice sound.

'Well, yes. It's an idea, isn't it?' Mrs Thomas looked to Ned's mum.

'Why don't we sort it out later? Ned and I are starving, and these cakes look delicious.' She pointed at the squashed currant buns. 'I've always wished I was a better baker,' she confided.

Anni and Harri reached forward and loaded their plates, so Ned did the same.

'These are Welsh cakes; we made them in class today, didn't we, Anni? Now let's have a nice cup of tea and get to know each other, will we?' Mrs Thomas smiled, but her face fell as Harri scraped his chair back.

'See you after.' Harri shoved one cake into his mouth and rammed another into his pocket, while crashing out of the door. 'Got to go!'

As the door slammed shut behind Harri, it felt like someone had burst a balloon relieving the tension. Anni grinned at Ned and broke the brief silence with a question.



'If you're not a refugee, what are you?' she asked, all reserve gone. 'Are you an evacuee?'

'Um. No,' Ned said, turning to his mother. 'I was an appr—'

'We're here on war work. Ned's going to be working with me,' his mother replied smoothly. She smiled at Anni over her teacup.

'Why don't you go and show Ned around Manod, Anni, while there's still a bit of light left? Is that all right with you, Mrs Letton?' Mrs Thomas suggested.

'Yes, of course, Mrs Thomas.' His mother nodded.

'Anni, take Kip with you too and throw a stick about for him in the park, there's a good girl. He's due some fun now he's finished work for the day.' Mrs Thomas fixed a simple lead to Kip's collar and scooted them both out of the door. 'And stay out of Harri's way, cariad,' she added quietly to Anni.

'Yes, Auntie Merryn. Come on, Ned. I know all the good spots in Manod. I'll introduce you to the best people. There's one or two who we'll avoid but I'll save Mr and Mrs Evans-next-door for tomorrow. You can meet all their animals. My favourite is their donkey, Myfanwy. We'll go down to the shop now and see who's about; there's always someone to chat to in the shop. How fast can you run? I was the fastest girl in my last school! I'm A1 fit. Race you!' Anni shoved Ned and sprinted out into the schoolyard, with Kip barking in excitement.



## 6

'This is Mrs Davies' shop. Your mother will have to give Mrs Thomas your ration book. Mrs Davies marks down everything in the back, so you won't get any extras. And mind your p's and q's with Mrs Davies. She stares. At least she always stares at *me*,' Anni said with a shrug as she hung Kip's lead on the hook right outside the shop.

'Who's this, then?' A grey-haired woman wearing an apron appeared, accompanied by a cat.

She peered closely at Ned through dark-rimmed spectacles balanced on the tip of her thin nose. To avoid her gaze, he took in the small shop. It must have been someone's front room once, except there was now sawdust on the floor. The shop was on two levels. The top had a counter, weighing scales, a till and shelves of supplies. The lower part, down some steps, was slightly darker, and frying smells wafted up from it.

'This is Ned, Mrs Davies. He's staying with us for . . . How long *are* you and your mother here for, Ned?' Anni asked turning to him.

'I don't know.' Ned shrugged.



Anni picked up the stick that Kip had dropped at her feet. Ned was surprised to see Kip almost bow to Anni, with the front half of his body on the ground and his bottom in the air. His tail wagged madly until Anni threw the stick, and he bounded off again.

'Some people call them Seeing-eye Dogs, but we call him a Guide Dog. I've never lived with an animal before. We're not allowed them in our apartment in London, but my parents had two cats in Vienna. Gustav and Ernst, brothers. I don't know what happened to them. I suppose Jude, that's my best friend, might have taken them in. He always liked our cats and was kind to animals. I thought I would be a cat person, like Mama and Papa, and Jude, but now I think I might be a dog person. What about you?' Anni asked as she threw Kip's stick again.

'I've always wanted a dog, but I wouldn't mind a cat either. Maybe I could be both a dog and a cat person?' he said.

'I don't know. I think that's against the rules,' Anni said seriously.

'So, you and your family are from Vienna?' he asked.

Kip had dropped the stick by Ned's feet and was barking impatiently at him, so he threw it as far as he could.

'Yes. But now Mama is working in London and Papa is in Glenbranter camp in a place called Argyll, which is in Scotland, but he'll be joining us just as soon as he can.

'What kind of camp?' Ned asked.

'An internment camp. They came at four o'clock in the morning and rounded the men up. They took Papa away with them in a Black Mariah.' Anni shuddered, remembering.

'What's a Mariah?' Ned asked.

He was realising, since travelling to Wales, just how many things he didn't know.

'It's a horrible police wagon used for prisoners, but my papa isn't a prisoner. He hasn't done anything wrong. They took them off to Kempston Park Racecourse and made them sleep in the empty horse stalls. But the last laugh was on them because the racecourse had forgotten to switch the heating off. Papa was very funny in his letter – he's allowed to send two a week – about how comfortable he and our neighbours, Mr Kaplan and Mr Simons all were in their stall. He even drew a picture.'

'Why did they put them in horse stalls?' Ned asked.

'Nowhere else to put them?' Anni rubbed her eyes, warding off tears. 'They called him an alien,' she said, before throwing the stick for Kip as far as she could.

'Who?' Ned's face crumpled in confusion.

'Papa and our neighbours. But they're not aliens . . . They're Jewish.' She paused.

Ned felt Anni's eyes on him, weighing his reaction before she carefully continued. He nodded supportively.

'Mama and Papa were persecuted because they are Jews. Papa was beaten rather badly, Mama told me, right outside their university in Vienna. We were forced to flee the country and emigrate to England before the Anschluss.'

'What was that?' Ned didn't attempt to say the word.

'The Anschluss? Austria, where we lived, was invaded, and taken over by the Germans. I was only little so don't remember much. Papa was given a work permit through his job at the

library and Mama was given a different type of permit to work by . . . someone else. And until I'm sixteen, I'm safe in Britain. I'll be ten in a few months, but the war will be over before I turn sixteen. Won't it?' Anni sounded frightened.

'But if your dad worked in the library and had a permit why did they . . . ?' Ned hesitated.

'Because he is Jewish and seen as a threat. Papa's friend, Arthur, was exempt from internment because his job was doing useful work as a BBC announcer. But no matter what job you do, *some* people in the government just don't want to let Jewish people into Britain. Not even Jewish children.' She stopped again before continuing, 'Like me.' She trailed off, clipping Kip's lead back on, and much to Kip's disappointment, she turned, heading back towards the main road.

'What's your father's name?' Ned tried, wanting to make things better.

'Otto. When we get home, I'll show you a picture of him that Mama keeps in a frame. She gave it to me when Papa was taken,' Anni explained. 'Mama brought a folder of photos when we fled Vienna and I have two of them here with me. The other one is of my grandmama Hilde. Anyway it's time for tea. If we're lucky, there'll be cawl!' She licked her lips. 'Auntie Merryn's cawl is almost as good as Mama's chicken soup. Let's go home.' She held out Kip's lead to Ned.

He didn't know what cawl was, but he did know that he'd answered enough questions to be given Anni's stamp of approval. If only Harri was as easy to win over, he thought, as he followed Anni along the winding streets back to the schoolhouse which was, for now, home.



7

When they returned to the cottage, Ned followed his nose to the kitchen where steaming bowls of peppery stew waited for them. He spotted carrots, swede and two more vegetables, possibly parsnips and peas.

'This is cawl,' Anni said happily, sitting down at the table. 'We made it yesterday, especially for you. With real Welsh sea salt from Anglesey. That's an island in case you didn't know. And did you know, Ned, that Manod is 1,750 feet above sea level?'

'I've made you up a bed in the nook, Ned, cariad,' Mrs Thomas said, passing him a slab of bread and a small chunk of crumbly cheese.

'Thank you,' Ned said, before filling his mouth with food. Real food. Hot food. Proper food.

He noticed Harri was back but still sullen and silent, apart from scraping his spoon around his bowl.

'There's no lamb in it, Mam,' he complained.

'Sorry, no. Not today.' His mother shrugged.

'Then it's not cawl, is it!' Harri moaned.

Mrs Thomas tutted at Harri. After his complaint, they



didn't seem to have much to say to one another. Anni did most of the talking. Ned and his mother joined in with the odd question or carefully selected bit of information about their lives back home. Neither of them mentioned Bletchley Park or his mother's work at the brickyard.

People knocked at the door regularly throughout the evening with questions for Mrs Thomas about school or asking for the new sheet music for choir. Ned thought of his friend Robyn back in Bletchley. He could just imagine her saying that it was as busy as Piccadilly Circus, not that she'd been there. Nor had he, to be fair. He couldn't imagine what it must have been like for Anni, moving to a big city like London and then having to move again to Manod. The two places must be like chalk and cheese.

Harri sighed dramatically each time he or Anni got up to answer the door.

'Is it always like this?' Ned asked Anni quietly as she sat back down at the table.

'Yeah. We never get any peace,' Harri said, throwing another log on the fire.

'Our apartment in Vienna was very quiet but when we fled to London, a friend of Mama's found us an apartment and we had wonderful neighbours: Mr Kaplan and his family, and Mr and Mrs Simons. The doorbell was always ringing, and music playing and people singing, just like here. I like it busy and chatty.' Anni wriggled with pleasure in front of the fire.

'Well, I don't. People turn up at all hours, outstaying their welcome,' Harri carried on pointedly. 'Just like you, English,' he added under his breath.

'Do you want to play cards, kids?' Mrs Thomas placed a deck of cards on the table but misjudged the edge and they fell to the floor, spilling everywhere. 'Oh, drat!'

'I've got it, Mam.' Harri jumped up to retrieve the cards.

He gathered them into an untidy heap and slammed them on the table, then scowled at both Ned and Anni, as if it were their fault. Mrs Thomas didn't say anything but felt the edge of the table with her hand then patted it, as if to remember where it was. Kip nosed her hand and butted her until she rested it on his head. He then steered her back to the door as someone knocked, again.

'I'll deal!' Anni said, but Harri simply got up and left, clattering heavily up the stairs.

'He's a cheat anyway. And a sore loser,' Anni whispered as she split the pack. 'I only know snap, but I'm very good at it.'

As they played, Ned tried to tune in to the adults' conversation. Mrs Thomas told his mother about her husband in the Army, and his mother spoke about his brothers and their roles in the RAF, never once mentioning her role at either Bletchley Park or down the quarry at Manod. Anni questioned him constantly, while winning at snap. Before too long Ned gave up trying to eavesdrop on the mothers. He knew his mum would never let anything slip. She was an expert at talking around a subject, he realised. Back home in Bletchley, she'd perfected the skill of presenting an image to the outside world, never truly revealing what went on behind closed doors.

'I think I'll go to bed, Mum,' said Ned. 'Is that all right with you, Mrs Thomas?'

He still had no idea where or what the nook was. It could well be that room outside, which he'd assumed was a privy. Kip, sensing something good was going to happen, circled the room in anticipation. His eyes moved back and forth, deciding who his best option was.

'Follow Kip, if you like, cariad. He's ready for bed too and he'll show you the way.' Mrs Thomas smiled.

She patted Kip's head affectionately, whispering some words to him in Welsh. Ned followed the dog, who padded through the kitchen before pushing through floral curtains-which hid an area that Ned had assumed was a scullery. Beyond the curtains was a tiny room, big enough to lay a mattress on the floor while leaving space for the long narrow desk running the length of the wall. There was no window, but Ned spotted a small skylight. And best of all, he realised in surprise, were the pencil drawings and sketches of constellations and the night sky that covered the desk and the wall next to it. Astronomy books lined the small, uneven shelf, with dusty fossils and sea glass scattered between them.

'Ah, you've found Mr Parry's collection, have you?' Mrs Thomas poked her head through the curtains. 'He was a bit of a sky gazer. Lovely man, the headmaster. This cottage is his.' Mrs Thomas smiled fondly.

'Oh, I thought this was your house.' Ned began to understand why Harri was so annoyed at being shifted from room to room.

'No, we lived in the old bakery, that's the house I grew up in, with my father, until he died. When my husband and Mr Parry went off to war, they asked me to be headmistress. I used to teach here before I got married. It made sense to

move into the schoolhouse rather than trek up and down the hill all day, especially with my eyes! We call this space the nook, but I think Mr Parry probably called it a study or something grander. I haven't had the time to move his books or sort through his things, now he's not coming back . . .' She tailed off uncomfortably.

Ned thought about asking why the old headmaster wasn't coming back, although he could guess the answer. But at that moment, his mum poked her head through the doorway. There wasn't room for the three of them to stand in there.

'Will you be all right in here, cariad? I'm sorry about Harri,' Mrs Thomas began. 'He's not been himself since his dad left. We haven't had a letter in a while, see.'

'Don't worry, Mrs Thomas,' his mother said.

'Please call me Merryn. If we're going to be living together, I think we should drop the formalities, Helen. And you can call me Auntie Merryn, Ned. That's what Anni calls me, even though we're not related. We don't stand on ceremony in Manod, we're all auntie and uncle someone or other round here.'

'Ned'll be fine, won't you, love. Look, you've got a friend for life there!' Ned's mum burst out laughing.

Kip was sprawled across the mattress with his head on the pillow like a human.

'Oh, he's a one! He knows he's not allowed on the beds.' Mrs Thomas tried to sound cross. 'Don't you!'

Kip had closed his eyes, as if asleep, although his wagging tail gave him away.

'I don't mind,' Ned said, feeling pleased at the idea of a bit of company on his first night in this strange little place.



'Kick him off when you're ready to sleep, if you can shift him, and don't forget to turn off the torch, cariad. There's a skylight you might like to look out of. Your mam says you're an astronomer.'

All of a sudden, Ned felt like he might cry. Both women backed out of the room, but his mother paused between the curtains and reached back in to give Ned a kiss and a hug.

'If you need me, I'm upstairs, the little room at the back. I could leave my door open?' she offered.

'No. I'll see you in the morning,' he said. His voice sounded strange and croaky .

If she stayed one more minute, he'd end up crying in her arms and he was far too old for that kind of carry-on.

'Tomorrow will be a better day,' she promised, just as she always did at home.

He listened for her footsteps retreating across the large slate slabs that tiled the kitchen floor, then lay down in the small space Kip had left on the mattress. He buried his face in Kip's warm, soft side. His coat was rich and thick and a variety of golden shades in the torchlight. Kip sighed dramatically, lifted his heavy head, and opened his eyes to look at Ned, as if reluctantly agreeing to share the bed. Deal negotiated, Kip flumped back down contentedly, tail wagging gently. Kip was snoring noisily within minutes, his ribcage rising and falling deeply.

Despite the comfort Kip offered, and the stars shining through the skylight, Ned turned off the torch and cried himself to sleep.



8

Ned was relieved they managed to arrive at the quarry on time the next morning, and glad to have escaped the schoolhouse. His father had drilled all three of his boys in matters of punctuality, with military determination. If you weren't fifteen minutes early for everything, then you were late. And to be late was unforgivable. It wasn't a bad habit, Ned had to admit. He was keen to know what job he would be doing and to have a purpose again.

As soon as they walked into the Cathedral, Miriam linked arms with his mother and marched her off somewhere. Ned stood alone, looking up at the slate roof. There was so much to get used to again, just like when he had started working with his father at Bletchley Park.

'We had to blast the ceiling with explosives to make way for the artwork from the NG,' Mr Rees said, appearing at his shoulder. He was swiftly joined by Martini, the cat. 'One of the pieces, *The Equestrian Portrait of Charles I*, almost didn't fit under the bridge on the road to the quarry! Not surprising, standing at twelve foot in its elephant case.'

NG must be the National Gallery, Ned thought, trying to

keep up with Mr Rees, who spoke very quickly. He had no idea what an elephant case was; surely they weren't keeping animals from London Zoo in here too?

'Had to dig up the road to lower it. Took an enormous amount of work, but we did it,' Mr Rees said proudly. 'They said it couldn't be done.'

'What would you have done with the painting if you couldn't make it fit? It's not as if you could have left it outside,' Ned commented. 'Does it ever stop snowing here?'

'Of course, it does, Ted! Just you wait till spring when the daffodils come, and the mountain is violet with Rhododendrons. And, no, we wouldn't have left a painting outside. It's a van Dyck. One of the most important British paintings of the seventeenth century. A bit of snow wouldn't get in the way of an operation like this. Cee would have something to say about that, you can be sure! You don't argue with the boss. The last chap who did was never seen again.' Mr Rees looked at Ned as if he were a coffin short of a nail.

Ned wondered who Cee was. He'd thought Kaye oversaw Manod. Maybe Cee was short for Cecilia, or Cecily? Why did the higher-ups have such odd names? And were they all going to be women? Although there had been a lot of women working at Bletchley Park, more of them than men, it had been the men who ruled the roost, especially the Heron.

'Kick the snow off your boots, Ted. I don't want you trekking it into the cavern,' Mr Rees warned.

'Good morning, Mr Rees!' his mother said cheerfully.

Just like the day before, she seemed to appear from

nowhere. *Where did she come from?* Ned wondered. And had she heard Mr Rees call him Ted? It was embarrassing that Mr Rees couldn't even remember his name.

'Morning, Mrs Letton. Now then, see that chap over there with the beard? That's Nate Hawthorn.' He pointed, and Ned and his mother nodded. 'Nate's job is to keep the quarry at the right temperature to store the artwork. Temperature checks, on the hour, before his brother Edward takes over,' Mr Rees said proudly, as if he'd organised the whole thing himself.

Manod quarry was a bit like Bletchley Park, Ned supposed, with so many people each working in their own small section, which formed part of the bigger picture; they were all cogs in the great big machine of the war effort. He wondered how many people across the country had strangers living in their homes, keeping dangerous secrets all because of the war. He looked around to see what his mother thought, but she was stepping into one of the brick buildings they called bungalows, following Mr Rees. She hadn't even said goodbye.

'How high, I betcha thinking,' a man in a brown flat cap, white shirt and tie said.

He followed Ned's gaze up into the roof of the chamber.

'Yes, but I'm not very good with numbers,' Ned admitted. 'It's all Greek to me,' he said, borrowing Mary's favourite phrase. The joke was, Mary probably could speak Greek by now.

'It's roughly a hundred foot high. Impressive, ain't it? No wonder it's called the Cathedral. From outside you'd never imagine what's in 'ere, would you? It's like a magic trick.'



The man was wearing a utility belt with a hammer, a tape measure and other tools, hanging off loops or straps. He looked like a carpenter, Ned thought. His father had a similar belt, which he wore in the workshop at the parlour. Ned pushed the image away – he didn't want to be reminded of his father.

'You're working with me, Mr Rees tells me, and I tend to do what Peter Rees says. I'm Bob Howse and you're my new apprentice. I've heard good things about you, fella.' He smiled reassuringly.

Ned shook the hand Mr Howse held out, pleased to be thought of as an adult. Children didn't shake hands, but men seemed to, all the time, in fact. Women didn't, but he had no idea why that was. Although, now he thought of it, hadn't his mother held her hand out to Harri? That was new.

'So, what do we do in here? What's our job, exactly?' Ned pressed, keen to make a good impression.

'We're the frame-men. We wait for the next load of art to arrive in our cavern and then we, *carefully*, take the frames off and mend them. Or if we must, we rebuild. Chippies, we are.'

'Chippies?' Ned laughed.

He was thinking about the chippie run by Amelia Squires on the high street. Her chip butties were second to none.

'Yeah, chippies. That's what carpenters are called – if you're any good, that is. First things first, let's grab a cuppa and then you can meet the team,' Mr Howse said, gesturing to a small kitchenette next to one of the brick buildings at the mouth of one of the caverns.

From the kitchen, Ned looked out onto the great cave, processing all the activity around him. People were working in sections, inside sheds or brick buildings. There was art in different shapes, sizes, conditions, styles and colours. It was a shock to the system, like looking down the barrel of a brightly coloured kaleidoscope. He blinked several times to clear his eyes. Ned had only been in a museum once. It had a few pieces of art on the walls, mostly portraits of long-dead people who looked posh and rich. There was the odd landscape painting, dull and green and brown and full of fields of boring old sheep and cattle.

'Aladdin's cave, we call it. Troubles your eyes to start with. But you soon get used to it, like anything,' Mr Howse said, passing Ned a steaming cup of strong tea.

'Go on, get out of it, Sherry. Do your job and keep them rats at bay!' Mr Howse gently lifted a sleek black cat out of the kitchenette with one hand.

'Thank you,' Ned said, trying not to spill his tea; the cup was full to the brim.

He took a sip without blowing on it and burned his tongue then coughed awkwardly to disguise it.

'Steady, fella, steady there. Now, let me give you a whistlestop tour so you know what's what,' Mr Howse pointed. 'Those are the craftsmen, that's the engineer's department, that bungalow is for the art restorers. They're a bit high and mighty, in my opinion – no offence.'

Ned wasn't sure why Mr Howse thought he might be offended about art restorers, whatever they were.

'Out in the galley are the railway men, good men they are. Worked with them before. Course there's security. And Isaac and Otis, the Jones brothers, they're our nightwatchmen and you wouldn't want to mess with them; they're armed, just so you know. But that's enough natter for now. Come on, then, fella, let's see what you're made of. Put this on and follow me.'

Mr Howse hoisted his belt, tapped it, and passed Ned a steel helmet with a miner's lamp on the front.

'And we'll have to do better than those old boots, Ted.'

'It's Ned!' he said quickly, his voice coming out too loudly. 'Ned Letton.'

'Ned it is. Your boots ain't fit for purpose. Leave it with me, I'll see what I can do. I know a bloke,' Mr Howse said, tapping his nose.

Ned shoved the helmet on as he scrambled to catch up with Mr Howse; for a short and solid man, he moved quickly. Ned switched his miner's lamp on and then followed Mr Howse into the chippies' cavern.



9

'Hello, love, how did you get on?' his mother asked.

Ned sat down at a trestle table to join her for lunch with the other workers. He was far more interested in her and how she was getting on, wherever she'd been all morning.

'Where did you go?' he asked quietly.

She passed him a potato cake and ladled soup into his bowl. Ned could have done that himself, he thought irritably. He hoped Mr Howse wasn't watching.

'Sorry, love. Mr Rees said he'd sort you out. I'm in Bungalow 3, with the art restoration team.'

Ah! So that was why Mr Howse thought he might be offended. Well, he couldn't be more wrong, there was nothing hoity toity about his mum.

'What's art restoration?' he asked at the same time as she introduced him to someone.

'This is Miriam, my friend. Miriam, this is my youngest son, Ned.' His mother smiled proudly.

The famous Miriam. He ought to say thank you to her for organising everything, he supposed, but he felt shy. His mother, on the other hand, looked to be in her element.



'Hello, Ned. Good to meet you. You're with the chippies, I hear. The frames are what really holds everything together,' Miriam said, as if he were the same age as her. His shyness vanished – he liked her instantly.

'What's art restoration?' he asked Miriam, as his mother was too busy eating to talk.

'Art restoration – repairing paintings, returning them to their former glory. It's how we met. Your mother came to restore one of the paintings in the Rothschild collection.'

'Who are the Rothschilds?' Ned asked.

'I'm one! We're a rather large family. Bankers mostly, which is where all the money came from, I suppose. My father was rather more interested in animals than banks, which is how I fell into conservation. And that's how I ended up at BP, which is where I bumped into your mother again!' Miriam tucked her cropped, waved hair behind her ears.

'You were at Bletchley?' Ned whispered in amazement, looking between his mother and Miriam.

'Yes. Recruited by a friend of mine, Alan. You might have bumped into him. You'd remember him if you had. Bright sort. We did some decent work together before I was reassigned here.'

Ned shook his head, and Miriam went on.

'Your mother and I reunited on a bus near the brickyard and we've been exchanging letters ever since. Although your mother is moving in higher circles than me now with her special project,' Miriam said.

'You trained in art restoration? When did you do that?' he asked his mother.

'Before I started teaching. And long before I had you and your brothers. You knew I was an art teacher, didn't you?' she checked.

'Yes, but . . .' Ned lied; he'd assumed she had taught finger-painting to infants.

'Your mother, let me tell you, is the best in the business. I couldn't believe my luck when she said yes to coming here to work with me! Although Kaye has poached her from under my nose already. She'll be waltzing off again soon!' Miriam nudged his mother, as if they were two schoolchildren sharing a joke.

'What do you mean? Waltzing off?' he asked nervously.

'Nothing. *Shush, Miriam!* What's Mr Howse like?' his mother asked, changing the subject abruptly as she put her soup spoon down and leant forward.

'Great. Funny. He's showing me the ropes and putting me through my paces. He's going to make me an apprentice if I'm up to the job.'

'Better than school, hey?' His mother smiled before turning to Miriam. 'Ned found school a bit tough, didn't you, love.'

'Never went to school myself, Ned. My brother, Victor, did, but my parents didn't believe in education for girls, so my sisters and I taught ourselves until I was seventeen, then I demanded to go to college! Framework is a specialist skill and you'll come out of the war with a trade.' Miriam nodded approvingly.

Ned had never met anyone who hadn't gone to school – it sounded wonderful! – but his mother started talking again before he could ask her more.

Ned moved his chair backwards and followed Miriam's lead, telling his mother he'd see her later. His mother was being . . . *different*, and he wasn't sure what to make of it. *Flighty* was the word his father would have used.

He'd have to think about it later, when he was back in the nook, with Kip. See what the dog had to say about it all. He was a great listener; Ned had discovered that last night. And right now, Ned needed that more than ever.



10

'American Air Corps are all over the bases in Britain! They're really in the war with us now!' Harri shouted in delight as Ned and his mother stepped into the cottage.

They'd only been living in the cottage for a week and still weren't sure if they should just walk right in or not, so they'd knocked on the door awkwardly. But rather than being his usual sullen self, Harri had rushed to the door and flung it open, eager to share the news. It was the first time Harri had spoken to Ned without a sneer on his face.

'Which bases? Did they say?' Ned's mother asked, taking off her layers and hanging them in front of the fire to dry. Ned did the same.

'No, but since Pearl Harbour was attacked just before Christmas, the Yanks have remembered who their friends are, haven't they? This is good, isn't it! I mean, it's not good, obviously, but . . . well, it's good for us!' Harri said, looking uncertain for a moment.

'Yes. It is,' his mother said guardedly.

'Pearl Harbour isn't in America, Harri,' Anni said



authoritatively. 'It's in Hawaii. Even I know that and I'm only nine.'

'But it was a US naval base that was attacked, so it's an attack on America, Anni! You don't know anything,' Harri bristled.

'What else did they say on the news?' Ned's mother asked, steering the children away from an argument.

'Nothing important, just that Princess Elizabeth is going to sign up for war duty. But she won't be allowed on active service until her birthday,' Harri said dismissively.

'Her birthday's only two months away. What do you think she'll do? Join the Navy, the Army or the Air Force?' Anni asked excitedly.

'I wonder what strategy the Yanks will follow?' Harri said, pacing around the kitchen. 'I heard the Canadians passed conscription. They'll soon be over here too – and then look out!'

'I'd love to meet an American. They're so glamorous,' Anni sighed.

'Canadians aren't American. Anyway, you're not going to meet any of them here! There's no bases in Manod,' Harri said dismissively.

'Actually, the American Air Corps already have bases all over Britain. I heard it on the news. But I'm not sure I am a fan of the Americans after all . . .' She paused.

'Why's that, then? I thought you were going cow-eyed over them,' Harri laughed.

'Because they're putting Japanese-American men in internment camps. Like I said, I listen to the news, Harri! You should try it some time. Anyway, it's just like what they did here to my papa,' Anni's voice wobbled.

'Oh,' Harri mumbled. 'I didn't know that. Sorry.'

'They'll probably end up in the big cities, the Americans,' Ned said, trying to distract Anni from thoughts about her father. 'Like Liverpool, Birmingham and London.'

'I'm a Londoner. I know all about London, Ned,' Anni pulled up her socks and arranged them neatly, before looking pointedly at Harri.

'I thought you were German,' Harri said sarcastically.

'You know I'm not! I'm Austrian. There's an enormous difference, Harri!' Anni shouted. 'Just because I can speak German, doesn't mean I am one.'

'That's right, my mother's friend Miriam can speak German but she's English, although I think her mother was Austrian. And she's Jewish,' Ned's mother patted Anni on the arm.

'Just like me!' Anni's face lit up.

Although they were both Jewish, Ned could see that Miriam's family, with their fancy paintings and posh houses and money in the bank were in quite a different position to Anni and her father.

'I thought Austria was one of the lands of the German Empire now?' Harri evidently couldn't stop himself. 'Anyway, the Yanks will be travelling to Buckingham Palace or somewhere fancy. Top brass. Tea and cucumber sandwiches with Mr Churchill,' Harri continued, ignoring Anni.

Ned and his mother exchanged a swift look; most likely, the Americans would end up at Bletchley Park, again. There'd been a midnight meeting with the Yanks, well before the

bombing of Pearl Harbour. Wisely, they both kept quiet now and let Harri and Anni bicker contentedly until Mrs Thomas and Kip swept in.

'Have you heard? Princess Elizabeth's registered for war service. She's joined the Auxiliary Territorial Service and in April . . .' Mrs Thomas began; she, like Robyn's mother, was a firm supporter of the royal family.

'We know!' Anni interrupted, jumping up and running over to Mrs Thomas. 'She's going to drive army vehicles,' she said, helping Mrs Thomas take off her layers. 'And I think she's marvellous for doing her bit!' Anni said delightedly, shaking off the earlier unpleasantness with Harri.

'I've been listening on the wireless in the school hall.' Mrs Thomas swept the snow off her long white hair.

'Did you hear about the GIs? They're here in spades now. Numbers growing by the day,' his mother said.

'Thank God for the Americans! You never know, we might even see some out and about on manoeuvres. Although I expect they'll be down south rather than up here. But I wouldn't mind some candy and nylons if they do come calling.' Mrs Thomas winked at his mother and Anni.

Harri and Ned looked awkwardly at one another. Americans were all well and good, but as Harri had said, there was no need to go *cow-eyed* about them. He didn't have his mother pegged as that sort. Harri turned his back on Ned and started peeling vegetables, as if the mothers, and Anni, were nothing to do with him at all.

'Can I help?' Ned offered.

'No. I'm all right, English.' Harri didn't even turn around. Ned knew he shouldn't rise to it. He wished he was the type of boy who could just shove Harri in the back for calling him English in that sarcastic tone and not worry about the consequences.

'You can come and walk Kip with me?' Anni offered, sensing the tension between the two boys.

'Yes, go for a little walk together,' Harri said quietly.

Ned wished Harri would go for a walk. Maybe a very long one off a short pier.

'Kip's finished work now, hasn't he?' Anni checked with Mrs Thomas who was sitting in front of the fire with Ned's mum.

'Yes. You can take off his harness in a minute and pop a lead on. And mind you're back for your tea.'

'Oooh, what's for tea?' Anni asked, licking her lips.

'Welsh rarebit and laverbread. I've left your ration books with Mrs Davies at the shop. There'll be a better menu next week,' Mrs Thomas promised Ned and his mother.

'You're good to have us, Merryn. No apology needed.' His mother patted Mrs Thomas on the arm. 'I can't cook for toffee, so you've nothing to worry about there!'

'I love Welsh rarebit!' Anni shouted, as she ran over to Kip who was sat at Mrs Thomas's feet, his chin on her knees.

'Go free, Kip. Go free. Good boy!' Mrs Thomas said. 'Go free.'

Kip got up and trotted over to Anni. She took off the complicated-looking harness Kip wore when he worked with Mrs Thomas.



‘What’s Welsh rabbit?’ Ned asked they left the cottage, considering how it might differ from English rabbit, or Scottish, or Irish for that matter.

‘It’s rarebit, not a rabbit!’ Anni laughed, delighted. ‘It’s Welsh cheese and English mustard on toast,’ she explained, passing Kip’s lead to Ned while she pulled her socks up again.

Anni was easy company and filled him in on each neighbour as they passed house after house.

‘This *was* Mrs Jenkins’s house, but her husband has,’ she paused for effect, ‘black lung disease! Isn’t that dreadful. I thought it was like the black death or the plague; we studied that in school, but it’s not. Anyway, they’ve moved right down to the bottom of the hill. Mr Jenkins can’t climb up it any more.’ Anni pointed to a house at the end of the street.

‘And this is Miss Lily’s post office. Well, it’s Miss Elizabeth’s too. They argue over it all the time. And they won’t work with each other. Watch out when you go in. They’ll trick you into asking them whose post office it is. Then when you give them the wrong answer, they’ll both chase you out with a broom. Even if you went there on an especially important errand.’ Anni shuddered as they walked quickly past.

‘See the little garage over there? With the petrol pumps? It used to belong to Mr Horwood but now his daughters Lucy and Rose run it.’

‘There’s a lot of women in Manod,’ Ned noted, looking around at the old women in headscarves perched on doorsteps or leaning against door jambs, watching him.

‘They run the show, Auntie Merryn says.’ Anni nodded

her head at them. ‘Don’t repeat that in front of Harri, will you?’ she asked.

‘Promise.’ Ned nodded solemnly.

‘Oh, and when the snow clears, Miss Eliza Poppy will ride down the valley. She’s got a pony called Nye who carries books in packs hanging from his saddle! They travel all over, in every kind of weather making sure everyone’s got something to read because there’s not a library for miles. I’m going to help her when I’m older, on Myfanwy. Miss Eliza’s pony library is the absolute best thing about Manod. I’ve got a temporary lender’s card. I can get as many books out as I like. Even though you’re not from round here, I’m sure I can get Miss Eliza to give you one too,’ Anni said hopefully. ‘She doesn’t mind outsiders, like me, because she’s taught herself Italian, German and French, just by reading her books! Isn’t that clever!’

Anni was a bit like Mr Howse at the quarry, giving a running commentary on what was going on around him. Although it was different with Mr Howse, because he was teaching Ned. He supposed Anni was teaching him how to survive around Harri, just like his brothers had taught him how to survive around his father. Harri and his father would probably get on like a house on fire; Harri was what his father would call ‘a proper boy’.

‘What does Harri do all day?’ Ned asked, unable to fight his curiosity.

‘He’s the school caretaker, replacing Mr George – but don’t tell him I told you he works at the school!’ Anni warned. ‘He wants to be an ARP warden but he’s not old enough.

And of course, he's joining up as soon as he can. Says he doesn't want to miss out on the war.'

Ned felt immensely pleased that he wasn't the only one working with his mother. Harri could stuff his airs and graces from now on. They were in the same boat, despite Harri telling everyone what to do all the time. This news lifted Ned's spirits. He listened as hard as he could to what Anni was saying as they climbed the snowy hill, to repay the favour.



## 11

Ned met his mother and Miriam for lunch in the canteen. He was getting used to Miriam, who never ate anything but vegetables and drank her tea black. Miriam had been in the quarry since the beginning of the operation and was 'one of them'. Ned suspected that he and his mother were not. It reminded him of starting at Bletchley, when no one really knew him or his father and acted warily around them. Miriam didn't behave like that, though, probably because she'd known his mother for years. In fact, that was one of the best things about her. She happily told him tale after tale about his mother, so Ned couldn't help but like her. He knew all about his father's family and the history and heritage of the undertakers. But he'd not heard anything about his mother's life before Bletchley.

'She once caused a bit of a stir on campus by standing up to a rather salty sort in the restoration department.' Miriam's eyes gleamed as she raised her hand to Ned's mother who was trying to stop the story from unfolding.

'Miriam! He really doesn't want to hear all this,' she protested.



‘Come on, Helen, this is a good one, you know it!’  
Miriam pleaded.

Ned knew from his mother’s smile that she was giving in.

‘So, we were getting on with our work. Well, your mother was; I may have been distracted by a new theory about fleas, but not your mother,’ Miriam teased.

‘Fleas?’ Ned couldn’t help but interrupt.

‘Miriam is a scientist as well as a conservationist and is doing groundbreaking work on fleas.’ His mother said proudly.

‘Very glamorous, I’m sure you’ll agree, Ned. Now, back to your mother. She always got her work done on time. She was a bit of a boffin, truth be told. Should have had her in the huts with me at Bletchley but of course that wouldn’t have been allowed.’

‘Why? Because she’s married?’ Ned asked.

‘No. Your father would *never* have let her, would he!’  
Miriam said sharply.

‘Never mind all that, Miriam. Tell your story.’ His mother tried to move Miriam away from dangerous topics.

‘All right, all right. We’ll agree to disagree on that matter, as we always do. But when you stood up to that professor . . . What a day!’

Ned found it impossible to believe his mother would have stood up to anyone. He shoved bread in his mouth and chewed quickly in case he needed to ask another question.

‘Sorry to interrupt, Miss Rothschild, Mrs Letton. You’re wanted in the head office.’ A man who Ned didn’t recognise gestured to his mother and Miriam. ‘It’s time,’ he added mysteriously.

They both stopped eating at once, rose simultaneously and pushed their chairs back.

‘Time for what?’ Ned asked his mother.

‘I’ll see you later, love,’ she said.

She put her hand on his before leaving him alone with his lunch, the wisp of the story hanging in the air as well as his unanswered question. Ned looked around the room awkwardly. It felt like everyone was staring at him. He was uncomfortable sitting at the table on his own, but he couldn’t swan over and join Mr Howse and the chippies now without raising eyebrows. He should have sat with them from the start, then they might have started to think of him as one of the team. He walked as inconspicuously as he could down the slippery track towards the quarry entrance. As he passed the men in the shed, he nodded to them.

‘Need some fresh air,’ he told them.

‘Mind yourself in that easterly wind, it’s colder than the South Pole out there,’ one of them warned him.

The others didn’t even look up. They were gathered around a man who was peering into what looked like a microscope. Ned wondered what they were doing in there, but he knew it wasn’t his place to ask, so he kept walking.

Ned blinked as he stepped out of the confines of the dark tunnel into the wide-open brightness of the mountaintop. He rubbed his eyes, adjusting to the white glare coming from the snow-frosted ground and wished he’d gone back for his coat. The temperature drop hit him like a punch to the chest. His shirt, jumper and boilersuit were not going

to protect him out here for long. There was only one thing for it, a brisk walk. Maybe even a run around outside to warm up. Although running in hobnailed boots might be a push and he didn't have too much time before his break would be over. Mr Howse was a stickler for punctuality.

He jogged away from the quarry mouth and down a side of the mountain which he hadn't yet explored, jumping inelegantly from ledge to ledge, coordination never having been his strong point.

His heartrate accelerating, he shook off all the thoughts that had been racing through his head – the hurt of his mother's desertion, the strangeness of the many secrets she and Miriam shared, as well as trying to keep the operation in the quarry hidden from the Thomas family and Anni. He thought he knew his mother better than anyone else, certainly better than his father or his brothers. But since coming to Manod, he wasn't sure. Maybe you never truly knew anyone, not even your own mother.

That idea made him stop in his tracks to catch his breath. His throat was sore from the cold, sharp air, like when he was forced to play football, which he hated, in winter.

Ned looked out across the green valley dusted with snow. In the distance, he could see the tops of frosted mountains. He was so used to the closed-in atmosphere of home with its thin walls and doors slamming shut. And at work, in Bletchley Park, they were hemmed in by huts, surrounded by gates and fences, and watched everywhere they went by security guards. Ned stretched his arms out. Here he could breathe. It was empty and wild and peaceful. Bletchley was

so noisy, with someone in his ear all the time telling him what to do or asking him questions. Even his friends, he realised, always wanted to talk to him about something. And although he missed Robyn and Mary, he was coping without them. He was, he noted, doing surprisingly well on his own.

Today, there were no snow-clouds casting shadows down the mountain, making shapes across the deep reservoir. Mrs Thomas said the snow would let up by next week. It'd be interesting to see what the place looked like without it.

'Oi! English!' Harri's voice shouted from further down the mountain, shattering Ned's peace.

Ned stood up in shock then bellowed back, 'Shouldn't you be in school?'

'I don't go to school! I'm not a kid,' Harri sneered as he scrambled up the mountainside towards Ned.

'You're not supposed to be up here.' Ned stood his ground as Harri came closer and closer.

'Why not? It's a good place to catch rats.' Harri shrugged, as if this was perfectly normal behaviour. 'What's it got to do with you, English? Who made you mayor of Manod?'

'Ugh! Why are you catching rats?' Ned shuddered, ignoring Harri's question.

'Why not?' Harri replied, laughing. 'Not scared, are you?'

'Yeah!' He didn't mind admitting it. Everyone was afraid of rats.

'Well, there's none about now, so dry your tears. Could have sworn this used to be a good place for catching rats; it's like they've all disappeared.'



Ned tried to keep his face straight thinking about the cats in the quarry. Sherry, Brandy and Martini were clearly doing a great job as ratters.

'I was going to leave a few traps,' Harri said. 'I'm going to make an exploding rat bomb, in case of enemy invasion. Got to be prepared, since strangers make a habit of turning up here,' he finished pointedly.

'Really? How do you make one, then?' Ned challenged. He didn't believe half the stuff Harri came out with.

'Catch it. Let it dry out. Skin it. Scoop out the insides and fill it back up with plastic explosive to make it look like a rat. It's like modelling clay but more fun. Have to stuff them just right to look like a real rat.' Harri set traps as he spoke.

'All right, but what happens then?' Ned had to admit it sounded like Harri knew what he was talking about.

'Get a fuse – they look a bit like a pencil – and shove it up the rat's—'

'OK, OK. I get it. I get it.'

'And then you squash the end with your boot and place it wherever you think the enemy might be lurking, like on a railway, and in about thirty minutes, it'll go off. And then they'll wish they'd never invaded our home. I'm going to keep some to put outside my house, just in case,' Harri informed him.

Ned was unable to hide the disgust on his face. He hated cruelty to animals, even rats. Harri stood up from his traps and approached him slowly.

'Yeah, you going to stop me? You and whose army?'

What was Harri was so angry about, other than his dad

being away at war? Nearly everyone's dad was away. Harri wasn't any different to the rest of them, even though he acted like he was something special. He knew Anni missed her dad too, but she wasn't strutting about the place catching rats and falling out with people every five minutes. But Ned didn't miss his dad one bit. In fact, it was the opposite. And this made him jealous of Harri and Anni, who were desperate to be reunited with their fathers. Not that he could ever say this out loud.

'This is my home, not yours. The sooner you realise that, the better,' Harri said, spitting on the ground, narrowly missing Ned's boot. 'Why don't you just go back to where you came from, English!'

'Stop calling me that!' Ned shouted.

'All right! Show me what you're made of, and I'll stop calling you English. Deal?' Harri spun around and strode back to Ned. 'Dare you!'

'Depends.' Ned wasn't going to fall into this trap; he had two brothers who loved to dare him.

'See those tracks over there on the north side of Manod Mawr? That's where they used to run the transport system. Took the miners, like my granddad, down from the mountain at the end of the day.' Harri pointed at some old quarry equipment that looked fit for the scrapheap.

'Yeah, so?' Ned shrugged, hoping the dare wasn't going to involve the quarry.

'So, how about we have a race? Winner gets to call the other anything they want. You *man* enough?' Harri smiled again.



12

Ned had been reluctant to wait for Harri after work, but he didn't want to be accused of chickening out, or worse.

'Don't get too close, English! Tell your mother I saved your life!' Harri joked, pushing Ned towards the sheer drop off the side of the mountain before pulling him quickly back.

'That's not funny! What did you do that for?' Ned snapped. His stomach lurched, and his arms tingled.

Harri grabbed Ned's arm again. 'Watch your step, English! Don't want you slipping, do we? Or you might end up in the old quarry hospital like the rockmen. One slip with the dynamite and a man's arm or leg would be gone, my granddad told me.'

'Get lost!' Ned shook him off firmly.

'I'm just joking. Don't you know how to take a joke, English?' Harri smiled.

'Why don't you stop *joking* and show me these carts?' He took several steps away from the edge.

'They're cars, not carts! Welsh men call them Ceir Gwyllt. Of course you won't be able to manage that, so we'll call them wild cars. Just for you, English,' Harri said.

'There's nothing to race in!' Ned laughed in relief.

'Yes, there is: the wild cars. There's two left and I know where they keep them. Meet me back here at the end of the day. After you finish whatever it is you're doing up here. Unless you're chicken?' Harri laughed. 'Shall I pin a white feather on you?'

Everyone knew white feathers were given out to cowards or conchies – the horrible name given to conscientious objectors, who refused to fight because they believed in peace rather than war. Ned didn't think he was either, but he was glad he wasn't old enough to enlist. Although just this month, conscription had been brought in, calling up men and women over eighteen to fight. And when he turned eighteen, if the war was still raging, he would *have* to fight.

'Got to go. Cold enough to freeze the snot in your nose!' Harri tore down the path like a mountain goat, leaving Ned worrying about why the cars were called wild.



'Steady! Hold on proper, like. I don't want your death on my conscience. And not a word to the mams.' Harri tapped his nose then quickly grabbed hold of the pole again, steadying himself.

'As if I'm going to tell my mum about this! She'd kill me!' Ned rolled his eyes.

'That's if you live long enough! I forgot to say, it's about a thousand-foot drop, give or take!' Harri whistled, looking down the track and then back at Ned.

Ned noticed that Harri's face had paled a little. He wondered if the boy was anywhere near as brave as he pretended to be. But moments later, Harri was pushing with his feet to get his car moving.

'Where's the brake? Where's the brake!' Ned pleaded as Harri set off.

'Between your knees,' Harri yelled over his shoulder.

It was too late to turn back now. Ned shut his eyes and shoved off with his feet, breathing heavily in and out as the wind whipped his face. He forced his eyes open as his stomach swirled and his cheeks were pulled back by the force of the car's motion. He shouted but his voice was carried away. Everything was a blur of grey slate and green grass, like a wobbly watercolour painting, as the car flew down the mountain. He closed his eyes again and swallowed down the sick feeling, waiting for this to be over.

He landed at the bottom in a heap, narrowly avoiding an old slate wagon. Harri leapt shakily to his feet.

'We did it!' Harri shouted in relief, looking happy for the first time since Ned had arrived. 'I couldn't breathe, I went so

fast. I bet I went faster than my granddad! Must have been about fifty miles an hour at least,' Harri shouted, running over to Ned, who was lying face down on the ground. When Harri got no response, he stopped shouting.

'Are you all right?' Harri sounded genuinely worried. 'English?' He knelt and rolled Ned over, onto his back, carefully. 'Oh! I thought . . . You had me worried then. My mam would kill me if . . .' Harri laughed nervously.

'Now you know how I felt when you jumped off the ledge!' Ned wheezed in delight, getting his breath back. 'I am never ever doing that again. And I won. My board went off the rails. I swear I flew into the air at the end. My cheeks feel like they're made of rubber! Anyway, a deal is a deal so, no more of this "English" rubbish. You promised,' Ned reminded him, laughing at the surprise on Harri's face.

'All right. All right. You win, *Neddy*.' Harri held his arms up in defeat.

'Neddy? I think I prefer English!' Ned shoved him.

'Chuck your car in the wagon with the others. We'll pick them up next time, right?' Harri grinned. 'That was a fluke, by the way. Beginner's luck.'

'Just deal with the fact that I'm clearly a better driver than you,' Ned replied.

'We'll see about that next time!' Harri punched him on the arm.

'I told you. No way is there going to be a next time,' Ned said. But just maybe there might be. *Maybe*.

'*Yeah, yeah*. Race you? Whoever finishes last has to fill

the coal scuttle!’ he bellowed as he ran down the mountain for home.

Ned let him, realising that of all the people knocking at the door of the schoolhouse, he’d never once seen any friends call for Harri. Harri must be lonely too, Ned thought, as he caught him up. And maybe he could change that.



13

‘There you are now. We were beginning to get worried,’ Mrs Thomas said, a thin smile of relief stretching across her anxious face.

‘Why didn’t you take me with you?’ Anni said. ‘Where’ve you been?’ She had been curled up on the rug in front of the fire with Kip, but they had both got up when the boys returned. The dog was nudging Ned in the back of his legs for fuss – he didn’t go looking for attention from Harri, Ned realised.

‘Somewhere *little girls* aren’t invited,’ Harri replied.

Ned winced as Anni scowled at both of them, wishing Harri was more tactful.

‘Harri, can you set the table after you’ve cleaned up?’ Mrs Thomas said, her lips pressed together in disappointment.

Ned looked down at himself and saw why. Both he and Harri were covered in mud and grass stains. His knees were cut and bleeding, and Harri’s overalls had a tear in one knee and a long rip on the elbow.

‘Ned, come with me,’ Mrs Thomas said, in a tone which brooked no argument.



Ned followed her into the nook, surprised. It had generally been accepted that the nook was his private space. Anni had been told to keep out unless invited. Ned let her come in and use his telescope to look at the stars, although she preferred to chat. He surveyed the space, taking in the hospital corners he'd tried to make when tidying his bed, and his few spare clothes, folded up at the end of the desk.

'Well, Ned, you're very neat. You've kept your room lovely. Now then, your mam's had to pop away to work on a project, but she said she'll be back in a day or two. You're to stay here with me, obviously. Is that all right?' She rushed the words out like ripping a plaster off a cut.

'Where's she gone?' he gasped.

'London. She sent a message down to school. You can ask her all about it yourself when she gets back, can't you.' Mrs Thomas dusted off her hands, signalling the end of the conversation. Presumably, she didn't know anything else.

'Can I see the note?' he asked as someone rapped on the door.

Mrs Thomas reached into her pocket and pulled out an envelope, then left him to see to whoever was knocking so insistently.

*Dear Merryn, I've had to go to London for work. Please can you look after Ned? I'll explain when I get back. A few days at most. Best wishes, Helen.*

Mrs Thomas came back into the nook a few minutes later.

She was holding another envelope as far away from her body as possible.

'It's a telegram. It's Harri's father. I saw his name. I . . . I can't see to read the rest. It's too small.' Her teeth were chattering, and she was shaking.

Everyone knew a telegram was unwelcome news. Kip barged through the curtains, his tail narrowly missing Ned's drawings of constellations on the desk as he pressed his face into Mrs Thomas's knee then threaded himself through her legs until they were wrapped up in one another. Mrs Thomas slowly sank to the floor and began to cry, a terrible silent cry. Ned was at a complete loss. He'd seen his mother cry plenty of times but that was different. He could usually make her laugh or get her a cup of tea or something to take her sadness away. But Mrs Thomas, although not a stranger, certainly felt strange to him. He knelt onto the floor and edged closer to her, instinctively reaching out an arm. Kip took his jaw off Mrs Thomas's shoulder, turned around and sat in front of her and gave Ned a look.

'I know, I know. It's all right, boy, I'm just worried, like you are,' Ned told the dog.

The telegram slipped through Mrs Thomas's fingers onto the floor. Ned reluctantly reached out to pick it up, wincing as if afraid it would burn him.

'The mail boy waited for a reply, but I sent him away,' she said. 'It's too small for me to read. Can you?'

'It's from the War Office. It says they deeply regret to inform you that Mr Thomas is missing in action. There are only a few lines,' he told her.

No wonder when telegrams cost so many pennies for each word.

'It says they'll notify you if they have any further news. Immediately,' he said but Mrs Thomas wasn't listening.

Why did his mother have to go to London now, of all times, right when they needed her?

'Mercury, Venus, Earth,' Ned recited under his breath. 'Mars, Jupiter, Saturn.'

'What?' Mrs Thomas stopped sniffing and crying and lifted her head.

'I'm listing the planets. It's what I do when I don't know what to do about something.' Ned shrugged, embarrassed but pleased that Mrs Thomas had stopped crying.

'Does it help?' She wiped her nose on her sleeve, getting to her feet.

'Yes. Mostly. Uranus and Neptune. And look!' He pointed up at the skylight.

They stood up to get a better view. Kip wriggled, sensing a change in mood.

'What is it?' Mrs Thomas didn't need to stand on her tiptoes, she was so tall she could reach the handle of the skylight.

He picked up his telescope off the desk, where he'd left it last night and gave it to her.

'Here you go. Steer it in this direction, that's it, and you should be able to see Mars. It's the colour of good marmalade,' he explained, remembering Robyn's mother's marmalade.

'Oh! I think I can see it. I can see something,' Mrs Thomas said excitedly.

'You can always see the constellation of Orion this time of year. Those three stars shine the brightest. There isn't a piece of the sky that isn't interesting if you look hard enough,' he added.

'How am I going to tell Harri?' Mrs Thomas said, handing the telescope back. 'He'll have so many questions and I don't have any answers.' She stood rooted to the spot, Kip watching to see what her next move would be.

He thought about what his mother would do in this situation. She wouldn't hesitate.

'Come on, Kip, lead the way, there's a good boy. Find Harri, that's it, find Harri.' He pushed through the curtains and gave Kip his instructions, holding the fabric open for Mrs Thomas to walk through.

'Let's all go,' he added, as Kip ran in front of Mrs Thomas, then circled back and stood behind her, gently steering her.

'You're a good boy, Ned Letton. Your mother must be so proud of you.'

Mrs Thomas breathed in deeply and crossed the kitchen floor to the foot of the stairs. She began to climb, and Ned and Kip were right behind her.





## 14

When Ned returned from work at the quarry he was immediately confronted by Anni.

'I want to know what you and Harri were up to yesterday. And why you and Auntie Merryn were in Harri's room last night. No one's allowed up in his room,' Anni stated clearly, as if she'd been running it over in her mind, waiting by the door, watching for him to come home.

'Sometimes Harri pulls the ladder up so no one can climb up and bother him,' she continued, still not willing to let Ned into the kitchen. 'Even though Auntie Merryn says it's a hazard and what would he do in the event of an air raid.'

'Do you want to go down to the shop? Mrs Davies might give you a penny sweet,' Ned said, hoping to distract Anni.

'All right. You can buy me some sweets and then we'll talk,' Anni agreed.

Anni stuck to her word and was unusually silent until they reached the shop.

'So, are you going to tell me what's happened? Is it the

telegram?' Anni whispered as they walked past Mrs Davies standing to attention at the counter.

'If you know, why are you asking me?' Ned was impressed; Anni didn't miss a trick. 'Hello, Mrs Davies,' he said in his most polite voice.

'Hmm. What can I do you for?' Mrs Davies folded her arms across her chest and viewed them both with suspicion.

'Have you got any sweets, please?' Ned gave her his best smile. 'I need to give some to Anni.'

'Got your blue ration book, have you?' Mrs Davies held out her hand expectantly.

'No. I thought my mother had given it to you. Or Mrs Thomas?' Ned blushed. He'd really wanted to get Anni some sweets to make up for things.

'Thought, he says. *Thought!* Coming in here, expecting handouts and favours when there's only just enough to go round the village as it is. Cut above the rest, are you?' Mrs Davies started. 'Typical outsider! You're all the same.'

'I'm sure my mam will sort out the books with you, Mrs Davies.' Harri appeared, using a voice Ned hadn't heard before. If he hadn't known it was Harri, he'd have said it was charming.

'I've got to stick to the rules, that's all, Harri. Can't be making exceptions for newcomers and refugees, see. It starts with sweets,' she pointed at Ned and Anni, 'but who knows what it'll be next. Foreign foods, I shouldn't wonder! They'll all be trying it on in here, those Englishmen up on Manod Mawr, if they think I'm a soft touch.' Mrs Davies pointed up at the mountain.

'Oh, Mrs Davies, I don't think anyone would mistake you

for a soft touch,' Harri said, pointing to a box of matches on the shelf.

'I'm sure you heard about the dust-up down the pub the other night. Those English from up the mountain had the cheek to tell us to mind our business! Manod *is* our business, or at least it was until they showed up.' Mrs Davies tutted, turning around to get the matches.

'Heard all about it. Can't say I blame Mr and Mrs Jenkins from barring the English.' Harri winked.

'True! Shot themselves in the foot there. Do you know, I'm in two minds whether to do the same, and bar them from my shop.'

'No one would blame you if you did, Mrs Davies.' Harri pocketed the matches and smiled at her. 'Diolch.' Harri raised his hand in thanks and steered Ned and Anni towards the door.

'Dim problem. Now then, I was sorry to hear about your father, Harri. Terrible shame. Awful worry for you,' Mrs Davies carried on, oblivious to the upset she was causing.

Ned watched Harri's face fall and wished Mrs Davies would just shut up.

'Out!' Harri spluttered, holding the shop door open for Ned and Anni, as if they were children and he was the adult.

'Keep me posted now on your father. We're all thinking of you. Owen Pugh said a prayer in chapel for him. Mind you tell your mam I was asking after her. I'll drop by the schoolhouse to get an update, will I?' Mrs Davies said as Harri slammed the shop door behind him, shaking the glass in the frame.

'What have I told you about her? Stay out of her hair. She's got her beak in everyone's business!' Harri warned Anni and Ned, before marching off in the opposite direction.

'I told you Mrs Davies doesn't like me, but you wouldn't listen. She doesn't like anyone different. I know *all* about terrible things happening, so you can tell me about Harri's dad,' Anni said seriously, launching back into their previous conversation as soon as Harri was out of earshot.

'All right, Anni. I'll tell you, but please don't go gossiping about it to anyone,' Ned said in defeat as they started to walk back to the cottage, empty handed.

'I *never* gossip, Ned. Ever,' she said solemnly.

He filled her in, which didn't take long as he knew so little. 'And don't tell Harri or Mrs Thomas that I told you. You saw how he reacted to Mrs Davies just now. He couldn't get out of there quick enough.'

'Your secret is safe with me. Auntie Merryn closed the school. Can you believe it?' Anni sounded scandalised.

'What did you do all day, then?' Ned asked. No wonder she'd practically jumped on him when he got home, he thought.

'I've been next door with Mr Evans.' She pointed at the little cottage nearest the school. 'It was brilliant. Harri went off up the mountain first thing; he always does that when he's cross. He should have gone into school because it's falling down in places. He's *supposed* to be the caretaker. I didn't meet his dad, but he sounded nice from what they've both told me.'

'He's not dead, Anni! He's just missing,' Ned cautioned.



'You shouldn't talk about him as if he's already gone. It would really upset Mrs Thomas and Harri.'

'There's a photo of him in the kitchen if you want a look?' Anni offered as they stepped back inside the cottage.

Ned shook his head. It wasn't his business, or Anni's really.

'What shall we do? Auntie Merryn is still asleep upstairs with Kip. Where's your mother? Will she make us something to eat when she gets in?' Anni looked up at Ned expectantly.

'She's . . . away. Working,' Ned replied.

'The mams are all working these days, aren't they? Mine's in London, in a museum somewhere. She's an art forgery hunter. Don't tell anyone, though; I'm not supposed to tell, but I trust you.' Anni took a breath.

'Anni! Even if you trust me, you shouldn't be telling me things about your mother, especially not about her job. You never know who might be listening. Promise me you won't tell anyone else. And maybe you and I should keep away from Mrs Davies' shop for a bit?'

'I promise. I don't need sweets anyway. I can cook eggs. I'll go back next door and see if Mr Evans's hens have laid, shall I? I can make our tea.'

Ned nodded. Anni switched topics so swiftly that it was a job to keep up with her. He hoped she'd understood his point. For all she knew, he could be a spy or a double agent and feed the information about Anni's mother back to the enemy. It sounded like Anni's mother was just as involved with hiding the art from the galleries in London, as he and his mother were.

'Straight there and back,' Ned said.

If Anni's mother was a forgery expert, Ned wondered if *his* mum was in London, working with her. Maybe it wasn't a coincidence that Anni had ended up in Manod. But was she actually safe here? He could understand why her mother had left her in Mrs Thomas's care, but if Anni didn't watch herself, she might not be safe for long. Not with people like Mrs Davies listening to every word, putting two and two together and coming up with five.

Anni came back with some eggs wrapped in newspaper and set them in a pan to boil. She directed Ned about the kitchen, and he was only too happy to be told what to do.

'Slice some bread. There's no butter but we won't need it with egg yolks. Mr Evans gave me some spinach too, so we don't get rickets. Or scurvy, I think. Anyway, we'd better eat it up. Have you had one of Mr Evans's eggs yet? The yolks are so yellow, they're orange.'

'Should we make some for Mrs Thomas or Harri?'

Harri was snifty about food at the best of times. He'd certainly have something to complain about if Anni presented him with a meal. But Harri wouldn't dream of cooking anything himself either.

'Let's just see to ourselves, will we?' Anni smiled at Ned.

He could tell she was glad he was there. He felt the same. It was easy to forget how much younger she was than him. Mrs Evans next door liked to say that Anni had an old soul.

'And after the eggs, how about I teach you something? You've been mithering about not having a hat.' Anni pointed at him with the wooden spoon.

'What's mithering?' Ned said.

He paused in slicing the bread. It was proving tricky, as the knife needed sharpening, but he didn't know where the sharpening stone was kept and didn't feel comfy rummaging through drawers.

'Mithering means moaning. Shall I teach you to knit? Can't have the mams doing all the work, can we? Even though the snow's stopped, it's still chilly.'

Truth be told, Ned was keen to learn how to knit; his mother had tried to teach him at home, but his father had forbidden it, declaring it a girl's pastime. But his father wasn't here now so there was no one to stop him accepting Anni's offer. He could knit his mother a scarf. It was about time someone gave her something nice.

After they'd washed up, in icy water as the boiler was on the blink again, Anni got out her *kit*, as she called it. It was a bag made from carpet. He assumed someone, possibly Anni's grandmother, had made it for her.

'Right, these are knitting needles. We were sent some so that we could knit gloves and balaclavas for the forces. They even gave us free patterns. Here's one for a fatigue hat. First, I need to show you the *When You're Off Duty* jumper I'm making for Mama. Not that she's ever off duty . . .' From outside came a crashing sound, as if someone had driven into the bins. Or more likely kicked them over. 'Something smells funny! Like toast burning. And what is that noise? I can't hear myself think!'

As Anni spent most of her time with people a lot older than herself, she peppered her conversation with their phrases. She was right enough, though; it did smell, shockingly, like

someone had started a bonfire, despite the rules. There'd been no bonfires or fireworks night allowed since war broke out three years ago. Ned pushed the knitting needles away from him. Anni, understanding instantly, shook her head.

'Who cares what Harri thinks?' she hissed. 'He's what my mama would call a thief of joy.'

Ned got to his feet and began to make his way over to the door as he heard Kip thunder down the stairs. Mrs Thomas followed, pulling on a jumper over her clothes, which looked like men's pyjamas.

'Shillings and sixpence! Is that boy playing with fire?' she said in horror.

Mrs Thomas threw open the door onto the schoolyard. Ned and Anni peered behind her. Harri was sprawled on the ground covered in litter as if he'd had a fight with the dustbins and lost. He scowled across at the three of them, standing and staring from the doorway.

'What did I tell you about playing with matches! You know bonfires are banned. Do you want the enemy to find out where we are? Come inside, right now!' Mrs Thomas shoved her feet into a pair of wellingtons and marched across the yard, Kip at her heels, hackles raised.

Ned and Anni remained in the doorway, watching.

Mrs Thomas bent down and hoiked Harri to his feet, tucking the matches away in her pocket. Harri was caked in what Ned could now see was rubbish from the bins and the ashes of whatever he'd been burning. He must have been setting the bins on fire. To Ned and Anni's surprise, Harri started crying. Mrs Thomas threw her arms around him



and drew him into her, ignoring the mess all around them. Ned pulled Anni away from the door and closed it gently.

‘But I . . .’ she began.

‘Come on, you promised me a knitting lesson and I really need a hat. This country is absolutely freezing. It definitely doesn’t feel like spring!’

‘Auntie Merryn says it’s a long winter when you live in Manod. Can’t we wait in the kitchen?’ Anni said, eyes wide, anticipating more drama.

‘Let’s go in the nook.’

‘But what about Kip? He’s shut outside. He’ll be cold and hungry.’

‘I’m sure our friend Kip will be in to find us soon,’ Ned started, walking away from the door. But when Anni didn’t follow, he knew he had to raise the stakes.

‘How about, if you teach me how to knit, I’ll teach you how to make a nut whistle?’

‘Everyone knows how to make a whistle, Ned!’

‘OK, something else, then. I’ve been thinking about teaching you this anyway. Something my friend Mary taught me.’

The run-in earlier with Mrs Davies had got him worried. He was glad Harri had turned up when he did, but he got the sense that he and Anni would only ever be seen as a stranger and a refugee by the people of Manod. Just how long did you have to live somewhere before you were accepted?

‘Teach me what, Ned?’ Anni asked.

‘Something classified. Top secret.’

‘Top secret!’ Anni jumped up and down. ‘Classified? Oh, my giddy aunt, Ned!’

‘Sshhh!’ Ned warned. ‘It’s not going to be a secret for long if you keep shouting, is it? Once I’ve shown you how it works, we’ll be able to use it to talk to each other and no one else will be able to understand us.’

‘Not even Mrs Davies-in-the-shop?’ Anni checked.

‘Especially not Mrs Davies-in-the-shop!’ Ned confirmed, shuddering.

‘Gut! Sehr gut!’ Anni nodded.

‘Anni!’ Ned reminded her. ‘You’re supposed to speak in English. Or Welsh, remember.’

He might need to ask his mother to have a serious talk with Anni. She didn’t seem to understand that one little word, one tiny slip in front of the wrong person, could spell disaster.

‘Good!’ She switched languages, remembering herself. ‘Da iawn.’

He smiled. He'd forgotten his mother could be fun! She launched into a mini lecture on the Dutchman, who had been obsessed with light and shade. Ned let it wash over him as he walked up and down the collection.

'What do you think?' She was stood in front of a painting of an old man with a big red nose, wearing a floppy black hat.

'Well, it's not exactly my cup of tea. If I'm being honest, it's ugly. I mean, look at that nose! Sorry, Mum, but I don't think this is going to cheer up any Londoners.'

'But Rembrandt is one of the greatest storytellers,' she said, looking thoughtful. 'His most well-known piece *The Night Watch* is in Amsterdam. I hope to go one day, maybe after the war. But look at the honesty in his self-portrait. He doesn't shy away from the truth or flatter himself falsely.'

Her face was alive with all the possibilities the picture held for her, as if she were at the theatre. Ned went right up to the frame and studied it, hoping to see what his mother saw in it.

'Look at how Rembrandt's made his face look like a sculpture, with all its lumps and bumps.'

'I like the red of his cloak. It's less boring than the other ones full of crosses and bibles.'

'There you are, Ned! We'll make an art scholar of you yet. The more you look, the more you see. You could almost take his hand and let him pull you into the picture.'

Ned wasn't sure he'd wanted to be pulled into Rembrandt's world. He had never seen his mother like this. She was so sure of herself. But then, when would she have had a

chance to speak with him like this? Back at home her days were filled with washing, cleaning and cooking, as far as he knew. There hadn't been time to discover who she was or what she'd done before. And, if he were being honest, he'd never bothered to ask.

'I've so much more to show you before we make our selection for March's Picture of the Month. We don't want to gobble everything up all in one sitting. Let's walk off the Rembrandts, they can be quite heavy on the stomach. We'll go and feast on something lighter – the Impressionists. Always remember to leave room for pudding, Ned!' she advised.

And he saw at once how brilliant a teacher she must have been, and hoped that she might be again.





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## March 1942

Ned woke every morning with Kip's big face in his. Huffing and snorting, the dog would lick him and nudge him, tail thumping gladly on the blankets, until Ned got up and took him out, which was less painful now the spring had finally shown its face.

Before coming to Wales, he hadn't realised there were so many different shades of green. His mother pointed out all the leaves appearing on elm, beech, oak, larch, lime, walnut, plane, poplar and ash trees as they walked up and down Manod mountain, explaining how to tell them apart. And Anni had sworn she'd seen swallows returning to the eaves of the little schoolhouse. The more time Ned spent out of the cottage, the better. Since the telegram about Harri's father had arrived, the air was thick with worry, and there was nothing he or Anni could do to ease it. His mother had made some inquiries through Kaye, but it had come to nothing. Perhaps Kaye wasn't quite as all-knowing and all-seeing as his mother had led him to believe.

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He and Anni had spoken of it when they'd reluctantly gone to the shops for more milk. They'd been avoiding Mrs Davies-in-the-shop as much as possible but the milkman's wife, Christine, had gone into labour in the night, with twins! And so, Mr Owen Pugh had not been out on his horse and cart to deliver the bottles or his sermon in chapel. Mr Pugh, it had turned out, was both milkman and preacher.

'Do you think they'll ever find Mr Thomas? At least I know where my papa is, even if I can't see him. The last time I saw him he was fussing over having to put on a fresh shirt. His collar and cuffs were grimy with smuts from the city. At least he won't have to worry about that in Scotland. I've heard the air is fresh and clean there.' Anni's voice sounded forced.

Ned was in awe of the way she was handling the dreadful situation with her father.

They were carrying bottles of milk back up the hill to Mrs Thomas's. Anni had thoughtfully grabbed an extra one for Mr and Mrs Evans, much against Mrs Davies-in-the-shop's wishes. She'd muttered about *having to score it right in the ration books*. She'd even reminded them that there was a war on, as if they'd forgotten!

'What's that noise?' Ned asked as Kip tilted his head to listen, ears moving back and forth, working overtime.

'Choir practice, I guess. I can hear Harri's cello,' Anni said dismissively. 'I know it's sad about his papa, but there's no need to be such a misery, is there? He's been taking it out on me all week.'

'Sorry you're bearing the brunt of it all, Anni.'

As they walked closer to the chapel, Ned felt the deep

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vibrations of the cello – it was the first time he'd heard Harri playing and he wondered at how gentle and delicate it sounded, when Harri himself was the complete opposite.

'It's beautiful, his playing, isn't it, even if *he's* awful,' Anni said.

'I thought it was an adult playing,' Ned said, leaving the milk behind on the wall and walking closer to the arched wooden doors of the chapel to listen.

'You can go in if you want. Mrs Pugh's always trying to get me to join the choir. I don't really feel like singing, though. Anyway, the door's always open. I'll take these home,' she announced, picking up Ned's milk bottle.

'All right. See you in a bit?' Ned asked.

'See you after,' Anni said, grinning.

She was trying out local phrases on Ned to see which ones made her sound more of an insider than an outsider. His mother had told him that there were Jewish refugees being taken in all over Wales, which made Ned wonder if Anni was the only Jew in Manod and whether she minded or not. But he wasn't sure how to go about asking. He felt out of his depth in Manod, being English, but he had no idea what it must feel like to Anni, to be a refugee. And Jewish. She'd talked to him a little bit about it on their daily dog walks, but he imagined there was a lot she kept to herself. He had to keep reminding himself she was only nine too.

'Straight home, Anni?' Ned checked.

'Of course, Ned. But I'm going to call in with Mr and Mrs Evans first, for a chitchat with Myfanwy and to give them their milk.' Anni smiled.

Ned waved goodbye to her and peered around the door of the chapel. But there was no choir rehearsal. Just Harri playing his cello alone, silent tears slipping down his face. Ned closed the door as silently as he could, hoping that Harri wouldn't realise he had been seen.





## 18

‘There’s been a leak!’ His mother shook him awake the next morning and whispered urgently. ‘Someone found it down on the high street.’

‘A water pipe?’ Ned sat up, rubbing his eyes, pushing Kip off the bed.

He wasn’t sure why his mother was in the nook, getting herself in a tizz about a leaky pipe.

‘No! A newspaper. Someone’s leaked what we’re doing to the press and now it’s in the newspapers. About here!’ Now Ned understood the danger. His mother relaxed her grip on his arm, but the worried look remained. ‘They’re saying last in first out, Ned. There’s never been a leak before.’ She got up and peered through the curtains to the kitchen, making sure no one else was up to hear them. ‘*We* were last in, Ned.’

‘But we haven’t done anything! Who do you think has talked?’ he whispered, remembering what Mrs Davies had said about the row in the pub between the local old boys and the men from the quarry.

‘I’ve no idea! No one in the restoration bungalow, that’s for sure. Miriam thinks one of the chippies could be the

culprit. Someone getting too chatty after a pint in Y Manod.’ Ned was wounded to hear a note of hope is his mother’s voice.

‘That’s rubbish! The chippies have been barred from the pub. Why did she say that? She doesn’t even know them!’ He jumped out of bed.

‘Ned, there’s no need to raise your voice,’ she cautioned, twitching the curtains open again. ‘Why have they been barred?’

‘I don’t know. Mrs Davies said there’d been an argument. People in the village asking questions about what we’re doing in the quarry.’

‘And I’m guessing they didn’t like it when they didn’t get any answers.’ His mother nodded.

‘I don’t know. Mrs Davies didn’t exactly confide in me!’

‘Well, someone went to the papers and told them there’s a mine hiding art from a gallery in London. I’m not saying it was Mrs Davies or one of the men in the pub, but *someone* said something.’ Her voice shook as she folded herself down onto the narrow bed.

‘Did they mention Manod? Or Wales?’

‘It doesn’t say Manod, but it’s already far more information than should ever have been revealed. Oh, Ned! What’s going to happen? What shall we do?’

He didn’t know how to answer her. This was bigger than the both of them. He could see it wasn’t just the possibility that the art might be found by the enemy that was troubling his mother.

‘If the enemy get hold of the papers, like you say they

can, and work out exactly where the art is being hidden, even just one bomb raid would destroy the masterpieces, and even worse, kill people in the village. Think of everyone here who has nothing to do with it – like Anni, Harri and Mr and Mrs Pugh and their new twins, wiped out in a split second.’ Ned stopped, leaving the frightening image hanging in the air. There was something else too, although he didn’t even want to think it, let alone say it because it was so very selfish, when lives were at risk. If everything went wrong, his mother could lose her job. And then their new life away from Bletchley Park, and his father, would disappear in a puff of smoke.

‘What does Kaye say?’ Ned asked when his mother remained silent.

‘That’s the worst part, Ned. Kaye’s called an emergency briefing.’

‘Who? You and me? Just us?’ His mother’s panic was infectious now.

He knew the punishment for breaking the Official Secrets Act was either going to prison for life or, worse: the death penalty. Would you be shot or hanged? He was going to be sick. Fluid was pooling in his mouth.

‘No, Ned, not just us, everyone at the quarry! That’s why I woke you so early. We’ve got to go. Now!’

They hiked as quickly as possible up the mountain path, unable to speak. The cutting spring air burned in their lungs as they hurried towards the quarry. Between gasps, his mother shared as much as she knew about the newspaper report.

‘It was in a Liverpool newspaper. Someone showed Kaye. Kaye told Cee. Imagine the fallout! There’s going to be a witch hunt!’ She gasped.

‘Liverpool? That’s where Mary’s from. But we’re miles from Liverpool.’

‘Not as far as you’d think. Few hours’ drive. Whoever wrote it got too many things right for it to be guesswork.’ She panted, refusing to stop at their usual spot to take in the view or get their breath back.

‘But who found the newspaper?’ he forced out, trying to match his mother’s stride while avoiding the snowdrops.

‘I don’t know. Someone showed it to one of the chippies and the rest you know.’

‘Well, whoever wrote it got the cave bit wrong. It’s a quarry not a cave.’

‘They’re practically the same thing, Ned,’ his mother said regretfully. ‘The men who are normally in there must already be at the meeting,’ she noted anxiously, getting her breath back, as they walked past the empty shed near the entrance of the quarry.

‘I hope it hasn’t already started. I don’t want Kaye looking at us as we walk in,’ Ned replied as they stepped swiftly along the tracks and out into the big cavern, already full of people.

He spotted Miriam making her way through the crowd to them.

‘Good morning, Helen. Ned.’ She nodded grimly.

His instinct was to ignore her, after the comments she’d made about the chippies. But his manners got the better of



him. He nodded in response, as the nervous chatter of the crowd came to an abrupt halt. A man in a three-piece suit stepped up onto a crate and waited for silence.

‘Who’s that?’ he asked his mother.

‘That’s Kaye.’ She frowned at Ned and put her finger on her lips.

This wasn’t the woman he’d been expecting. Not the *Kaye* he’d imagined when his mother and Miriam had rabbitied on about her. It must be *K* not Kaye, and *K* must be short for something. He was wearing the loudest tie Ned had ever seen. The tie, a painting itself, was bursting with colour, like a peacock parading its feathers.

As *K* began to speak, Ned knew he’d better listen.



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‘Why are we here?’ *K* addressed his audience as if he were in a theatre. ‘Because we, the custodians of these glorious masterpieces, are valiantly fighting to preserve our national treasures. These remarkable works of art represent our defiance in the face of the enemy. But now we must ask ourselves a new question: Who is the enemy in our midst?’

The cavern did feel a bit like a theatre, even if *K* was stood on some old milk crates rather than a grand stage. *K* reminded Ned of the voices on the wireless – confident, clever and clipped. ‘*This is the BBC.*’ Ned searched the crowd for the chippies and spotted Mr Howse, whose arms were firmly folded, a grim expression on his face. He nodded at Ned across the cavern, and Ned nodded back.

‘Someone in this room, living in this town, has turned their back on our country. Placing this collection in danger. We have a traitor in our ranks. A spy if you will,’ he said gravely, making eye contact with each of them.

There was an audible gasp. Ned could hear the scraping of shoes against the hard floor. And a sprinkling of uncomfortable coughing and throat clearing. Sweat gathered at his temples.

‘Thanks to our faithless and traitorous friend, Turners, Raphaels, da Vincis and Michelangelo’s may soon decorate the walls of the enemy! Or perhaps it will be viewed as degenerate art, auctioned off or burned at the stake. I need not remind you of the monstrous treatment of the Bayeux tapestry. Ripped open. Interrogated. Sewn back up, rebranded and used as propaganda.’ K shuddered. ‘Art and our national story being rewritten before our very eyes. Without our art, treasures, culture and history, who are we? What are we?’ He held his hands out, palms raised, like a preacher.

Ned shuddered, hoping that no one was looking his way. He tried to look innocent by standing up straight and not blinking but ended up earning a concerned look from his mother, who passed him her handkerchief as his eyes began watering. Miriam raised her eyebrows, but his mother shook her head. The last thing he wanted was to draw attention to the two of them.

‘I have been ordered by C to open an investigation and interview each of you in turn. The enemy are not the only ones keeping a Black Book. When you are down in the town, or dining in your digs, study those around you. Report anything of interest directly to me. Be on your guard, for we are in dangerous waters, and let me warn you now: it is time to sink or swim!’ K spoke with authority, stiffly and sourly. ‘The Official Secrets Act is a deadly serious matter.’

Even though he knew he was entirely innocent, Ned scrunched up his fists inside the pockets of his boilersuit. If

it wasn’t for the paintings around him, he and his mother would still be in Bletchley. And they couldn’t risk everything, including their lives, just because someone had opened their great big mouth.

‘But what if it’s not staff? What if it’s someone who hasn’t signed the act?’ a voice called out from the crowd.

‘Then they will be tried as a traitor,’ K spat. ‘And executed.’ No one spoke or called out after that.

When K stepped down, various members of staff mobbed him, petitioning for his attention. K stood, neat as a pin, dark hair slicked back with precision. Ned was happy to step away from the masses and hide in the kitchenette. The chippies followed soon after, and Mr Howse set about making the tea, but not in his usual chatty manner, Ned noted.

‘Well, what a palaver, eh, fella?’ Small Dave clapped a hand on Ned’s shoulder.

‘Thought K was going to line us up against the wall,’ Jonno tried to joke.

‘It was scary. I thought Kaye was a woman,’ Ned blurted out. ‘And Cee.’

‘Did you? *Ha! Ha!* Heard it all now. C is Control. C is K’s boss,’ Mr Howse explained, passing Ned a cup of tea.

‘C is everyone’s boss!’ Small Dave said seriously, blowing on his tea to cool it. ‘In charge of every museum and gallery in London, he is. Top man. Answers only to the PM and the king.’

Ned gasped.

‘Remember, K is just Kenneth,’ Mr Howse added. ‘You can’t be scared of someone called Kenneth, fella.’



'All the toffs have ridiculous codenames.' Small Dave winked.

'I wonder what C's real name is. Lord Cedric Spymaster General!' Jonno saluted, which raised a few weak smiles amongst the chippies.

'All this talk about spying makes me skin crawl.' Mr Howse took his cap off, smoothed his hair a few times and then placed it back on his head, as if he'd set the world to rights.

'What's the Black Book K mentioned?' Ned asked Mr Howse as chills ran up and down his arms.

'Tell him,' Small Dave said when Mr Howse didn't answer. 'He's a right to know what he's got himself involved in.'

'It ain't a good idea.' Mr Howse shook his head. 'There's been enough fuss and bother already, Dave.'

'It wasn't me who started throwing punches, Bob. I was just defending meself. Those old boys are a bunch of nutters if you ask me.'

'And now look at us. Barred from the only pub in town and about to be hauled over the coals by K!' Mr Howse said angrily. 'Never mind about the bloody Black Book.'

'But look at him. He's confused and it ain't fair. Listen, Ned, the Black Book is a list of the most valuable masterpieces and which galleries they're hung in. There's a list of each gallery's director. And the museums too, like the British Museum and the Imperial. C is in the Black Book, marked as a Person of Interest, because he's responsible for all the galleries and museums in London. If we're invaded . . . C and K will be shot on sight.' Small Dave sighed.

'Arrested on sight! It's arrested, not shot,' Mr Howse warned, seeing Ned's face pale.

'They're hardly going to follow the rules now, are they, Bob? Not going to stop and check the Black Book for procedures and protocol. They'll shoot first and ask questions later. And you and I both know it.' Small Dave slammed his cup of tea down so hard on the saucer that it shattered; the smashed porcelain amplified by the cavern's acoustics.

This place was even more dangerous than Bletchley Park.



## 20

As Ned and his mother walked into the kitchen, Mrs Thomas, Harri and Anni immediately stopped talking. There was a hasty exchange of looks as Ned's mother shut the door behind them. At least they were talking to one another rather than shouting, Ned supposed. Anni was excited about something, that much was clear. Cheeks flushed and hair wild, as if she'd been running outside and had got it wet, dark curls corkscrewing in all directions. Mrs Thomas pressed her hand on top of Anni's, giving her a warning. Harri looked wired and Mrs Thomas was more alert than she'd been since the telegram. She'd been sleepwalking through her days, waiting for any news at all about Mr Thomas.

'Oh, we weren't expecting you so soon,' Mrs Thomas spoke first.

She looked guilty, although Ned wasn't sure why.

'We've all been sent . . .' Ned began without thinking.

'We finished early.' His mother spoke over him.

Surely she didn't think Mrs Thomas, Harri or Anni had anything to do with the leak?

'Oh,' said Anni.

'Right,' said Harri.

'I see,' said Mrs Thomas.

The five of them sat in their usual chairs, facing the fire. They stared into the flames, rather than looking at each other. No one offered a comment about the weather, or the signs of early daffodils.

'Anyone for a nice cup of tea?' Mrs Thomas offered, getting to her feet, steered on course by Kip, ever present by her side.

'No, thank you,' his mother said.

'Nor me,' Ned added.

'I'm not thirsty, Auntie Merry,' Anni said, shaking her head.

'I've had enough tea today, thanks, Mam,' Harri said.

Everyone in the room noted his tone. He'd referred to Mrs Thomas as Mam, for the first time since the telegram arrived. It appeared that peace had been restored in the Thomas household. But there was drama here too, Ned could smell it.

'Any news, Merry, from Mr Thomas . . .' His mother hesitated, not wanting to upset Mrs Thomas or Harri.

'No. Nothing. But no news is good news.'

'What about you, Mrs Letton?' Harri turned the question on Ned's mother. 'Any news from your *work*?'

'Yes! Did . . . did anything happen where you work today, Ned?' Anni put her chin in the palms of her hands.

'Stop fishing for clues, Anni,' Mrs Thomas warned.

'What do you know? What have you heard?' his mother dared.

'It's more what we've read,' Harri explained, pulling a





## 21

Mrs Thomas sent Anni next door to Mr and Mrs Evans, on a vague pretext about Myfanwy, the donkey, needing a brush. As soon as the door slammed, they all leant forward. The kitchen had become a war room.

‘As much as I hate to say it, Anni stands out in the village. People are pointing fingers because they’ve had a fright. We need everyone to know that Anni is innocent, hasn’t said a word to any newspaper and hates the enemy just as much as the next man, even if she can speak their language,’ Harri said, taking the lead.

Then Mrs Thomas spoke. ‘People ought to know that Anni’s parents were persecuted, bank accounts frozen, jobs taken away, forced to sell their jewellery, made to leave their home. Anni and her parents are the very last people on the planet who would ever support the enemy! They’re entirely blameless for all this.’ Mrs Thomas swept her arm around to indicate the ration books, clothing coupons and another pot on the range without much meat in it.

‘But not everyone wants refugees to come to Wales, Mam. I admit it, I wasn’t happy to start with but it’s not her fault, is it?’

‘And not everyone knows how to open their door to others. Or is able to, in fairness,’ Mrs Thomas acknowledged. ‘I did have to think hard about taking Anni in, what with my sight failing. I’m sure a woman in her forties going blind, with a dog to help, wasn’t top of their list for a suitable foster parent! And, to tell you the truth, it’s not been easy, with running the school and trying to keep the choir going, as well as having a little girl in the house for the first time. But I’m glad we did it.’ Mrs Thomas looked at Harri and smiled cautiously.

‘Me too, Mam. So, we’ll just have to make sure that *everyone* knows how blameless Anni is,’ Harri declared as Kip got to his feet and padded to the door.

‘I’ve got an idea!’ Ned said, standing up. ‘Something that will help things, I think, with everyone in the village, seeing as the art isn’t exactly a secret here any more. And it’ll explain what’s at stake in the quarry. And in fact, Anni could help. Then everyone will know it isn’t her that’s blabbed,’ Ned babbled on.

‘What are you on about, Ned?’ Harri asked.

‘I know a way Anni can help,’ Ned said.

‘How?’ Harri demanded, getting up to let Kip back in from outside.

‘Quick, before she’s back. Tell us,’ Mrs Thomas encouraged, clicking her fingers for Kip to return to her side, which he did, thumping down onto the slate floor.

‘Mum’s taking a picture back to London, once a month, so Londoners get to see art inside the National Gallery instead of empty walls. It’s for boosting morale and all

that, you know. Making people feel better and that there's still hope despite everything. At least that's what everyone keeps saying in the quarry. Couldn't we do the same here, in Manod? Show everyone in the village that we think they're just as important as the Londoners and deserve to see the masterpieces too.'

'That might work. It'd answer all their questions and show them what's really going on up on Manod Mawr.' Harri looked pleased.

Ned looked glanced anxiously at his mother. 'Mum? What do you think? Could we do Picture of the Month in Manod?'

'It's not the worst idea I've ever heard,' his mother said carefully.

'And?' he encouraged.

'We'd need to get it past K. He won't like the fact that everyone in Manod knows his business.'

'But it's better that it's out in the open. We'll all be working for the war effort together,' Ned said.

'Maybe. K will have to take it higher up, to C. We'll need a safe venue and a way of transporting a painting down the mountain.' His mother was taking him seriously!

'Who's K?' Mrs Thomas asked.

'The boss at Manod,' Ned replied proudly. 'C is the big boss but he's in London, so we haven't met him.'

His mother tutted at him. Maybe he shouldn't have shared that!

'I can take care of transport down the mountain!' Harri offered.

'*Shut up, Harri!*' Ned glared at Harri and gave him a kick under the table.

He'd nearly spilled the beans to the mams! Ned pictured their dangerous venture in the wild cars, which had narrowly avoided disaster.

'What's going on between you boys?' Mrs Thomas asked.

'Nothing!' they both said at the same time, then burst out laughing.

'Well, whatever it is, I'm glad you're no longer bickering,' Mrs Thomas eyed them suspiciously. 'There's been enough of that going on in this village by the sounds of it!'

'I think I know where we could display the painting, big enough to fit everyone in.' Ned swiftly changed the subject.

'Anni can deliver the invites!' Harri suggested.

'If that doesn't show them she's on our side, then I don't know what will!' he said.

'She can't deliver invites, boys. Just think about how easily that newspaper was found in the street!' His mother shook her head.

'She doesn't have to hand anything out, though, does she? She can just tell everyone about it.'

'That's true,' Mrs Thomas said. 'And it'll remind some of them to think first and speak later,' she added grimly. 'Especially Mrs Davies-in-the-shop.'

'Well, I think we might have a plan. Of course, this will be your project, *if* it gets the green light, Ned. I'm far too busy with the real . . . my project.' His mother caught herself.

No matter what she thought, this was a real project,



Ned told himself. And it was going to save lives, or at least Anni's reputation.

'Wine gums! Look!' Anni came bursting through the door holding a paper bag.

'How come Mr Evans gives *you* sweets? He never gives me any,' Harri complained.

'Because you never pop in there to see if they need anything or just for a chat. And Myfanwy has no idea who you are,' Anni said sadly.

'Why don't you play with kids your own age, instead of donkeys and old people?' Harri teased.

'I don't like children my own age. And they don't like me. That's why I talk to Kip – because he listens,' she added. 'Guter Hund.'

Ned could tell it made Mrs Thomas and his mother nervous when Anni spoke German. Even though she was careful to only speak English, and a little bit of Welsh, outside the cottage.

'Oh, Anni-bach,' Mrs Thomas held her arms out to Anni. 'Come and have a cwtch.'

Anni accepted the cuddle gratefully before shrugging Mrs Thomas off to return to the important matter in hand – sweets!

'Don't worry, boys. I'm going to share them with you. Mr Evans gave me enough. Isn't that wonderful?' Anni said, sitting down at the table.

'I haven't seen wine gums in ages,' Harri said.

'Me neither,' Ned agreed, his mouth watering.

'I could have eaten all of them, but that would be mean,' Anni said, counting out the sweets.

She passed them around, then looked at everyone's faces.

'Why are you all smiling at me? Is it because I'm the best sharer, Auntie Merryn?'

'Yes, cariad, that's it.' Mrs Thomas kept smiling.

'This is the best day of my life!' Anni garbled, shoving the sweets into her mouth so that sugary juice ran down her chin. 'I love living here!'



## 22

Inside Manod quarry, everyone went about their business with less cheer than normal. Sections kept to themselves, eating their bland cauliflower soup and meat paste sandwiches in quiet huddles in the canteen. Ned saw less of his mother than before, as he remained with the chippies. She was ensconced in the bungalow with Miriam.

'Here's something I never thought I'd say, fella: K wants to see you.' Mr Howse laid a heavy hand on Ned's shoulder and guided him towards K's office.

'Oh.' Ned's stomach flipped.

Ned hadn't seen K since he'd stood on the crates, giving his Churchill-style speech to rally the troops.

'He's investigating, see. But I s'pose you're not guilty, although you are looking a bit shifty!' Mr Howse joked as they stood outside the door. 'Go on, I'll be 'ere when you come out.' Mr Howse knocked on the door and then stepped back.

'Enter!' came the command.

'Hello,' Ned said stepping inside.

He looked around in panic. He'd been hoping to see his mother, even though he had a feeling she was deep in the

vaults. Should he call him K, like everyone else? Or would it be better to call him Mr Clark? Or Sir Clark? No, it was Lord, wasn't it? These fancy titles were a minefield. He couldn't remember exactly what he'd overheard in the canteen.

'I hear you want to bring art to the masses, young man?' K launched into conversation.

'Yes,' Ned said, ramming his shaky hands into his pockets.

'Sir,' he added, deciding that was the best title to go for.

'And do you have a particular piece in mind?'

K was dressed for somewhere much smarter than a quarry. A brilliantly white triangle poked out of the top pocket of his jacket.

'Not yet but my mother showed me some the other day. Lots of Rembrandts.'

'And where were you thinking of showing it?' K continued.

'In the chapel. The school's too small. I suppose there's the pub. But I don't think the pub is the right place for art.' He stopped himself from chattering on.

'Some might argue that a popular pub is the perfect place for art.' K smiled at him, briefly, before continuing. 'However, I do believe that we're no longer welcome in the pub. I am assuming that you had nothing to do with that?'

'No. Definitely not.' It felt as if K was making fun of him now; but at least he wasn't going to interrogate him as part of his investigation.

'And what will you choose as your Picture of the Month?' K asked.

'I don't know. How do you choose something that everyone is going to like?' Ned asked.



‘Cezanne believed that art begins with an emotion. Look for the piece that makes you feel the deepest,’ K suggested, placing his hand on his heart.

This version of K fitted with the way his mother and Miriam had spoken about him. As someone passionate about the arts and keen that people should be able to see paintings, even if they couldn’t pay for the experience.

K went on, ‘I suppose, if you were to twist my arm, I might be tempted to choose a Turner. When I was looking for a suitable place for an air-raid shelter in the gallery, I came across an undocumented case. Inside were several rolls of canvas. I was going to throw them away but something, curiosity I imagine, made me unroll one. It was in a despicable state. Covered in filth. I was surprised it remained in one piece when I unrolled it. Guess what it was.’

‘I . . . I don’t know.’ He really didn’t like games. ‘A Turner?’

‘A Turner! Yes! And not just one Turner! A box full of them. Although Turner has of course fallen out of fashion recently. Your mother and Miriam have care of them. Take a look, there might be something in there that catches your eye.’

‘Thank you, sir,’ Ned said.

‘Art is for everyone and here you are, bringing it to everyone. *Even to a place like this!* Well done, young man.’ K shook Ned’s hand, before adding quietly, ‘You’re just like your mother.’

Those were the best words Ned had ever heard. And, in that moment, his big idea became the greatest idea anyone had ever had.



23

‘Did K give you a grilling about that newspaper business?’ Mr Howse asked, passing Ned a cup of tea.

‘Course not! You know my mum’s project?’ Ned checked.

‘I do.’ Mr Howse nodded, draining the dregs of his cup.

‘I’m going to do something like it, but down in the village,’ Ned explained.

‘Is that right?’ Mr Howse asked, washing up his teacup and putting it on the draining board to drip dry. ‘And will it be open to everyone? Even us chippies?’ He smiled.

‘Yes,’ Ned said, hopefully looking around at the men. ‘Everyone’s invited. And it’s free. No admission! No tickets! Just like a real gallery.’

‘Well, let us know where and when and we’ll be there, fella. If you need a hand setting up, just give us a shout.’ Mr Howse swept his hand to include the rest of the chippies folding up their chairs, ready to start the day.

‘Thanks so much, Mr Howse.’

‘Now then, I’ve got a stack of mount boards that need cutting. This way.’

\* \* \*

Later, at home, as Ned was starting to think of the cottage, he explained to Mrs Thomas, Anni, Harri and Kip how he'd chosen a painting.

'I had a lot of advice from people who work in the quarry,' Ned started.

'How many people work there?' Anni raised her hand to ask.

'Anni, you're not in class now. Put your hand down,' Harri said, dipping a cloth into warm soapy water to clean his cello bow.

'I don't know but some men sleep in there!' he shared, as his mother wasn't there to stop him.

'They do not! How? Can I see?' Anni bubbled with questions. 'Can I sleep in there?'

'No. Shush, cariad, let Ned speak.' Mrs Thomas handed out potato cakes.

'So, there's a lot to choose from. Religious paintings—' Ned was interrupted again.

'Last thing we need. Specially if it's in the chapel,' Harri muttered, rubbing the cloth up and down the bow.

'I know! I was going to say that. Anyway, I spent ages just standing in front of some of them, trying to find something that everyone would like.' He paused to sip his tea.

'You'll never do that. Can't please all the people.' It sounded like Harri was speaking from experience.

'Then K told me about these paintings he'd found by a fella called Turner and I went to have a look at them—'

'Fella?' Harri snorted into his tea. 'Where you from now, then?'

Mrs Thomas cut in. 'I know Turner! I mean, I don't know

him. He's dead, so how could I? But I know his work. How exciting! Sorry, cariad, carry on.'

Ned didn't really mind the interruption. It was nice to see her happy and excited about something for a change.

'I think people will like looking at my choice,' Ned finished.

'Is that it? Is that all you're going to tell us?' Anni shook her head in disbelief.

'You'll just have to wait until Sunday night, Anni.' Ned smiled.

'But what will I tell people when I go visiting around the village? I have to get them interested somehow,' Anni wheedled.

'You're never going to get Tomi Tudor and the old boys out of the pub and into the chapel, Anni. You might as well give up now,' Harri said, carefully clipping a broken hair off the bow.

'All right, Anni. Tell them this . . . it was painted on Turner's first tour of a very special place close to their hearts,' Ned said.

'Right, leave it with me. I'll report back once I've spoken to everyone. Can I take Kip with me, Auntie Merryn?' Anni asked brightly.

'Yes, he's finished work for the day. He deserves some fuss. Make sure you keep him on the lead, mind.' Mrs Thomas bent down to Kip and kissed him on the head. 'Go free, Kip, go free.' She released him with her usual command.

'Well, that was a waste of time. I thought you had proper news.' Harri sighed, packing up his things. 'I'm away back



to work,' he said grandly, striding out of the back door. 'Can't all spend our days looking at pretty pictures, not when there's drains to unblock.'

'Never mind him. You're doing a decent job, Ned, as I'm sure your mam's told you. It'll be a lovely surprise for everyone in the village. We've never had anything like this happen here before,' Mrs Thomas said excitedly.

'Bye, Auntie Merryn. Bye, Ned. I'm away to work too. Come on, Kip,' Anni announced proudly with the dog at her side.

'Take care, cariad. And back by tea, mind,' Mrs Thomas reminded her. 'And no gossiping, Anni-bach, especially with Mrs Davies, right?'

'I never gossip, Auntie Merryn. Bye!' Anni shouted, slamming the door behind her.

'How long have you had Kip for?' Ned asked. He'd been waiting for the right time to put the question.

'He came to me just after he completed his Guide Dog training. When Mr Chamberlain first announced we were at war, the dogs all had to go somewhere. As I'll be needing a dog at some point soon, it made sense for me to have him.' Mrs Thomas seemed happy to talk about Kip, so Ned carried on.

'How *do* they train the dogs?' he asked.

'I'm no expert, but from what my brother, Ivan, told me – he put me in touch with the ladies at Endscote Manor in the first place, I think it's mostly repetition. Going over the basics while they're puppies. Then they do more specialist work. Helping them sense obstacles. And know where and

when to wait and watch at roads and on station platforms or bus stops.'

'Is that when they get the special harness?' Ned was impressed with Kip's harness.

'Yes. That's right. Although we've gone through a few harnesses and training jackets. Guide Dogs sent us the largest size they have; we'll have to hope Kip has stopped growing!' She pulled a face.

'I didn't even know that it was a job, training dogs,' Ned said.

'You'd be great at it, Ned. Kip's really taken to you. I hear you talking to him sometimes, in the nook. Don't worry, I'm not eavesdropping. I can just hear your voice. It's a miracle, isn't it, the way dogs connect with us? I think I'm most honest with myself when I'm with Kip. He's gives me so much more than support; he gives me hope.'

Ned hesitated, wanting to know more, but he also didn't want to be rude.

'You can ask me, you know, I won't bite,' Mrs Thomas said in a stage whisper. 'No one ever asks me about my eyes, apart from children.'

'What's it like?' he asked hesitantly.

'Like a fog thickening and misting outwards. I don't remember losing my other eye – I was only three when I caught the measles. Looking through my good eye is like looking through a viewfinder – you know, the kind of thing they have at the seaside, that needs a good clean.'

He didn't know but he could imagine.

'That circle of sight is getting smaller. Harri put down

pebbledash edges on all the footpaths, steps and doorways in school to help me. That's probably what you trip over when you come in and out of the cottage!' she laughed.

'That's a great idea,' he had to admit, and it made him see Harri in a new light.

It must be frightening for him too, to think of his mother not being able to see, especially with his father missing. It'd be up to Harri to look after her when she needed it.

'Thank you for putting up with the nook and . . . Harri. He misses his father, as I'm sure you and Anni both do. Ned shrugged and got up. He didn't want to talk about his father. He wasn't missing him, not one jot. In fact, not that he'd ever tell anyone this, sometimes he forgot about him completely. It was as if he didn't exist. And then suddenly someone would say something, and Ned would remember him with a jolt and his stomach would drop. It had only been a matter of weeks, but it felt like so much longer. He *was* missing his mum, though, even though they were living in the same house and working in the same place. At least they'd be together on Sunday night, in the chapel, with the Turner. And hopefully, if Anni's skills of persuasion prevailed, so would most of Manod.



The chapel was almost full when K's men carried in the painting, protected by brown felt corners and cloth. An easel had already been set up, by Mr Rees from the quarry, who clearly thought he was an essential member of the team, even though Ned hadn't asked him for help. He could have put up the easel by himself, Ned thought as he sat nervously with Anni. He was both delighted and terrified at the turnout.

He walked to the front of the chapel on legs made of sponge and rubber, listing the planets furiously before stopping in case he drew attention to himself. Someone had placed a heavy wooden lectern next to the painting. There was no way he was going to speak from that. Everyone would laugh at him. Instead, he stood at the front of the chapel, with the painting behind him. He waited for everyone to stop fidgeting, talking and whispering. Ned opened his mouth and reached for the words he and Kip had rehearsed all morning.

'Thank you for coming tonight . . .' He waited for the Pugh twins to stop crying and then carried on. 'I picked this painting for everyone in Manod to say thank you.'



Ned nodded and gave her a small thumbs up. His mother had given him so many mini lectures. He was sure of her ability to share information and hold the attention of the very full chapel.

‘Mallard? That’s a duck!’ shouted one of the children proudly.

‘*Mallord,*’ his mother emphasised kindly, ‘painted this watercolour of . . .’

‘That’s Chepstow Castle! I recognise it,’ Mr Evans interrupted.

‘It’s on the Wye, isn’t it?’ Mrs Evans agreed with her husband.

‘Well, I never knew Turner painted of one of our castles!’ Mr Pugh exclaimed in delight.

‘What about a good Welsh painter. Haven’t you got any of those? What about something lovely by Gwen John?’ Mrs Davies paused her knitting for a moment.

‘I’m afraid we don’t have any paintings by Gwen John, although there are some at the National Portrait Gallery,’ his mother said.

‘I’d rather look at a nice bowl of fruit than that old fortress,’ Mrs Davies said to her neighbour who picked up her knitting and tutted in support.

‘Now, Turner painted this,’ his mother gestured to the painting on the easel next to the font at the front of the chapel, ‘on his very first tour of Wales. That’s why Ned, my son, chose it,’ she said proudly.

‘He came here?’ Anni asked, eyes wide. ‘To Wales? Where I am! You never told me that, Ned!’ Anni shouted across the chapel at him.

‘Yes. And he was only nineteen, Anni. Not that much older than you, really.’

‘I’m nine!’ she stood up and faced the audience. ‘Almost ten.’

‘Sit down, cariad.’ Mrs Thomas placed her arm on Anni’s.

‘But is it really him? Anyone could have painted the castle.’ Mrs Davies tutted, needles clacking, as if she’d wasted a precious evening coming here.

‘See here, it’s signed by the artist.’ His mother pointed at the signature on the canvas.

‘And it’s been checked, has it? Because there’s plenty of folk flogging all kinds of knock-offs at market in the big towns.’ Mrs Davies made a big show of putting her glasses on, ready to get up and examine the work for forgery.

‘Sian Davies! Sit down, woman! What do you know about big towns, sure, you haven’t left Manod since you were a girl. Hush now, let the woman speak.’ One of the old boys stood up in his pew, then bowed to his friends who cheered and clapped.

‘Well said, Tomi.’ One slapped him on the back.

Mrs Davies-in-the-shop blushed and harumphed but did finally stop interrupting Ned’s mother and go back to her knitting. But this wasn’t going at all how he’d hoped. If everyone was going to keep talking and arguing, it might be time to activate Plan B. The painting was supposed to bring people together!

‘This large-scale watercolour is of the castle overlooking the river Wye. You were quite right, Mrs Pugh.’ His mother

smiled breezily, smoothing things over with her confident and steady voice.

Mrs Pugh sat beaming in her seat as she patted the back of one of the twins, resulting in a loud burp.

'The view is from downstream and, if you look closely, children,' his mother spoke directly to the audience at her feet, who knelt higher and leant as close as they dared, 'there's a boat with . . .' She waited, and many hands shot into the air.

His mother pointed at one.

'I can see it, miss! It's a fisher, isn't it?' the snotty-nosed boy said. 'A fisherman!'

'Good boy, that's right. Now, is there anyone else in the picture?' Ned's mum asked, and this time chose the freckle-faced girl.

'Yes! On the bridge on horses. They're probably going to market, miss.'

'Well done. You are a sharp bunch,' Ned's mother said, and every child turned around to find their parent or grandparent to see if they'd heard.

'Good job, Mrs Thomas! Doing a decent job at the school, you are!' someone in the audience said. 'Mr Parry would be proud.'

The children began to chatter about which colours they thought Turner had used. And how smelly the horses would be. Ned got to his feet and nodded to Harri. He was waiting in the vestibule, a little area just out of sight of the audience.

'Thank you for listening, and to you clever children for sitting still for so long,' his mother said.

The audience broke into applause as she found a place on a pew. Ned felt he might collapse from how tense he'd been holding himself. He could see that his mother had been nervous too; her hands shook a little as she patted her hair back into place.

'I like your mam,' said the boy with the lisp.

Ned forced himself to stand front and centre again.

'I want to be a painter!' the girl with freckles told him, but some members of the audience laughed. She scowled at them and sat down again, muttering to herself.

'To end the evening, Harri Thomas is going to play the cello for us,' Ned said.

There was a look of astonishment on Mrs Thomas's face. Ned had agreed, despite his better judgement, that he would go down the mountain in the wild cars again with Harri, if Harri would do him a favour and play in the chapel. Harri sat down on the chair and rested the cello on his thigh and chest, ignoring the audience. He closed his eyes for a moment, lifted his head, took up his bow and started to play.

The quick back and forth of the music complemented the waves in the painting. Ned noticed everyone in the chapel felt it with him. As Harri's long-curved bow moved back and forth along the strings, the sound and the movement echoed the curve of the deep bow of the boat, which bobbed around on the river Wye. Harri's cello made waves. The painting and the music were dancing together.

Ned hoped this was a sign that life in Manod would be more peaceful from now on and things would return to how



they'd been before the leak in the *Liverpool Echo*. Perhaps there wasn't really much to investigate after all. Anni would be disappointed, of course, as she had a career mapped out as the next Sherlock Holmes.

When Harri finished playing and sat back, exhausted, the audience applauded even louder than they had for his mother. The old boys at the back got to their feet and stamped their boots, ignoring the tuts of the women nearest them. Harri smiled. Mrs Thomas clapped the loudest, looking at Harri like she wanted to squeeze the life out of him, but knew not to. And in his own mother's face Ned could see the very things he'd always wanted from his father: pride, love and acceptance.

'You are a wonder, Ned Letton,' she said.



25

'They're asking for a Picture of the Week. Never mind Picture of the Month!' Mr Howse clapped Ned on the back as he arrived in the chippies' cavern.

It was a big day for them. They were being entrusted with one of the National Gallery's most precious paintings. All Ned knew was that it was a man on a horse, which didn't sound precious, but he didn't care. He was on cloud nine after Sunday night's success in the chapel. Everyone wanted to talk to him when he walked through the village with Anni and Kip. People he'd never noticed before stopped him in the street to say how much they'd enjoyed the painting and to thank Anni for inviting them. Or to praise Harri's playing. And to ask when he'd be doing it again.

Their plan to bring the village together after the shocking leak to the papers seemed to have worked. He and Harri had done it! And Anni had done a fine job inviting everyone. He didn't yet have permission from K, who in turn would need permission from the big boss, C, but when K and his mother came back from London he was going to pluck up the courage and ask. The Picture of the Month, in Manod

and London, had to help K and C realise that he and his mother were trustworthy and valuable members of staff. Not outsiders under suspicion!

His mother had left for London that morning on the post train. Rembrandt's *Self-Portrait* was her choice for March's Picture of the Month at the National Gallery. She had even said she was going to copy Ned's idea about music and asked a mutual friend of hers and K's, a woman called Myra, if she would be willing to play the piano.

'Who was the fella on the fiddle?' Mr Howse asked, interrupting his thoughts about last night.

The chippies were waiting to be told that the painting they next had to work on was ready for them. Apparently, it was too big to fit in the chippies' cavern. They were going to have to travel to wherever it was being kept in the quarry.

'That's Harri. And it's a cello.'

'Will we be hearing from him again, then? Is K going to trust you with another of his precious jewels? Has the monkey got the nod from the organ grinder?' Mr Howse rubbed his face; it didn't look like he'd had time for a shave.

Ned assumed that if the organ grinder was C, then K must be the monkey. He wondered why Mr Howse didn't like K.

'I don't know. I haven't asked him. K's gone with Mum to London.' Ned stopped; was Mr Howse supposed to know this level of detail?

'It's ready for you, Bob,' one of the security guards shouted across the cavern.

'Well, time waits for no one. Let's be having you, fellas. Got to see a man about a horse, as it turns out.' Mr Howse slicked back his hair and placed his hat on his head.

Then he set off in the direction of a tall cavern near the vaults.

The painting was the largest piece of art Ned had ever seen. He crooked his neck to try and look up at the top part of the frame. How were they supposed to repair this?

'Looks like a right prince, don't he?' Mr Howse said admiringly.

'A king, I think you'll find, not a prince, Mr Howse,' K said authoritatively, appearing from nowhere.

'I thought you were in London,' Ned said, the words coming out before he had time to think better of them.

'I've returned due to new intel regarding the investigation,' K said, in a tone Ned didn't like.

Mr Howse's mouth settled in a hard line.

'Ah, had your orders from C, have you?' Mr Howse said, then pressed his lips together even harder.

'C and I sing from the same hymn sheet, Mr Howse. You of all people should know that. Events at the local pub have hardly covered your department in glory. I will shortly be interviewing every member of staff and, believe you me, I will find the culprit who has leaked details of our operation to the press, and they will be dealt with in the severest manner within my remit. The Official Secrets Act is not to be taken lightly,' K said.

Ned couldn't breathe.

The tension between Mr Howse and K made the atmosphere in the quarry feel oppressive. Did K really think one of the chippies had broken the Official Secrets Act?

Ned needed air but couldn't think of a good excuse for why he should suddenly be allowed to leave work without drawing attention to himself. The rest of the chippies were unpacking tools and pulling ladders on wheels out from a storage area.

'Needs some major work, this frame, K. We'll need to take a good look at that gilding. It's a cassata frame, isn't it?' Mr Howse said, ignoring K's previous comments.

'Yes. Flemish,' K agreed, then continued in clipped tones, 'Well, I have an investigation to lead and a collection to protect.'

'Still prefer the Rembrandt,' Mr Howse muttered.

'As they say, Mr Howse, there's no accounting for taste,' K said, leaving the cavern as if he were walking on a red carpet.

'Left, right, goodnight! That's what that fella needs.' Small Dave, who was not remotely small, boxed the air, as if he'd like to punch K.

'I think that's what got us into trouble in the first place, Dave,' Mr Howse said, shaking his head. 'Now, where'll we drink?'

'They didn't need to bar us, though, did they?' Small Dave shook his head. 'It was just a scuffle. Shouldn't have been pointing fingers and making accusations, like, should they!'

Ned wanted to know more, but there wasn't a break in the conversation to butt in.

'Don't know why they think we've been shooting our mouths off. It don't make sense for us to go to the papers, does it? It's our jobs on the line if it all gets out,' Mr Howse agreed.

'Well, Sherlock Holmes in on the case now, so the real culprit better watch out! An investigation, m'lord!' Small Dave put on a posh voice, mocking K.

'Let's get on with our own job and leave Mr High and Mighty to his, shall we?' Mr Howse handed Ned a bucket.

'What's that for?' Ned asked, distracted for a moment.

'To catch the rats!' Mr Howse said, and the chippies barked with laughter.

'Isn't that Martini's job?' Ned tried to hide his disgust. 'Or Sherry and Brandy's?'

'Martini's off having kittens. We haven't seen Sherry in days, probably being fed in the village. So, it's down to you and Brandy!' Small Dave patted him on the shoulder.

After being on unsuccessful rat-catching duty for most of the morning – Harri would be so disappointed in him – Ned stood on a piece of scaffolding, a quarter of the way up the painting. He was feeling angry with himself that he'd even dared to hope the investigation into the newspaper leak would go away. His event had gone so well but it hadn't really changed anything, and it was clear from K's words earlier that even if he and his mum were out of the spotlight, Mr Howse and the chippies were very much still under suspicion. He didn't like the way K had spoken to Mr Howse – if they needed to find a scapegoat, Ned felt sure



that K would swiftly lay the blame at Mr Howse's door, regardless of the truth of the matter.

He looked up into the horse's wild eyes. There was foam at its mouth. He concentrated on the small section of frame he'd been tasked with and set to work, trying not to let the horse's manic eyes follow his every move . . .

*That's it!* he realised, almost losing his balance on the ladder. He needed to follow people's every move with his eyes, just like the horse! He'd lead an investigation of his own and make sure that the chippies were in the clear.



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'You promised. That's the only reason I agreed to play in your concert,' Harri said, sounding like Anni when something didn't go her way.

'It wasn't a concert. It was an art exhibition.'

'Oh, pardon me, Lord Snooty!' Harri put on a posh voice.

'Ha ha! Anyway, I thought we were going to start our investigation,' Ned said.

'We will. After one race,' Harri bargained. 'I told you last time, it was a fluke that you beat me. And now I'm going to prove it!'

'It was not a fluke.' Ned smiled, remembering.

'Prove it, then!' Harri challenged.

'I would, but your mother told us to watch Anni,' Ned reminded him.

'Anni! Come here!' Harri called, suddenly grinning.

'What?' She was there in seconds, looking hopeful.

Ned had a terrible feeling in his stomach.

'We're going to play hide and seek,' Harri said, clapping his hands together.

'I love hide and seek! It's one of my favourite games,'

Anni shouted. 'Where are we playing? Indoors or outdoors? Let's play outdoors!'

'Yeah, sure. You count, and Ned and I will go and hide.' Harri grabbed one of his mother's scarves and wrapped it around Anni's head.

'Why are you blindfolding me?' Anni asked. 'Can we play blind man's buff after?'

'Yep. Now, count!'

'Eins, zwei, drei . . .'

'In Welsh. Or if you must, in English! Just not German, OK? And count to a hundred, at least.' Harri spun her round and set her down on a chair, grabbed Ned by the arm and dragged him out of the door.

Up on the mountain Ned told himself it would take ages for Anni to realise that they'd left the house. By the time they'd got back, she'd be over it. He'd tried to turn around and go back down the mountain several times, but Harri talked him out of it. It was easier to just agree and get the dare out of the way, then they could get down to the village.

His plan was to watch out for any suspicious behaviour and eavesdrop as much as they could, listening for any unusual conversations in the shop, especially from anyone buying newspapers. If there really was a rat in Manod, burrowing into their secret business, then they had to catch it. That was assuming there was just one person to blame for the leak. His father always said, where there's one rat, there's a whole colony, as he set out poisoned bread around the coffins in the cellar.

'Get in, then. Snails move faster than you,' Harri teased.

'What are we going to say if your mum gets back and finds Anni blindfolded and on her own?' Ned asked, looking down at the wild car. The ride hadn't been that bad and it might be fun to have another go, now he knew what it was like.

'We'll say Anni got confused and we got bored. Stop worrying about everything and try and enjoy yourself.'

'All right. One go, OK, and that's it.' Ned relented, getting into the car.

'What the bloody hell is going on here, then, boys?' A voice thundered across the mountain.

Both Ned and Harri jumped in fright as Mr Rees launched himself over the small cliff and down onto the slope. Now they were for it!

'What are you playing at? Wait till your mothers hear about this.' Mr Rees was fuming, his cheeks flaming.

'This is your fault, English,' Harri hissed. 'If you had just got in, instead of mithering, we'd be down the mountain by now.'

'But I didn't even want to come up here,' Ned said. 'I wanted to—'

Mr Rees cut him off. 'And as for you, Ted, K will have something to say about this carry-on, you can be sure as eggs of that. I told them a boy would cause trouble. But would they listen? Well, they'll listen now, won't they!'

'Please don't tell my mam. She's got enough to worry about,' Harri begged.

'Should have thought of that before acting so recklessly, shouldn't you! Get marching.'

‘Where are we going?’ Ned asked, as Mr Rees pulled them roughly out of the wild cars.

‘To one of the quarry vans. Don’t even think of running off. I trust you both as far as I could throw you. I’m driving you home.’ Mr Rees grabbed them by the back of their shirt collars and set off at a furious pace towards the quarry.

Outside the quarry gates, Mr Rees let them go long enough to fish a set of keys out of his jacket pocket. He quickly unlocked the door to a dark and unnamed van with ropes and tarpaulin across the back of it. It had a GWR stamp on the rear of the vehicle, which must mean it belonged to Great Western Railway, Ned thought. Mr Rees shoved them firmly towards the door and they jumped up onto the passenger bench. Mr Rees stormed around the front of the van and threw himself angrily into the driver’s seat. Then he flicked a switch and both boys jumped as the doors locked. Harri’s eyes widened, and he opened his mouth to say something.

‘Don’t even think about trying to jump out, because you can’t. And I don’t want to hear a single word from either of you,’ Mr Rees warned, revving the engine before reversing with skill down the slope where he paused to turn around in one fluid and fast motion.

Ned gripped the seat, which was leather and slippery and had a few rips in it. The cab smelt of tobacco and sweat. There were a few empty packets on the dashboard alongside a rolled-up newspaper. Ned gasped.

‘What did I say to you, Ted? Not a sound, right!’ Mr Rees didn’t take his eyes off the road. ‘Got better things to

be doing with my time,’ he muttered accelerating rapidly down the gravelly road.

Ned kicked Harri to get him to notice the newspaper, but Harri just kicked him back harder, mouthed *Ted* at him, and turned away. The newspaper was well-thumbed and some of the print had smudged. It was rolled up tightly and wedged into a dip in the dashboard, but it looked similar to the paper Harri had slammed onto the kitchen table. Perhaps they didn’t need to go down to the village to investigate after all. Maybe the rat had been right under K’s nose the whole time. But if Ned was right, he and Harri were now locked in the rat’s van as he drove them down the mountain at top speed.





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'I'm not speaking to you, Ned Letton, so don't even try talking to me,' Anni warned, folding her arms across her chest.

'I won't,' Ned promised, hoping that Anni would soon cave in and want to see what he was up to.

'Funny game of hide and seek you and Harri played yesterday!' Anni muttered to herself.

He pretended to drop another stitch and sighed dramatically. He shook out the scarf and then dropped it onto his lap.

'Oh, Kip. It's not going well at all.' Ned stroked the dog's head. 'I can't tell the difference between purl and . . . what was the other word? Bobbins?'

He could sense Anni twitching, pretending to look out of the window at the birds on the feeder.

'Maybe I should just unravel the whole thing and start again, Kip?' Ned began to pull the wool off the needles.

'No! Stop! It's not that bad.' Anni held her hand up.

'Are you talking to me?' Ned asked hopefully.

'I'll help you, but only because of the troops.' Anni got up

and came over to Ned. 'It's not fair that they should suffer for your bad behaviour, Ned.'

'That's true,' he agreed.

'I can't believe you haven't remembered what I taught you. A child could do it,' she chastised.

Ned was dreading his mother's return from London and the inevitable conversation Mr Rees had promised to have with her. He had grudgingly released them from his van last night but not before reading them the riot act. And again, inside the cottage, facing a furious Mrs Thomas, with Anni and Kip eavesdropping on the stairs. And now his mother was late. She should have been back by now.

'Ned, are you listening to me? Are you even watching? I'm showing you how to cast off, again.'

'Sorry, Anni.' He took his hands out of his pockets and gave himself a mental shake.

'Hey, Anni, let's practise your Morse code,' Ned suggested, taking out his sketchpad and pencil.

'But, Ned, you're down to your last few pages,' Anni reminded him.

'I know, but you're worth it.' Ned nudged her as she sat down at the table next to him.

As it was the weekend, Anni didn't have school. She'd taken over the table with her knitting and patterns, settling in for the day. She now cleared a space for Ned's sketchpad.

'That's true.' She smiled, although hesitantly: he was not completely forgiven.

'Now remember, each letter of the alphabet is a different combination of dots and dashes. Those are called dits and

going to be just between us. Can't keep your mouth shut for five minutes, can you, *Ted*?

'I'd be a better investigator than either of you two.' Anni stood up. 'No one thinks that I'm listening and half of them think I can't understand Welsh, so they gossip away about all kinds of things.'

'All right, Miss Agatha Christie. Who's top of your suspect list, then? Myfanwy?' Harri laughed not taking her seriously.

'Of course not, Harri. Myfanwy has a heart of gold. No, it's whoever last drove that van from the quarry,' Anni stated simply.

'What do you mean? We know Mr Rees drove it, daftie.' Harri laughed.

'If you want to investigate, you need to start by listening to people properly.' Anni blew her nose on a hankie.

'All I did was listen to him ranting on from the minute he spotted us to the moment Mam practically kicked him out of the door.' Harri replied.

'No, Harri, you weren't listening. You were rolling your eyes behind his back and pulling silly faces. If you *had* been listening, like I was, you'd have heard Mr Rees say he had to get the van back for the driver. It's not *his* van. Mr Rees is not your man.'

'Well, if it's not his van, then whose van is it?' Harri challenged.

'Good question, because if the van isn't Mr Rees's, then that newspaper might not be his either,' Ned added. 'It's not like you can just pick up a Liverpool paper in Mrs Davies's shop is it!'

'What newspaper?' Harri looked blank.

'The one rolled up on the dashboard next to the tobacco packet. I swear it had *ECHO* on it. Harri, do you not use your eyes?' Ned grinned at Anni.

'Doesn't mean it was the *Liverpool Echo*, though, does it?' Harri tutted.

'No, but it's a step closer than we were before,' Ned said, joining Anni, who was making her way to the door.

'Whoever owns the van bought the paper. And if it is the *Liverpool Echo*, then we've solved the case!' Anni cried.

'But what will we do then?' Harri asked. 'Even if you're both right.'

'Tell K. Or C. Maybe not C. But definitely K,' Ned thought aloud.

'Come on, then, what are we waiting for? Let's find out who the van driver is!' Anni was bouncing in excitement by the door.

'What – now? But we're grounded,' Harri pointed out.

'Well, you might be, but I'm not! *I* didn't get myself into trouble, unlike you two,' Anni said.

'She's got a good point,' Ned said.

'And since when has anything stopped you from doing what you want, Harri Thomas?' Anni put her hand on her hip and all three of them laughed as the door flew open, knocking Anni to the floor.

'I've got good news! Anni, get up off the floor, cariad, I haven't swept it yet.' Mrs Thomas burst into the cottage. 'Good news, Harri!'

'What is it? Is it Dad?' Harri squeaked.

'Yes! They've found him. He's in a hospital somewhere. He's going to be all right, Harri! And once he can travel, they're sending him home,' she shouted, waving a postcard in her hand.

Harri took it from her and read the brief message twice over. Then he handed it back to his mother and ran outside, leaving the door wide open.

'I'm so happy for you, Mrs Thomas,' Ned said.

'I've got a message for you from Mr K,' Mrs Thomas said, smiling. 'He came and found me after choir rehearsal.'

'It's just K,' Ned said. 'Not Mr K.'

'K, then. He said March's Picture of the Month has been another tremendous success down in London. He gave me this to show you.'

Mrs Thomas reached into her coat and pulled out a thin rolled-up newspaper which she placed on the table. Ned recoiled.

'It's good news, I promise, cariad.'

He unrolled it and flicked through it, confused.

'Page four,' Mrs Thomas prompted.

On page four was a write-up about the National Gallery and the new exhibition.

'The whole country should have access to this prestigious collection. Not just Londoners,'" Ned read.

'You should tell them about your Picture of the Week, Ned!' Anni said excitedly.

'Don't be silly, Anni,' Harri said, reappearing in the doorway. 'Remember, we're not to breathe a word of it.'

'Starved of entertainment following a cultural blackout,

the city has been in a deep depression. But today, crowds of Londoners flocked to the National Gallery for a lunchtime concert. It was given by Miss Myra Hess, accompanied by Kenneth Clark's latest venture, the Picture of the Month. As reported previously, curator Mrs Helen Letton selected Titian's *Noli me Tangere* for February's Picture of the Month. This was a well-attended event. March's Picture of the Month's numbers have exceeded expectation. Rembrandt's *Self Portrait* will be on show for the rest of March, while Londoners eagerly await Letton's new picture in April. The exhibition grows in popularity following a visit by Her Majesty, the Queen. Further details to follow about Letton's Rembrandt lecture,'" Ned finished.

There was a small photo of Rembrandt's *Self-Portrait* at the top of some steps, in a frame with the caption 'March's Picture of the Month' underneath. Ned could tell from the photo that it was a gilded frame. Mr Howse would be pleased with him. He couldn't quite believe it – his mother's project. The article said that hundreds and hundreds of people had turned out. Despite the bombs and the blasts and the blackout. They came from all over the city to see.

'The famous concert pianist Myra Hess played Mendelssohn in the gallery,' Ned read aloud.

'Oh! I've heard of her. I think she's one of papa's friends.' Anni sat bolt upright at the table, all earlier grudges momentarily forgotten.

'That's wonderful, Ned. Music and art, together. Like here with you and . . . Harri.' Mrs Thomas reached for her son's hand.



Ned noticed that Harri's eyes were puffy.  
'Mr K said that your mother has been delayed. Won't return for a few days. In case you were worried.' Mrs Thomas softened.

'Why don't you send her a Morse code message, Ned?' Anni suggested helpfully.

'What if something's happened to her? Why wouldn't she come straight back here after the exhibition?' He couldn't help but ask.

'Don't worry, Ned. She'll be home soon,' Harri said dismissively. 'What's for tea, Mam?'

'Mr K would have told us, wouldn't he? If there had been an accident, I mean.' Mrs Thomas sounded more like she was asking Ned, rather than telling him or reassuring him.

'If something has happened to my mum in London, and K left her there because of his investigation, I'll never forgive him,' he swore.



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She'd been gone for a whole week. Ned was worried sick, and so was Mrs Thomas. Word had got round that K was investigating and rumours were flying. The longer his mum was away without explanation, the more Ned worried that people might start to become suspicious about her absence. The last thing they needed was the finger being pointed at his mother, who was not here to defend herself.

And he, Harri and Anni were no closer to finding out who might have let slip the secrets of the quarry. They'd wasted hours watching people coming and going in the village, and drivers arriving at and leaving the quarry. Anni had brought a notebook but hadn't managed to fill it with anything of great interest, apart from the fact that Mr Pugh was now delivering the post, along with the milk. Perhaps the postie had joined up.

Almost all the drivers had newspapers on their dashboards, so Mr Rees and his GWR van were nothing special, not that they'd been able to get into any of the other vans to sneak a peek. He'd tried to find Miriam to ask about his mother, but she was in somewhere in Northamptonshire, at her family's home.

'Ned! There's a call for you,' Mr Howse interrupted his thoughts.

'What do you mean there's a call for me?' Ned asked, putting down the plane he'd been using to smooth a frame. 'Who would be calling for me?'

'It's your mother, fella. She's on the line now,' Mr Howse added. Mr Howse guided Ned towards the portable plug-in telephone. He'd never noticed it before.

'Mum?' Ned said in disbelief.

'Ned! I'm sorry. I wanted to tell you in person. I was going to come back and tell you but then I collapsed and . . .'

'Mum! What's going on? Are you all right? I've been so worried about you. I didn't know where you were.'

Ned's mind had played him scene after scene of blasts and bombsites, his mother buried underneath rubble. She was safe. *She was alive!*

'I'm so sorry! There's been some awful news. I asked your father to send word to you. *Did he?* Did he let you know? I've been so ill. He sent for the doctor, and they gave me something. They said it was for the shock, but I didn't want it. I've been out of it for days, it's all a bit foggy. I can't think straight. I'm at the brickyard, in Bletchley . . .' Ned pressed the receiver to his ear, but the line kept cutting out. ' . . . before I . . . train . . . They let me use their phone . . .' Mr Howse stayed with him, stood to the side, watching.

' . . . in action . . . there's hope but it was such a shock when your father . . . telegram.'

The line was crackling and fizzing. Ned wanted to slam the receiver into the wall of the quarry.

'Mum! I can't hear you properly. Slow down. Please. Why are you back in Bletchley?' Ned pleaded.

Mr Howse came forward. He gestured to Ned to hold the receiver out so he could listen. Ned was so glad he was there. He put his arm around Ned.

' . . . missing . . . Sent it to the gallery. I don't know why. *Ned?* Can you hear me? I haven't got much time. I told K that everything was in hand . . . need you to tell Miriam. She'll know what to do. Your father's conducting a funeral. Won't let me out of his sight . . .' She suddenly came to life, crisp and clear.

'Yes! I can hear you, Mum! Why haven't you got much time?'

'I'm in Bletchley. Your father came down to London and brought me back here. Your brother is missing in action. I've got to go.'

Ned folded to the ground. Mr Howse gently pulled him up into a sitting position and tried to take the portable telephone from him, but Ned couldn't let go of the black receiver. Small Dave put his arm and body behind Ned's to support him. His brother was missing in action, but his mum hadn't told him which brother. Why had his father taken her back to Bletchley? And did that mean he would have to leave now too?



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‘What about Mr K, what will you tell him?’ Mrs Thomas asked, after Ned relayed every word of the phone call with his mother.

‘Nothing. I don’t want the fact that my mother isn’t here to seem suspicious! Surely people would start to wonder why she’s disappeared right in the middle of K’s investigations.’

‘But she’s at home because one of your brothers is missing. Surely he’d understand that. It’s got nothing to do with the newspaper leak,’ Mrs Thomas said.

‘Yes, well, *we* know that, but it was difficult to make out what she was saying on the phone. She said she’d told K that everything was in order. She must have reassured him that the Picture of the Month was all in hand. So, I can’t risk him finding out that she lied and that nothing is in hand at all! Everyone’s so jumpy in the quarry and watching their backs. I’ll just have to keep her work going.’

‘You can’t do her job,’ Harri said. ‘It’s impossible. You’ll never get away with it and it’s not fair of her to ask you to try.’

‘She didn’t! She asked me to tell Miriam. I think mum thought she’d be able to help.’

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‘Now, that sounds like a much better idea,’ Mrs Thomas said approvingly.

‘But Miriam’s gone home too, and I don’t know how to contact her.’

‘Just tell your mam’s boss that she’s ill. Everyone gets ill, don’t they.’ Harri shrugged. ‘Even the mams.’

Ned understood what Harri was saying but he didn’t know what else was at stake. Harri wouldn’t understand. Harri’s His dad was a hero, whereas Ned’s was . . . something else.

‘So, what are you planning to do, then? Waltz into the quarry and just choose April’s Picture of the Month? And organise the transport by yourself? Know many drivers, do you? And after what we saw in the truck Mr Rees used, how can you trust any of the drivers anyway?’

‘What’s this? What are you talking about, Harri?’ Mrs Thomas tried to interrupt.

‘And what about March’s painting? And February’s! Wasn’t she meant to bring that home with her once she’d delivered March’s Picture of the Month?’ Harri reeled off some of the details he’d learnt from listening to Ned and his mother talk about the project.

Suddenly Ned realised: *he’d forgotten about collecting February’s painting!*

You don’t get it! Mum can’t lose this job. And neither can I. We need our jobs, they’re all we’ve got,’ Ned tried to explain.

‘Why not? Why can’t you go home, Ned? If that’s where your mum is now . . . I don’t understand.’ Anni focused on what Ned *hadn’t* said.

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'Because my dad blames my mum for . . . everything. When we left, he said we weren't to come crying to him when it all went wrong. And now it *has* gone wrong, and he's got her back, he won't let her leave.'

Anni got to her feet, came over to Ned and wrapped her arms around him.

'Then your home is here. And your mam isn't going to lose her job. We'll help you, won't we?' She turned to Mrs Thomas and Harri, who both nodded.

'Of course, cariad. Whatever you need. And when she's well enough, we'll find a way to get her back here,' Mrs Thomas promised.

Ned didn't have time to think about that now. He *couldn't* think about that now. He had to get up to that quarry, find his mother's work notebook, if he could, and choose a picture. This wasn't going to be the same as choosing one for the chapel. This was for the National Gallery in London. And there was the small matter of organising the transport to get the painting there safely. Or at least getting the painting to his mother in Bletchley. And then, together, they'd take it to London; he'd help her. But for now, he needed to focus on the task in hand. He was the frame now. He had to be the hard edges and hold everything together, so it didn't all fall apart.



With all the worry about his mother, Ned had almost forgotten that the village was expecting another Picture of the Week. He'd managed to find a portrait by Gwen John. It didn't really grab his attention, but he knew would be a hit with the people in Manod, especially as some of them had asked for her. K hadn't thought they had anything by her, but Mr Howse had managed to find a few paintings in a crate stamped 'National Portrait Gallery' and there were all by women, which no one had got around to cataloguing yet. Perhaps K had offered to store them along with the gallery's collection.

Ned got out the brown felt and other packing materials and tenderly wrapped the painting. He knew how to look after an artwork now. He'd got quite good at judging how much material it would take to enclose a frame. He knew how to make sure that the picture spent the least amount of time in the wrong climate and conditions, which gave him confidence in getting the Picture of the Month safely to his mother in Bletchley.

Harri offered to play the cello on Sunday night in the

chapel without any bargaining or mention of the wild cars, not that either of them would risk it again after the to-do with Mr Rees. Now, all he had to do was find Mrs Davies-in-the-shop, try and charm her as Harri had, and convince her to tell him everything she knew about Gwen John. If there were questions at the end, which there were bound to be, his mother wasn't going to be there to save his bacon. So, he'd better have some answers of his own.

Sunday came around quickly. The chapel was full to bursting. Word had got around that a Welsh painter was on show tonight. Mrs Davies sat in the front pew, as if she were at a wedding and was mother of the bride. She put her handbag on the seat next to her, presumably saving it for someone. She nodded at Ned, as if now she was here, they could begin.

He was starting to wish he'd just picked some old master's work, because the self-portrait on the easel next to him was causing a stir. The noise in the chapel was unlike last time. And the old boys from Y Manod were here in full force. Ned hoped they wouldn't heckle him or start another fight with the men from the quarry.

Mr Howse managed to find latecomers seats, squeezed shut the chapel doors and gave him an encouraging thumbs up. Miriam walked up the aisle towards him, patted him on the shoulder, then asked Mrs Davies to move her handbag. This happened grudgingly and at a snail's pace. Miriam stood her ground then sat down, in Ned's eyeline, and gave him a reassuring smile. Miriam wasn't a hugger, but

he'd certainly be thanking her later; he might even shake her hand.

'Thank you for coming to see the new Picture of the Week,' Ned began, and a round of applause rippled through the chapel. 'This week's picture is by Gwen John, who some of you may have heard of.'

'Course we have, she's one of us!' one of the old boys called out.

'Let him speak or you'll not be welcome in my shop tomorrow morning, Mr Tudor!' Mrs Davies turned in the pew and pointed at the heckler.

'Thank you, Mrs Davies. Gwen John was born in Wales. Her mother was an artist too. Gwen was a confident and strong-willed woman –'

'Like most of the women in Manod!' the same old boy dared.

This time Mrs Davies stood up, turned to the audience, and bowed. Everyone laughed, both Welsh and English.

'She was known as an independent artist. She liked to paint pictures of people or fruit. This painting is a self-portrait. She chose a russet-red –' he paused to check with Mrs Davies that he'd got the right colour – 'because it symbolises passion and power in art. Her hand on her hip makes me think that she was ready to face anything and anyone. Thank you. No questions tonight,' he finished.

'Where's your mam, then?' someone called out.

'I want another story,' the little redhead with freckles complained.

'Can you tell us about the lady in the picture, please?' A child tugged at Ned's sleeve.

‘Aren’t we going to have our lesson tonight, then?’ an old boy started.

Mrs Davies got to her feet again. ‘What do you want to know?’ she faced the audience, hand on her hip.

Now he’d seen it, he couldn’t help but notice the similarity between the two women. Mrs Davies had the same look about her as Gwen John did. Defiant was the word.

‘Anything!’ came a reply from the back. ‘We’re in your hands, Sian!’

Ned still couldn’t think of Mrs Davies as Sian. She was just too Mrs Davies-in-the-shop for him to imagine her as a person with a first name.

‘Gwen John liked to paint portraits of women, sitting still. Must have been a challenge because I don’t know any women who sit still!’ Mrs Davies said, straight-faced.

*Was Mrs Davies funny?* Ned looked at Miriam, who shrugged, but when he looked around at the audience, the chippies and the old boys were all laughing.

‘And she had a brother, who you’ve probably heard about: Mr Augustus John, although Gwen was the one with the real talent. She had a fling with a chap called Rodin. And took a fancy to a lady called . . . well, we don’t know her name. Mustn’t have been as important as the men, but never mind them, we’re here to talk about the woman herself!’

*What’s happening?* Ned mouthed to Harri who pulled a face at him as if to say, *How should I know?*

‘Gwen John stares deep into your soul. Shows you all of herself even though she’s buttoned right up to her neck. Her painting might be smaller than others, but it’s got some

mighty passion and power behind it. And she was a woman of independent means. Didn’t need to rely on any miner’s pay pack after it’s been half emptied in the pub first.’ She nodded at the old boys, who cheered; Mrs Davies had the whole chapel roaring with laughter.

‘Everything you see in her paintings, she bought herself. Her clothes. Her materials. Her room. Her cat. Always trust a woman with a cat.’ Mrs Davies stared at Ned.

He’d never put two and two together before but the cat in the shop was called Gwen.

‘There’s no nonsense. No need to shout. No need to make a fuss. No need to be anything but yourself,’ Mrs Davies said as if she was quoting from something or someone.

She tilted her chin at the audience then sat down. Then the clapping began, and it was deafening. He stood up and waited for it to stop.

‘Umm. Thank you?’ Ned said uncertainly, his voice lost to the last few claps and cheers thrown Mrs Davies’ way.

For a moment he forgot what was coming next. Mrs Davies had knocked him off his game.

‘All right,’ he said at last. ‘Now. Harri Thomas is going to play a piece called *Myfanwy*.’

Ned wasn’t sure he’d got the pronunciation right. He’d thought it was miff-fan-wee, but Mrs Davies had set him right until he could say miv-an-wee. He sat between Mrs Davies and Miriam. He couldn’t help but gawp and Mrs Davies-in-the-shop gave him a wink so tiny he might have imagined it. Everyone was full of surprises tonight.

He looked around the audience, eyes on Gwen John’s



*Self-Portrait*, and ears tuned into *Myfanwy*. How had he got here? It was another world from Bletchley and a dangerous one too, but right now, he wouldn't swap it for anywhere else. If his mother were here as well it would be perfect. Anni swung her legs next to him, her grey school socks falling down. She was humming under her breath. Mrs Davies was too. And more members of the audience, not Mr Howse and the chippies, or Miriam, but the people of Manod. They seemed to know the music.

Then Mrs Thomas left her pew and moved into the aisle and started conducting, as members of the choir, scattered around the chapel, stood up and began singing. Harri winked at him as the old boys at the back stood up, took off their caps, and joined in! And then the chippies took off their hats and stood up, even though they didn't know a word, and something passed between the English and the Welsh. There was a nod from Mr Tudor, the loudest of the old boys, to Mr Howse. Then Small Dave stuck his hand out and Mr Tudor shook it. Perhaps they'd be allowed back in Y Manod, tonight.



'There's only one way this is going to work and it's my final offer. Take it or leave it,' Mrs Thomas said wearily.

'I don't need a minder,' Ned protested weakly. 'I'm only going as far as Bletchley and then Mum will do the rest.' He didn't share with Mrs Thomas that once he found his mum, he was going to London with her, whether she liked it or not.

'And I don't have time to mind anyone. The roof's leaking again.' Harri folded his arms across his chest.

'Either you go together, or no one goes. Then Helen loses her job and the whole project falls apart,' Mrs Thomas said flatly.

Ned could see she was trying to get Harri to think past his own nose and consider someone other than himself, but he wished she wouldn't. As much as he didn't want to travel to Bletchley, alone, with a priceless portrait, he really didn't want Harri coming to his rescue either. And he didn't want to be stuck on a train or bus with him. Who knew how long it would take?

'You don't even know what to put the picture in. How are you going to hide it?' Harri turned to Ned.



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‘Keep him still or you’ll crease it.’ Harri warned, whispering.

‘I know. I know.’ He couldn’t keep the tension out of his voice. ‘Settle down, Kip. Settle.’ He gave the command word and Kip dropped to the floor of the train carriage and rested his head on his paws.

‘Are you sure he’s even allowed on here?’ Harri checked the carriage as if expecting a guard to kick them off the train any minute.

‘Yes. I’ve seen plenty of dogs on trains,’ Ned said, confidently.

‘Make him lie down properly, then.’ Harri nudged Ned.

‘I can’t, can I?’ Ned hissed back, hoping not to attract the attention of the two women knitting opposite him.

‘I’ll do it,’ Harri sighed, pretending to adjust Kip’s lead, rearranging his limbs as subtly as possible. ‘This is never going to work,’ he said again, unhelpfully.

‘We don’t have much choice,’ Ned muttered. ‘Why don’t you just look out of the window?’ he suggested, echoing his mother, who was never far from his mind. This *had* to work.

The train stopped at every single tiny station possible.

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None of them were named, so it was difficult to tell where they were or if they were making much progress. In fact, Ned had no idea if they’d even left Wales yet. There were only two carriages on this part of the Great Western Railway line. More could join them once they got to England, Ned supposed, but he wasn’t going to worry about that now. Kip was up on his paws and sniffing suspiciously around.

‘Does he need . . . ?’ Harri said in disbelief.

‘I don’t know! I think so . . .’ Ned watched Kip, who was giving him a certain look.

‘Oh, for goodness’ sake,’ Harri moaned.

‘I know!’ Ned hissed. ‘But if he’s got to go, he’s got to go,’ he reasoned.

‘I said this was a stupid idea.’ Harri tutted. ‘Why did we all listen to a nine-year-old kid?’

‘Are you all right?’ The woman opposite Ned put her knitting down in her lap and leant forward in concern.

‘Yes. Fine. Thank you,’ he replied, dragging his eyes from Kip, who had thankfully settled back down.

‘There you are, see. He was just getting comfy,’ the knitting woman said. ‘Now, who wants a humbug?’ She held out a brown paper bag and offered both boys a sweet, which they gratefully took.

‘Where are you two off to, then?’ her companion asked, unwrapping a sweet for herself. ‘On a day trip out, is it?’ she encouraged.

Ned and Harri looked at one another, then each boy gestured to his own full mouth. . One of them was going to have to answer and hope that the other wouldn’t give the

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game away. Ned started to panic, breathed in, and almost swallowed his sweet at the same time. He coughed. *He was going to choke!*

Harri jumped up and started to pat him, rather too hard, on his back. Ned could feel himself going red in the face. Heat scratched up his neck as he struggled for air. Kip's large paws were on his knees, his head cocked in concern. The knitting woman opposite Ned got to her feet just as the sweet flew out of Ned's mouth into her lap. Everyone in the carriage clapped and congratulated Harri on his quick thinking. The knitting woman picked the sweet off her skirt, put it in a hankie and went back to her knitting.

'Well, that was quite an eventful start to the day!' she joked. 'Are you sure you're all right? Have a sip of tea?' She offered her flask to Ned.

He shook his head. He shouldn't have taken a sweet. He should have just sat still and ignored her. She was going to want to chat with them all the way now. This realisation was dawning on Harri too. Ned closed his eyes and faked sleep, leaving Harri to face the music, for once.

He woke in surprise. At first he'd only been pretending to sleep, but it seemed he'd really dropped off.

'Where are we?' he asked Harri, after checking on Kip.

Kip had placed his heavy head on Ned's boots. This was comforting but had given him pins and needles, or nins and peedles as Anni called them.

'No idea. I lost track while you snored your head off.' Harri almost smiled.

'I think we're somewhere near Newtown, but I could be wrong,' one of the knitting women offered, now without her companion who must have got off while Ned dozed.

'Oh, thanks,' Ned replied.

'How are we *still* in Wales? This is taking forever,' Harri said in disbelief.

'Sorry. I didn't mean to fall asleep. I should have been watching,' Ned apologised.

He rifled through his bag looking for the Welsh cakes Mrs Thomas had packed for them and passed two to Harri as a peace offering.

'S'all right. I guess you were tired. *Diolch*,' Harri conceded, taking the cake.

'Looks like your mam's a fine baker.' The knitting woman was still keen to have a chat.

He wondered if poor Harri had been putting up with her this whole time or if he'd given her the cold shoulder. Ned looked around the carriage. It was half empty. There were two American GIs, both asleep, legs crossed and sticking out into the carriage. He looked at Harri then nodded at them. Harri's eyes widened as if to share his concern. *Exactly!* he mouthed at Ned. He was right, the cello case would never have worked.

Ned readjusted Kip's collar and poured him out a saucer of water. Kip lapped it up, then smiled at Ned, letting the remains of the water trickle onto the floor and Ned's boot. Harri laughed, causing one of the GIs to stir, before returning to snooze. *That was close*, Ned mouthed. Were they going to spend the whole train journey unable to speak to each



other, without being overheard by the knitting woman or a soldier? The knitter had moved on to a scarf. Ned wasn't sure where the reddish jumper had gone. Had she finished it already? Anni would be impressed.

'We'll need to get off at the next stop for Kip,' Ned said pointedly.

'OK. You can take him,' Harri said, folding his arms.

Ned picked up the saucer, wrapped it back up in a tea towel and returned it to his bag. Harri poured out a small amount of tea and passed it to Ned. He remembered his mother's warning about not drinking too much as there were no toilets. That trip felt like three years ago and three minutes ago at the same time. It hadn't been that long since they'd left home and travelled across the country. Not even knowing where they were going to live. And now, he was going *back home*, he supposed, but this time with someone he barely knew, and a dog, who was hiding a priceless masterpiece inside his jacket. Since the war started three years ago, life had been beyond strange, but it was never dull, he thought. The train began to slow down as they reached another unnamed stop.

'I'll be back in a minute,' Ned promised.

Harri nodded. Ned opened the carriage door and hopped down onto the platform.

'Come on, then, Kip. Come, come,' he gave the command.

Kip bounced out of the carriage after him.

'Don't take too long, all right?' Harri said.

'Didn't know you cared,' Ned joked.

'I don't, English. But if I don't bring that dog home, Mam

will give me to the rag 'n' bone man for his collection.' Harri grinned as he shut the door and pushed the window down.

Harri hung his arms out, watching them. And he wasn't the only one, Ned noticed. The knitting woman's needles were paused in the air as she looked out of the window too.

'What a nosy Nora,' Ned whispered to Kip as he looked about for a grassy area, but Kip was distracted by too many new smells.

Finally, Kip got the message and did his business. As they returned, the train whistle blew and Harri appeared through the steam, red-faced and panting.

'Run!' he bellowed, throwing Ned's bag at him.

'What? *Why?*' Ned shouted back, gripping Kip's lead tighter.

'Don't ask! Do!' Harri shouted, grabbing him by the jumper.

They ran as fast as they could as the train pulled away without them.



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‘What did you do that for? Why did you get off the train? We’re nowhere near Bletchley,’ Ned said, snatching his bag from Harri.

‘I bet you all the tea in China you can’t point to where we are right now on a map.’ Harri threw himself onto the ground next to Kip.

‘There are no maps!’ Ned reminded him. ‘Which is why it was a stupid move to jump off the train. We could be absolutely anywhere!’

‘Didn’t you see those GIs? They were watching us all the time. It’s a good job my mam made me come with you. So far, you’ve fallen asleep, made best friends with Chatty Cathy and not batted an eyelid at two GIs. Who knows what might have happened if I wasn’t here to look after you?’ Harri rolled his eyes.

‘What does it matter if they’re American or not? We’re all in the war together now, aren’t we?’ he reasoned.

Harri needn’t start acting like his big brother. He already had brothers – at least, he hoped he did. When he finally got to Bletchley, his mother would tell him which brother was missing.

‘Just because they’re dressed like soldiers doesn’t mean they *are* soldiers. Don’t you listen to the news? There’re spies everywhere; even the nuns aren’t to be trusted nowadays,’ Harri explained as if Ned were a child. ‘Did you hear them say anything American? They weren’t exactly handing out the candy and orange juice were they?’

‘Well, if they weren’t suspicious of us before, they will be now, won’t they!’ Ned pointed out.

‘There was something funny going on. At least, I *thought* there was.’ Harri shrugged, annoyed. ‘You’ve got me all paranoid with your witch hunt for the newspaper snitch and all that talk of K and C and the Officially Secret Acts.’

‘It’s *act*. The Official Secrets Act. And I’m sorry but I didn’t *make* you come,’ Ned muttered, sitting down on the grass next to Harri. ‘I’d have been fine on my own.’

‘All right. Don’t panic. We’ll find a truck or a lorry and hitchhike,’ Harri said, waving his arm as if one might materialise in front of them.

‘With a dog?’ He ruffled the back of Kip’s neck. ‘No hard feelings, Kip.’

‘You got a better idea?’ Harri got to his feet.

‘What about a bus? Couldn’t we just walk until we find one?’ Ned checked Kip over with his hands, feeling for any dampness in his jacket.

‘Dry?’ Harri asked.

‘It’s dry,’ Ned confirmed.

‘Good. At least Anni’s part of the plan is working.’ Harri smiled. ‘She’ll be so smug when we tell her. Won’t hear the end of it for days.’

They both smiled, thinking about how proud Anni would be *if* it worked out. Kip rested his snout in Ned's hand, giving him a look of trust and knowing as if he understood the vital role he was playing. Ned felt his heart rate slow, and his shoulders drop as he let Kip's warmth spread through his hand.

'You all right?' Harri checked.

'Course,' Ned fibbed.

'Let's flag down a lift,' Harri suggested, holding out his hand to Ned, pulling him to his feet.

He'd never hitchhiked before, and he wasn't convinced Harri had either. A bus would take longer than the train but at least it was safe. Otherwise, they could be getting into a spy's car for all they knew. How were you supposed to spot a spy, anyway? It wasn't as if he and his friends had a great record of spy spotting at Bletchley Park. They set off in what looked like the direction of a town, hoping a passing vehicle would stop for them. Harri didn't speak. Kip trotted along with his head held high. Ned checked the dog's jacket every five minutes to make sure the canvas wasn't creased, or damp, or too hot, or too cold. It was exhausting, and they had miles and miles to go.

The town, if you could call it that, did at least have a bus stop, which meant they didn't have to continue hitchhiking. They stood for some time before one rolled up at a snail's pace. It was gruelling carrying such precious and secret cargo, Ned thought. Although you'd never know it to look at Kip. He was attracting admiring glances from the other passengers on the bus. Showered with comments about being a 'big, handsome lad'.

They squeezed into their seats, one at the front and one towards the back. Ned took Kip and tried to tuck him in underneath his feet. Kip was having none of it, taking up all the foot room as well as a some of the aisle. The dog could smell something. His nostrils were flaring, senses in overdrive.

'Ah, bless him,' said the woman next to him. 'He's clocked my pie. I'm taking it to my daughter. She's just had a baby.'

'Oh, right,' Ned replied, smiling, glad that Harri wasn't sat anywhere near him; it'd be good to have a bit of time apart.

'It's not her first but any road it's nice to have a bit of help,' the woman carried on. She reached out her hand to stroke Kip's back. 'Aren't you a big beauty?'

'Don't!' Ned shouted, as the bus stopped, and everyone turned and stared.

He wondered if the bus driver would ask him to get off.

'I was only going to say hello. Sorry, I'm sure.' The woman ruffled herself, her face changing from open and chatty to pinched.

'It's not you,' Ned started to explain. 'It's just . . .'

'He's a Guide Dog,' Harri said, appearing from the back of the bus.

'Pardon me. I didn't realise.' The woman was still uppity, pretending to look out of the window.

'Look, this is his Guide Dog training jacket and harness, see?' Harri explained, smoothing things over for Ned.

'We're training the dog, for his mum.' Ned pointed at Harri who sighed with his whole body.



'Is she blind? What a shame,' the woman said bluntly. 'Poor bab.'

'Come on, there's more room at the back,' Harri instructed, waiting for Ned to follow.

'Why can't you keep your mouth shut?' Harri hissed as they reached the back.

Ned squeezed in next to him and Kip. Someone must have got off while they were talking to the pie woman.

'I did. I was. I mean, I can't ignore people, can I?' he said reasonably.

Maybe he should be more like Harri. No one ever seemed to want to strike up conversation with him.

'You'll be fine once you get to London. No one ever talks to each other there,' Harri shared knowledgeably. 'That's the plan, isn't it? You're not coming back to Manod with me and Kip, are you? You're going to go to London with your mam.'

'How did you know?' he asked.

'It's what *I'd* do. I wouldn't let my mam go to London on her own either.' Harri looked at Ned with respect. 'Like I said, you'll be fine once you get there. I've been before with my dad for a concert. Mum didn't want to come with us because . . . she doesn't like the Underground. London's too busy; she was worried she'd trip or fall or get in someone's way. So, I went with Dad. He's played everywhere.' Harri smiled.

'What does he play?' Ned dared to ask.

The bus was pootling along country roads, but it did feel that they were getting somewhere at last.

'The cello. Everyone says I take after him. He's the one who taught me.'

'You're really good,' Ned offered. 'The chippies thought you were a professional.'

'Did they? Ta for that. Dad plays for the Army, in the Royal Corps of Music. We used to play together, before he joined up . . .' Harri choked up, his voice breaking.

Ned reached out and patted Harri's shoulder, then turned away to look out of the wide window at anonymous houses and lives, flapping past like a flip book.



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They should get off the bus. Something Harri had said about the train and people watching them was making Ned twitchy. Through the window, the hills and mountains were replaced by factories. One reminded him of Cadbury's. Impossibly large chimneys poked up along the skyline. Houses lined the canal, back-to-back in places.

'Here we are,' the driver said, pulling into a large bus station. 'Brum.'

'Eh? Can you tell us where we are, please?' Harri sounded tired.

'Don't get a cob on. You're in Birmingham. Bus terminates at the Bull Ring,' she explained.

Ned perked up at the news they were in Birmingham.

It shouldn't be too difficult to get to Bletchley from Birmingham. He just needed to make their original trip, but in reverse. He felt several steps closer to his mum.

'What's the bull ring? Is that a market?' Harri asked.

'Follow the crowd and stay away from the cut and you'll be bostin.' The woman packed her knitting away and got

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ready to leave. 'Ta-ra a bit.' She waved goodbye and walked down the aisle of the bus.

'I didn't understand half of that. Was that even English?' Harri complained.

'Come on, it should be easy enough to find another bus. Or will we get a train?' Ned suggested. 'At least we know where we are now.'

'Take Kip to the toilet first,' Harri said.

Kip whistled and whimpered quietly. He'd been cooped up on the bus and must be bursting. He'd polished off nearly all the water and the biscuits. And he'd let out a few noisy toots. Harri had almost died of embarrassment on the cramped bus.

After Kip had relieved himself on a small patch of grass, they followed a group of people and managed to find their way from the bus to New Street train station, where Ned remembered the platform he and his mother had got off at. It was the same line calling at Coventry, Northampton, Bletchley and then Watford, before arriving in London. He was pleased with himself, as this meant they didn't have to ask anyone for directions or help.

He and Harri were both tired as they waited for the train to arrive. Ned was glad of Kip's Guide Dog jacket. Even though the train staff seemed familiar with Guide Dogs in training, they were suspicious of Ned and Harri, neither of whom appeared to be disabled.

'Hang back a sec. Let everyone else on first.' Harri drew Ned to one side. 'We can see who goes where and assess the situation.'

This was a busier train than the one they'd got on in Wales.

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And with more carriages. A variety of people boarded. A mother with two tired-looking children who were told in no uncertain terms to *stop fidgeting*. A few women who looked like they were on their way to start a shift at work, or had just finished one, hair tucked away under scarves, bags under their eyes. Several older men in suits and hats were scanning lean newspapers. Armed forces in all sorts of uniforms were scattered along the platform. Ned recognised the WRNS uniform, and Army, but no Navy in sight. He hadn't seen any more GIs in the station, though there'd been a few as they trekked across the city, dodging trams, buses and bicycles. Harri let go of Ned's arm and walked towards the carriage door. It opened from the inside.

'Up you get, laddie, there's plenty of room.' A man with a Scottish accent held out a hand.

These carriages were higher up. He had to stretch to get his foot in the door. Kip gracefully leapt into the carriage and waited for his next command from Ned. He gave himself a full-body shake from head to tail.

'Ugh! Really!' a young woman complained, picking dog hair off her skirt. 'Shouldn't be on here with passengers. Have you paid for his ticket?'

'Dogs don't need tickets,' Harri said in Ned's defence.

'Well, they should. If I must pay, so should he,' she moaned.

Kip, oblivious to the fuss he was causing, let out an undignified burp.

'Oh!' she said, gathering up her things. 'This really is the living end!'

'Thank goodness,' said one of the soldiers, as she stepped out of the carriage.

'Here, come and sit on this bench.' A woman with a brightly coloured headscarf suggested, moving her bag out of the way.

She smelt of smoke and perfume. Ned sat down next to her and peered at the large storage area under the seat. There was just enough room for Kip to lie down and stretch out flat. Which would be good for both the dog and the artwork hidden in his jacket.

'Can he have a biscuit?' The woman rifled through her bag.

'If he's not allowed, I'll take it!' the Scottish soldier joked. 'Ma stomach thinks ma throat's been cut.'

Harri sat in the last space, next to the soldier, and stared at Ned, who could tell that Harri was willing him to stay quiet. Ned nodded and took out his sketchpad and pencil. Harri gave him an approving smile. Kip settled, dropping to the floor with an almighty thud.

'What you got there?' The soldier leant forward into the scant space in the middle of the carriage.

The bench seats were arranged opposite one another with hanging space above their heads. The area in the middle was a constant battlefield of feet, shoes and manners.

'Doodles.' Ned tried to act like Harri would.

'Aye, they're no' bad. Stars, is it, eh? Constellations?' The soldier held out his hand to see.

Ned felt he had no choice but to turn his sketchpad around so the soldier could see better.

'I saw this picture once; it was of stars across the night sky swirling in front of the moon. That's what you want to aim for,' the soldier suggested.



'I know the one you mean. They look like they're moving, don't they!'

Ned knew the soldier was talking about a Van Gogh painting. Harri was giving him absolute daggers.

'I'm no artist but there's plenty of good clean sky at home. Even seen the Northern Lights the once,' the soldier shared. 'What more can you ask for from this magnificent universe, eh?'

'Oh, I'd love to see the Northern Lights!'

Ned and the soldier launched into a detailed and satisfying conversation about the solar system as Kip snored underneath the seats. When the soldier got off, a silence fell. There were only three of them left in the carriage. The woman next to Ned had almost finished the hat she was knitting. He could feel her gearing up to chat, so he busied himself with Kip for a moment, giving him a thorough stroke and fuss. He surreptitiously checked the canvas underneath the Guide Dog jacket. Anni's idea was working well, despite Harri's misgivings. Harri was looking out of the window. A late afternoon storm was rolling in across the flatlands and fields, weighed down by greying clouds heavy with rain. Despite how long the journey was taking, the train was quite a convenient way to travel. If it wasn't for the war, he'd be enjoying himself. His stomach grumbled.

'This is the last one.' Harri passed him a sandwich, just in time. 'Make it last.'

The carriage filled with the smell of meat and bread. His stomach growled even louder in anticipation. He hoped that when he was older, his life wouldn't be ruled by his stomach and the constant need to fill it.

'Well, this hat won't finish itself,' the knitting woman interrupted his thoughts.

She put down her Agatha Christie paperback to pick up her needles. Ned put the rest of his sandwich in his mouth. He ignored the way the meat paste substitute glued his tongue to the roof of his mouth. The train stopped and Kip came out from under the seat. He took a stroll about the small carriage, stretching his legs, joints clicking. Ned gave him the last of the biscuits and water and then put his things away. New passengers entered the carriage. The knitting woman didn't look up this time but continued to work on the hat with her head down.

Ned lost himself in thought again while the train continued its journey. Everyone looked fed up and worn out, but ready for whatever the rest of their day held. Kip nudged him with his nose and Ned fed him the sandwich crusts. He scratched behind Kip's ears and whispered nonsense to him quietly. The only sound was the clacking of multiple needles. One of the young women opposite had taken out her knitting. It looked a lot better than the work of the woman next to him, who kept dropping stitches.

He wanted to unzip Kip's jacket and take out the canvas, just to check, but he knew he couldn't. It was the smallest picture he could have chosen, and he was genuinely concerned that it wouldn't make the right impact as Picture of the Month.

'Nearly finished.' The knitting woman jolted him.

'Oh.' Should he have congratulated her?

She held up the russet-red hat, which certainly had a hole in it, as well as the odd dropped stitch. There might have been a lump too.

mother had been so strange on the phone at the brickyard; he didn't know what was going on between his parents.

'Let's find a telephone. I want to ring the brickyard to see if she's there before turning up at . . . the house.' He couldn't quite bring himself to call it *home* any more.

He pulled Kip towards him on the lead and patted him down, cautiously. He could feel the thickness of the painting underneath the material of the jacket. Warm, dry and curved neatly over Kip's large back. Even though the picture weighed little out of its frame, Ned felt it was the heaviest and most valuable thing he'd ever had to carry.

'Still there?' Harri checked.

'Still there,' Ned confirmed, and they both smiled, the earlier tension easing.

'Train's taking its time to move on,' Harri noted as they walked along the platform.

'Taken on water, apparently, so they can't move it out of the way yet,' an old woman sat on a bench shared as they passed her. 'There's been that much rain, hasn't there. A blessing we've not all floated down the bloomin' river,' she continued, causing them to stop, out of politeness.

'They're never on time these days, are they, Mum, no matter the weather.' A young woman came and sat next to the old lady.

'I blame the blackout.' The old lady tutted, gesturing at the darkening sky and the natural light already fading.

They should see the darkness of the real countryside, Ned thought. Try walking around in the rich coal-black of Wales.

'I'd take a dim view if bombs were dropped on us just because someone moaned about the lack of lights,' a man commented.

'I think we should stay off public transport for a bit, keep a low profile,' Harri whispered, aware of the adults around them.

'You're right! You're right!' Ned burst out.

'All right! No need to pop my eardrum!' Harri urged caution, looking up and down the platform.

'Everything all right, lads? Don't want to go announcing ourselves to the enemy now, do we?' the porter warned, walking back along the platform and into the busy refreshment room. 'And keep that dog under control,' he called out of the door.

'How dare he? Kip's always under control.' Harri tutted, resting his hand on Kip's head, surprising both Ned and the dog.

'So, as I was saying, I've got a friend whose dad works in the garages,' Ned said, happily turning around to walk back up the station platform.

He tightened Kip's lead, wrapping it firmly around his fist, to keep the porter happy.

'Which garages?' Harri asked.

'Over the road, at the park.' Ned jutted his thumb in the direction of Bletchley Park, behind the platform.

As they went back and forth, discussing what they should do, there came an almighty rumbling sound, as a train thundered down the track at speed. The station guard ran out of the refreshment rooms, blowing on his whistle several times, then dropped it and cupped his hands around his mouth to shout instead.

'Get off the platform! Get off the platform! It's not going to stop!' he roared.

But it was too late. The train was headed straight for them.



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Harri grabbed Ned's shoulder and tried to pull him out of the way as the express train thundered down the line. A signalman managed to jump clear of the footplate of the stationary carriage and landed in a heap further up the platform. The brakes screeched and sparks shot from the wheels. The express was steaming and smoking, travelling at great speed.

*It's not going to stop,* Ned thought, before being blinded by the headlights. The train smashed with full force into the end of the stationary carriage before mounting the platform, bulldozing the busy refreshment rooms next to them. The impact threw Ned and Harri in different directions as the ceiling crumpled, metal grinding against metal. Something landed on his stomach, squashing the air out of his lungs. He heard a snap then Harri screamed in pain. Enormous chunks of wood flew up in the air, falling in every direction. Ned was pinned to the floor as seats, window frames, glass and wood panelling disintegrated in front of them.

The station roof fell, shards raining down like sharp hailstones cutting their skin. Debris surrounded them and directly in front of them was the remains of their carriage,

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where they'd sat only minutes earlier. Ned couldn't see over the carriage as the smashed train filled his vision, but he could smell smoke and burning. Everything hurt.

'Harri?' he managed to croak, sounding like he was under water.

He tried to pop his ears by swallowing, but it didn't work. All he could hear was ringing. He looked about him and spotted Harri further down the platform. He must have been thrown there. His leg was twisted the wrong way. Ned couldn't tell if Harri was breathing or not. He needed to move to help him. Behind him, muffled screaming, shouting and coughing came from the refreshment rooms. When he managed to slowly turn and look, there was barely anything left. The busy room and its contents had been destroyed by the train.

'Good boy, good boy, Kip,' Ned said automatically, feeling around with his hand for the dog at the end of the lead, but the lead wasn't in his hand or wrapped around his knuckles. Ned rubbed the grit out of his eyes. He flung the remains of a train seat off his stomach and looked about him. The dog was lying flat, paws and legs splayed out, belly to the ground. Glass coated his fur, and grey powder his head. And his eyes were shut.

'Kip! Kip? Good boy, Kip?' Ned called, ignoring the pain in his arm as he crawled across to the dog, cutting his palms on the broken glass.

Kip's tail was tucked between his legs. It looked strange, like it had a bend in it at the top. It was sticking out horizontally before drooping limply.

'Kip. Wake up. Please?' Ned cried as he got closer.

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He reached out a hand, gently brushing the glass off the dog's back. Ned stroked Kip's closed eyes, checking his face for cuts or fatal wounds because the dog was not responding or moving. Ned laid his head down on the Kip's back and started crying. The dog groaned quietly and then whimpered. Ned's head shot up.

'Kip? Kip! You're OK, you're OK. You're a good boy. I'm here. I'm here,' he told him over and over.

Kip shifted slowly until his big head was underneath Ned's chin.

'All right, Kip. Up, up. Up you get. We need to get out of here.' Ned pushed himself into a sitting position. His stomach hurt terribly.

They needed to move before anything else collapsed on them. Harri too. Dazed, Kip got to his paws unsteadily, his torn lead dragging behind him and his tail hanging low and not wagging. Ned, still on the floor, slowly reached for the lead, just as someone kicked his hand out of the way. He watched in slow motion as the old knitting woman grabbed Kip by his damaged harness. She had a bleeding gash on her forehead. Was she concussed? She must have hit her head. Where was her daughter? She was acting strangely. Her mouth was full of blood, seeping through her teeth.

'Useless kid!' She spat blood, grappling with Kip.

'What are you doing? Stop it!' he cried, dragging himself up off the floor towards Kip. Ned and the stranger wrestled with Kip's lead and harness. The old woman dug her nails into his flesh, pulling the harness from his fingers. Kip was

jumping up and barking, then crying in confusion, his dark eyes wide with panic. The woman got the hard round end of the harness and shoved it forcefully into Ned's already bruised stomach. He screamed in pain, grabbing hold of the old woman's hair as he hit the ground. But he was left holding a wig. Someone was calling Kip. The dog ran in the opposite direction. Kip was making his way back to Harri!

'She's after the painting! She's trying to steal it,' Harri shouted to Ned.

Harri kept calling as Kip ran towards him. The old woman caught up with them both. Harri stuck out his good leg and, with a scream of agony, sent her flying. Ned seized the moment and staggered towards Kip and Harri.

'Run. Take Kip and run!' Harri shouted at Ned.

'I can't,' Ned tried to shout over the wail of ambulance sirens. 'I'm not leaving you!'

'Do it! Go on!' Harri commanded.

The old woman, who didn't look so old without her wig, was being helped to her feet by a nurse. The nurse refused to let her go, despite the woman's protests. More people were arriving at the scene, coming to the aid of the injured. All around him were people in various states of pain and injury. And worse, he could see at least four stretchers with bodies lying on them, covered.

'Don't think, Ned. Do!' Harri pushed him and passed him Kip's lead. 'I trust you! Go on!'

Harri was right. Someone would help him, any minute now. He and Kip needed to leave before they were stopped.

'If it wasn't for me, you'd be safe at home with your mum.

I'm sorry, Harri,' Ned added, bending down to pat Harri gently on the shoulder.

'I'm sorry too,' Harri said. 'Good luck, English.' He managed a watery smile and then winced in pain as a first aider knelt next to him and checked him over.

'I'm afraid that leg's broken, young man. We'll need to take you to hospital.'

'Tell my mum,' Harri instructed Ned. 'Tell her what's happened and where I am.'

'Wait. I need to have a look at you too. You can come in the ambulance with your friend,' the first aider told Ned as he got ready to leave.

'My friend needs to leave,' Harri told her. 'Tell my mum where I am, Ned,' he said again, through gritted teeth.

'I will,' Ned replied. 'Promise. And I'll come back and see you in hospital as soon as I can.'

'There's an animal ambulance coming too,' another nurse told him, arriving on the scene to help get Harri onto a stretcher. 'Your dog needs seeing to. They'll take care of him, don't look so worried. Probably a tail fracture rather than a break.'

'Go on, Ned,' Harri repeated as he was carried off on the stretcher. 'Get out of here.'

'OK. OK,' Ned shouted back.

'Ned?' a voice cut across the station platform. '*Ned Letton?*'

He turned to see who was calling him and spotted her, amongst the crowd of medics and first aiders from the park.

'Robyn?' His voice cracked. 'Robyn!' he waved at her.

'Oh my! What happened? We heard the crash from over the road!' she said breathlessly.

'Robyn?' he checked as she threw her arms around him. 'Ow! That hurts. Everything hurts,' he admitted as she stepped back.

'You're bleeding. Is anything broken? Mr Samuels made me do a first-aid course in the mansion, so I'm fully trained. Whose dog is this?' Kip was nosing her pockets hopefully, although his tail was still motionless.

'I can't believe it's you,' he said.

'Of course, it's me! But what are you doing back in Bletchley? Have you come to see your mum? My mum called round, but your dad said she wasn't well enough to receive visitors.'

'We need to get out of here,' Ned remembered.

He looked over his shoulder and gripped Kip's lead tighter. He wanted to check Kip's tail to see if it was broken but now wasn't the time.

'All right. Let's go, Letton,' Robyn said.

Ned looked back at the platform. Harri was being carried off on a wire mesh air-raid stretcher made from what looked like old metal railings.

'Wait!' the first aider called out. 'I need to check you over. And the animal ambulance are on their way. Just hang on.'

'It's all right. I'll look after him and the dog. I'm a first aider too,' Robyn promised.

Ned and Kip followed Robyn away from the crowds, the chaos and the wrecked train, towards the back gate into Bletchley Park.



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'Isn't it good news about your Robert?' Robyn said as they made their way through the woods, taking care not to trip over the tree roots running like veins across the path.

'Robert?' He was confused. 'My brother?'

'Only heard yesterday that they'd found him and now here you are! How funny.' Robyn smiled, taking his arm to help him.

'What?' Ned tapped his skull as if to knock some sense into himself.

'He's on his way home, isn't he, your Robert? Or have I got the wrong end of the stick?' Robyn stopped and put her hand on Ned's arm.

His head was throbbing. Pulsating right at the front like it had a life of its own. Robert was on his way home. Not missing in action. And everyone had already known, apart from him. But what about Joe, was he safe too?

'I've left Harri behind. He's probably got a broken leg.' He gestured back to the railway.

'Who's Harri?'

'And what will Mrs Thomas think of me? Kip's tail is

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broken and it's all my fault. I never should have brought Harri or Kip with me.' Ned's teeth were chattering, the lead shaking in his hand.

'You're not making any sense. Who are you talking about? Who are these people? I think you're in shock, Ned Letton. I know what you need. A cup of sugary tea and some of my mum's scones. Come on, let me sort you out,' Robyn said confidently.

'Mum had a telegram. She's . . . she's not good,' he said, unsure how to describe his mother's condition.

'Sit down a sec,' Robyn suggested. 'I think you might have concussion.' She steered him towards a tree stump.

Kip came and rested his heavy head on Ned's knee.

'Your Robert's been found with a few other RAF Bletchley boys. They're injured and have been taken to Stoke Mandeville hospital. Don't worry, it's not too far from here. Your dad told my mum that Robert's doctor is called Dr Guttman Ludwig. Isn't that a great name? He sounds like a character from one of Mary's books. Apparently, your father wasn't pleased because Dr Ludwig is German. Or Jewish. Maybe both. Anyway, I thought that's why you and your mum came home, because of your Robert,' she said. 'I couldn't work out why you weren't with your mum.'

'Dad sent a telegram to . . . Mum's work saying one of my brothers was missing. But Mum didn't tell me *which* brother was missing. We got cut off on the telephone,' he explained.

'Well! That's a fine mess. Do you know what, your dad is . . . He's . . . I just don't understand him.' She stopped herself.

'I know! I know!' Ned stood up from the tree stump. 'But

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my brother is going to be OK! Everything's going to be all right, Kip, just as soon as we find my mum,' he told the dog, his legs and hands shaking. 'Can we get Kip a drink? And I need –'

'Something to eat?' Robyn's voice wobbled. 'Oh, I've missed you and your stomach, Ned. Come on, I know where Mum keeps her secret supply of scones.' She looped her arm through his again, leading him carefully through the woods, towards her father's garages.

'Why are we going in here?' Ned hesitated outside.

'It's where I'm working now. Don't you know? I'm an apprentice,' Robyn said, hands on hips.

'I know you're an apprentice! So am I. We've had this conversation before, remember?' Ned said, thinking back to the first time they'd met, when Robyn was poking her nose into the back of his father's hearse, carrying a bucket of pigeon poo.

'No. Not with the carrier pigeons. I'm up in the lofts with them still and officially that's my main job but I'm an apprentice in the garages too. I'm a double apprentice! And Sadie's teaching me how to ride. I can kick-start, shift gears, brake and turn now. It's all on the quiet, though. Very hush hush. Mum's the word and all that.'

'What do you mean *ride*?' His head was like scrambled eggs.

'Do you remember Sadie? The motorcycle dispatch rider? She's teaching me to ride motorbikes. Dad's finally given in and let me learn mechanics on the side,' she shared as they sat together on the floor behind the charabanc.

Robyn caught Ned up on all the latest developments and he told her what he could about his activities.

'So, you came here to find your mum because she's got to deliver something secret to someone in London? And . . . I'm guessing, you want to go with her?' Robyn checked.

'That's about the long and short of it,' he agreed, wolfing down another scone before gulping down a glass of squash. Robyn's mother must be keeping the garages as well supplied as she could, stretching rations to their limit.

'All right. I'll go and find Sadie. She'll be about here somewhere. She'll know a woman who can help your mum with transport,' Robyn said confidently. 'And when I come back, you're going to tell me why you've adopted this ginormous horse of a dog. Deal?' she said, giving Kip a gentle fuss.

'Deal. And thank you,' Ned said gratefully.

Once Robyn had left, he was happy to sit on the floor in the garages. Kip leant heavily against Ned's side, keeping one eye open, still on the job. He quietly undid Kip's harness, which was rather battered, and set it on the ground. It was the first time he'd thought about the picture inside Kip's jacket since the train crash. He'd been so worried about Harri and Kip.

'Go free, Kip,' Ned whispered, releasing the dog from his work.

Ned checked no one else was in the garages then undid the jacket fastenings under Kip's belly as quietly as possible. He pulled the jacket gently off Kip's back and laid it flat on the floor. Then he got to his feet and took a quick look about the place. They were still alone. He guessed Robyn would be a while.

But he wasn't going to take the picture out. That would be too dangerous and take too long. He was more than happy to leave it for the gallery people deal with that when he and his mum arrived. Between them, he, Kip and Harri had got the picture this far. Which wasn't to be sniffed at.

Maybe he'd be able to take Anni to the National Gallery, after the war, when all the paintings were back in their proper places. Though the chances of this happening sometimes seemed slim. Especially after being in the quarry all day, listening to the adults speculate about invasion, the burning of art and how the royal family would need to get out and to Canada. They talked about it like it was almost inevitable, despite the years of fighting, secrecy and effort. He wasn't sure he could carry on with this mission. It might make more sense to try and get back to Wales and just come clean to K.

'Ned? Is that you?' A voice made his stomach plummet. 'Get up! What are you doing here?'

It was his father.

Kip belly-crawled to Ned and growled. It was the first time Ned had ever heard the dog make this noise. It was menacing, especially with his hackles raised, fur standing on end, making him look even bigger.

'Dad?' Ned said blankly.

'Just look at the state of you. Come home with your tail between your legs?' His father nodded.

'Why didn't you write back?' Ned didn't get up. 'I wrote you a letter.'

'I've been busy. Working. It's nonstop. Barely got time to spit.' His father didn't come any closer.

'You should have telegraphed us. You should have told us about Robert,' Ned said flatly.

'I did telegram. Can't rely on any of the services these days,' his father said defensively.

'But we didn't get it. Did you send it to Wales?' Ned continued to challenge him.

'I sent it to her work. Can't be sending things like telegrams into the back of beyond.' His father spoke with disgust, as if Wales were a place not to be trusted. 'Good job I did send it there. That's how they knew where to find me. Next of kin.'

'What are you talking about?'

'Had to collect her from the gallery. Ill with her nerves, again. I said it would be too much for her. Had to call the doctor out when I got her home. Looked after her round the clock, I did. That's the thing with women and their nerves, you can't take your eye off the ball. I even closed the doors to the funeral parlour. I've been sick with worry. And then what did she do once I nursed her back to health? She disappeared! That's what! Bloody disappeared on me!'

'What do you mean? I thought she was at the brickyard.' Ned shook his head; nothing was making any sense.

'Why would she be there? What makes you say that? What do you know?' his father demanded, coming closer.

Kip stood in front of Ned and continued to growl. Ned quickly placed the jacket over Kip's back and did it up. He didn't want his father asking any questions.

'I don't know anything. Why?'

'Get that mutt under control! Your mother was last seen

getting on a train at the brickyard. I've been down that brickyard myself and questioned them all but there's no sign of her. What does she think she's playing at? Hide and seek? At least you've had the good sense to come home, I suppose. You'll be expecting me to find you work in the parlour, no doubt,' his father said confidently.

Then Robyn appeared behind him and gave Ned the nod. He knew he could rely on Robyn to find a way.

'No. I'm not coming home.' His head was finally clearing.

'What are you talking about, boy? You'll do as you're told!' his father shouted. 'Why does no one in this family listen?'

Ned thought of all the things he'd like to say, all the answers he could have given to this question but knew that his father wouldn't or perhaps *couldn't* listen.

'Don't push me, *Ned!* One more step and I swear . . .'

Kip barked deeply and loudly, the booming sound echoing around the garage, making them all jump. His hackles were raised from head to tail.

'Get that ruddy dog under control! Whose is it anyway? I'll call the dog warden,' his father continued to threaten.

'It's all right, Kip. It's all right,' Ned reassured the dog. 'Good boy.'

And instead of answering his father, or trying to reason with him, Ned chose silence, which felt more powerful than any words. He picked up Kip's lead and his bag and followed Robyn away from the garages. And away from his father, who stood there shouting his name over and over and over.



'So, your mum's gone? What are we going to do now?' Robyn asked.

'I don't know! I thought she'd be here. And that I'd find her, and everything would be OK, and we'd go to London together with Kip.'

'All right. New plan. Sadie's found someone who's about to make a delivery. You and Kip could still make it to London on time.'

'OK, I guess I could.' He checked Kip over again. 'Do you think Kip will be able to face another journey?' he asked Robyn.

'More importantly, will you?' Robyn looked serious for a second. 'Do you think your mum has gone to London? Does she know anyone there?'

'I don't know. Maybe. I never asked her!'

'There's only one way to find out. Sadie says there's a delivery driver waiting. They'll take you as far as they can,' Robyn said as they walked down the drive towards the concrete sentry station and the green side gates.

'Hello, matey.' Sadie held up her hand as they met her by the gates.



She was in uniform, wearing lace-up brown leather knee-high boots and a fine weather jacket with lots of pockets. Her long light-brown hair was tucked under her helmet. Her messenger bag was slung across the seat of the dispatch motorcycle.

‘Just doing a quick oil and tyre pressure check before I hit the road,’ she explained, wiping her hands clean on a rag. ‘Then I’ll fill her up.’

‘Will they let Kip come?’ Ned nodded towards the dog. Kip was sniffing yellow daffodils and purple crocuses intently, and dodging puddles made by all the different vehicles that came hammering up and down the drive leaving ruts and potholes behind.

‘Yes. Though it’s not exactly first-class travel I’m offering, if you know what I mean. I’ve left a few things in a bag for you on the van, Rob.’ Sadie gave Robyn a knowing look, which Ned couldn’t translate.

*Rob?* Was that what people were calling her now? Should he call her Rob too?

‘Thanks, Sadie,’ he said. ‘You’re really putting yourself on the line for me and Kip.’

‘Not a problem, matey. We’re all in this together, aren’t we? Rob tells me you’re on a special mission. You’ll be going in the back of a van, so a dog won’t make any difference.’ Sadie wiped her hands using a large handkerchief and came over to stroke Kip. ‘I’ve got two dachshunds at home, but Rolo and Milo are nowhere near as clever as you are,’ she informed him.

Ned knew that Sadie had been a competitive motorcycle racer before the war, which was impressive – no wonder

Robyn thought she was the bee’s knees. Kip gave Sadie’s legs a thorough sniffing as they talked through the plan, which was simple to say the least. He and Kip were going to hop in the back of a van and see how far it took them.

‘Let’s go, then. The van’s waiting next to the churchyard.’ Robyn squeezed through the gap in the gates.

‘No need to check with the security guard, I suppose?’ Sadie said as she watched the three of them shimmy through and out onto the other side.

‘Less attention this way,’ Robyn reassured her. ‘It’s fine, Sadie. Don’t worry. I’ll be back in a jiff.’

‘No, you won’t, because you’re not coming,’ Ned said as they crossed the road to the graveyard where a white van was waiting.

The driver wound down the window and gave them a small wave and a nod. Sadie, on the other side of the gate, waved back at him.

‘I am. There’s plenty of room in there for three. Besides, I’ve already left my mum and dad a note. You’re in no fit state to travel alone and I’m a trained first aider. And even though I’ve still got no idea why the dog is with you, he’s a Guide Dog, Ned, not a medic. You need someone else with you, to take care of you both,’ Robyn reasoned. ‘I think you might have cracked a rib or two.’

He was so tired that he didn’t have it in him to argue. This was the last leg of the journey. They were onto the home stretch. It couldn’t hurt if Robyn came, could it?

‘Haven’t got all day, pal!’ the van driver called out. ‘Time’s ticking on.’

'No. Obviously.' He wasn't interested in her showing off. In fact, he really didn't feel like himself at all.

'Is it a bicycle?' he asked.

'No. It's a motorbike. It folds up. They drop them out of planes.'

'Who does?'

'I don't know. People. Forces people. The RAF, I suppose, or paratroopers. The Allies. Behind enemy lines. The Army. That type of caper,' she said dismissively.

'Right,' he said uncertainly.

'It doesn't matter where they get dropped, Ned. What matters is *we've* got one!'

'Oh.' He looked at the bag and then at the three of them, a boy, a girl and a dog.

They were never going to fit on a motorbike together. Was he supposed to balance Kip on his head?

'Might come in handy. I know how to put it together. Sadie showed me.'

'Do you know how to drive it?'

'You don't *drive* a bike, Ned, you *ride* a bike. And yes, I do,' Robyn said huffily.

He supposed he should be impressed or grateful. Instead, he felt dizzy and wobbly and as if he might burst into tears, which wouldn't do at all.

They sat in a silence so uncomfortable it felt like there was no air in the van. They both fussed Kip, taking care not to touch each other or look at one another.

'All right in the back, there?' the driver checked after a while. 'Weren't caught up in that crash at Bletchley train

station were you? I saw all the ambulances and chaos, played havoc with the traffic. You're both all right, aren't you?'

'Yes,' they replied.

'Coming up to Luton now, might get busy,' the driver explained.

Neither of them said anything in response so he gave up trying to chat to them. Ned tended to Kip, giving him food and water, taking care not to touch his tail. Robyn passed Ned a carrot from her pocket and bit into one herself. For the first time in his life, he wasn't hungry.

'Can he have one?' She gestured to Kip who was looking expectant, hopeful and half-starved all at the same time.

'Sure,' Ned agreed, hoping that he wasn't going to return Kip to Mrs Thomas with an upset stomach.

Kip took the carrot gently from Robyn and tucked in, crunching and chomping, bits falling all over the floor of the van.

'Don't worry, he's a great vacuum cleaner,' Ned said, finally drawing a laugh from Robyn.

'Just like you, then,' she replied. 'Match made in heaven. So, tell me about his real owner.'

And just like that, everything was back to normal. Or as normal as things were going to get sat in the back of a van, munching carrots in the dark.

'I'm running low on fuel,' the driver announced half an hour or so later, slowing down. Whoever had the van before me didn't top it up properly. We're going to need to stop and find somewhere.'

'OK,' Ned replied, exchanging a look with Robyn.

This didn't feel good. He pictured Sadie running her checks, filling up with petrol before she set off on her motorbike. Surely, the driver would have made sure the van was full before they left Bletchley. Robyn shrugged but he noted she was chewing her lip. They kept driving but the van was slowing down even more, maybe to conserve fuel.

'Whereabouts are we?' Ned asked, getting to his knees carefully. 'No, stay, Kip, stay.' He signalled with his hand for Kip to sit still.

'Coming up to Watford now. Won't be any petrol stations open this time of night, but as it happens, I live in the area, and I've got a jerry can in my lockup. We'll take a nip down there and sort the old girl out.' He patted the steering wheel as if the van were alive.

'Oh. Umm. OK,' Robyn said hesitantly.

Ned tapped on the floor of the van: three short taps, three long taps and three more short taps.

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Robyn watched him and nodded, her Morse code skills kicking in. She knelt up and gestured towards the driver. Ned shuffled closer to the driver's seat and engaged him in conversation. Robyn quietly felt the handle to the back of the doors. She gave Ned a thumbs up. It wasn't locked and it opened from the inside.

'Sit tight. We'll be there in a few. I'll fill her up and we'll be on our way.'

'Thought you said you lived in Watford. Where are you driving to? You never said,' Ned pointed out. 'Where's your delivery?' he asked, wishing he'd thought to ask Sadie. Why

hadn't he asked any questions before getting in a van with a complete stranger? Harri would never have been so daft.

'Finishing work for the day. Made my delivery at the park. That's why it's empty in the back, see,' the driver said in a friendly tone.

Neither of them knew what to say in response, but they'd already made their decision. As the driver slowed down for traffic, Ned peered as closely as he could at the fuel gauge. It was a quarter of a tank full. More than enough to get home, if that's where the driver was really heading.

'All right? Want to come and sit up front, pal?' The driver put his arm across the bench seat in the front and turned around to face Ned, for a second.

And that's when Ned spotted it. The driver was wearing a knitted hat. Russet-red in colour with lumps from dropped stitches. And a hole. It was awful and recognisable. Something anyone else would have thrown away. And on the dashboard was a rolled-up newspaper. Ned could just about make out the letters – E C H O. Whoever leaked to the *Liverpool Echo* must have given the nod to the enemy that he was travelling across the country, without a guard, with a priceless piece of art. He'd been so desperate to protect his mum and her work and avoid them taking the blame for the leak, but instead, he'd delivered the art they were trying to protect right into the hands of the enemy!

'No. I'm fine in the back,' he said, shuffling back towards Robyn and Kip.

Ned tapped more quietly this time.

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*Jump?* Robyn mouthed. Ned gathered Kip's lead then slipped his bag onto his shoulders. He checked the harness and jacket were locked in place. He nodded to Robyn as the van pulled away and gathered speed.

'Just a few more minutes and we'll be there,' the driver promised, accelerating. 'You two sure you're OK? Bit quiet, aren't you? Cat got your tongue?' he joked as the van rapidly picked up speed.

'Fine,' Ned said. 'We're fine.'

Kip could hear it in Ned's voice, the worry and the tension, and got to his feet slowly. Ned patted him and held onto him, making sure he wasn't going to slide about in the back of the van.

'Nearly there now.' The driver didn't sound quite so cheerful any more.

He was driving too fast. They could all feel it. Kip was such a clever dog: he seemed to know, without being told that something was very wrong. He was ready. The three of them were in sync, waiting, watching, poised for the right moment.

'Get out of the road!' the driver shouted, waving his arms uselessly as he slammed the brakes on. 'Home Front! Patrol somewhere else. Bleeding menace, they are,' he muttered to himself as he revved the engine menacingly. 'Last thing I need right now!'

Ned didn't know what the holdup was, nor did he care, but he didn't want the driver to speed up. This was their chance. He mouthed *one, two, three* and wrenched open the back doors of the van. He and Robyn jumped out and

Kip followed them. Robyn spun round and dragged the long bag out and Ned heaved it awkwardly onto her back.

'Oi! What are you doing?' the driver called through the open doors.

Then they ran. But the van driver was quick. He switched off the engine and jumped down from his seat.

'Oi! Get back here!' he roared, leaving the driver's door wide open before breaking into a run after them.

'*Oh no!* He's chasing us!' Robyn cried, looking over her shoulder.

'Get back here! What the hell are you doing?' the driver snarled, thundering up the road after them at speed.

'You can't leave your van in the road!' the Home Guard shouted after him.

But the driver ignored the shouts and the beeping horns of the other cars and pounded down the road after them. Ned dared to look over his shoulder quickly; the driver was gaining on them.

'You've got the wrong idea! Where are you going?' the driver yelled at them.

'Don't stop!' Robyn panted to Ned who nodded, breathless and fighting a stitch.

'Come back! Get back here!' the driver continued to bark at them.

'Get off the road,' Ned gasped to Robyn, pointing to a path. 'We need to get away from him.'

'Just stop!' the driver ordered. '*Stop!*'

He stood in the middle of the road and the traffic, hands on his thighs.

'Please! Don't be scared,' the driver called, changing tack, pleading with them.

They didn't look back.

'You've got nothing to be frightened of. *STOP!*'

There was no way they were going to stop. As they ran, Ned was aware of a police officer arriving on the scene. The officer grabbed the driver while he argued back, pointing to Ned and Robyn. Ned focused on the road ahead and didn't stop running. Kip's pink tongue was lolling out of his mouth as he galloped along the road. Ned tightened the lead, taking care not to slow down or trip. Robyn was holding onto the straps of the bag either side of her shoulders. She looked like she might topple over at any point. Ned glanced over his shoulder and saw that the driver wasn't chasing them any more. He was running back to the van.

'He's going to come after us in the van instead. We need to hide,' Robyn cried out.

'That way, down there. I can see a park.' Ned gasped in pain, pointing down a grassy verge, although he couldn't see what was on the other side of it.

'OK.' Robyn was struggling.

Ned pulled Kip up onto a path skirting the dark edge of what looked like a river or a lake. Robyn followed clumsily. They needed to share the load of that bag. Or get rid of it, he thought, just as Robyn overbalanced. She slid down the grassy bank, screaming and Kip tore after her, taking Ned with him. They plummeted to the bottom of the hill, stopping in front of a lake.

He and Robyn were soaked and caked in mud and fallen

leaves, but Kip was as dry as a bone. Ned rolled over and lay on his front, wincing in pain, and looked up at the road where the car lights were coming from. Robyn was stuck on her front, unable to turn over with the weight of the Welbike pinning her to the ground. He helped ease her out of the straps and she came and lay next to him, gasping for breath. Kip belly-crawled next to Ned. The dog licked him then checked his face, sniffing and assessing him.

'Sshhh. Down, Kip, down,' Ned whispered the command.

Kip lay low on his front, panting softly and looked up at the road, his nose snuffling. The three of them watched and waited. They couldn't hear anyone calling them, not that the driver knew their names, nor they his. How had he not even asked Sadie the name of the van driver? They could hear vehicles, but they were passing rather than stopping and searching.

'We need to move,' Ned said regretfully. 'If we stay, there's more chance he'll find us.'

'Got an idea,' Robyn said, patting the Welbike bag.

'It's not going to work! We can't all get on there and I'm not leaving Kip.'

'Of course, you're not leaving Kip! I'm not stupid, Ned. I know you've got something in his jacket – documents, maps or blueprints and you need to deliver it to someone or somewhere. It's all right, you don't have to say anything. Official Secrets Act? Am I right.'

Ned nodded.

'Look, I'll get on the bike and find help,' she suggested.

'Don't go! You stay, I'll go,' he offered. 'Although I don't know how to put the bike together, let alone drive it.'

'You don't drive a motorbike, Ned. I keep telling you – you rrrrride a motorbike. Anyway, Kip needs you here. I'll flag down a vehicle or commandeering one. I'm Sadie Squires, after all,' she said, flashing him a dispatch rider's pass. 'Sadie's pass allows me to stop any vehicle and seize it.'

'Robyn, you're a thief!'

'And a genius.'

'This might actually work.'

'Aren't you glad you let me come, now?'

'Erm, I think you invited yourself.' He laughed weakly.

'Maybe. Anyway, are you going to lie there all night? Or are you going to help me assemble this bike?' She stood up, hands on hips, looking at him expectantly.



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'I've found a milk train,' Robyn said, returning later on the Welbike.

'A milk train.' Ned stood up, looking around him, bleary eyed. He might have fallen asleep for a minute or two; he was completely exhausted. 'What's that?'

'A train that delivers milk, Ned, obviously,' Robyn said sharply as she kicked out the Welbike stand. 'The LNER. It'll get us to Kensington.'

'London?'

'Yes, Ned. London. That's where you're headed, isn't it?'

His legs were cramping, and his arm was numb from Kip resting his head there while he slept but his ribs were feeling less battered.

'Yes.'

'Right. Come on, then, it won't wait forever. I showed them the pass and they agreed to take us.'

'All of us?' Ned checked, clipping Kip's harness back on and adjusting the jacket to make sure it wasn't too tight.

'All three. We're a package deal, aren't we? A team.'

It was properly dark now. Everything sounded louder



and became less clear in the night and what he couldn't see was far more frightening than what he could. He liked to be able to assess things around him.

'I flashed Sadie's dispatch rider pass. He would have said yes to anything. Keen as mustard to do his bit for the war effort. Do you know, I'll be glad not to hear another word about the blinkin' war effort. I'm sick to the back teeth of it,' Robyn admitted.

It took Ned by surprise to hear that. He'd thought she found the whole thing quite the adventure, especially now she knew how to ride a motorbike. Even sparky people like Robyn got tired and fed up, he supposed.

'We'll take the Welbike with us. You never know, it might come in handy again. Good old Sadie,' Robyn said.

If Ned had less to worry about, he could easily become quite jealous of super Sadie.

'Do you want me to carry it this time?' Ned offered. 'Let's swap. You take my bag and Kip and I'll have the bike.'

'Nah. I've got muscles now!' she laughed. 'Probably bigger than yours! And you barely look fit to carry yourself. I'm taking you straight to hospital once you've found your mum.'

*'If we find my mum.'*

'Ned! Don't! Of course we'll find her. We won't stop until we do. Someone in London will know something, I'm sure of it.'

'All right, then, Captain Confident. Now, where's this milk float?' Ned asked as they reached the exit from the park.

'What is going on with your accent? You sound funny. And it's a milk train, Ned. Were you listening?' Robyn rolled her eyes. 'You never listen properly, do you?.'

'I do listen, I just can't always remember what I've heard.'  
'You'll love this: the porter said milk comes all the way from Fishguard. That's in Wales, isn't it?'

He knew Robyn had no idea about Manod and what was hidden there, but she was a sharp as a pin. She knew something. But he mustn't give anything away, not even to her.

'That's a long way to travel,' he said nonchalantly.

'Look! There's the train line. The porter was showing off about the express engine, apparently, it's top of the range, high speed and all that jazz. We might have to run the rest of the way. I don't know how long they're willing to wait. Ready?' She tightened her straps, adjusted the weight of the Welbike, and started running towards the railway line.

'Let's catch that train!' Ned said.

He gripped Kip's harness and ran as best he could towards the milk wagons.



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*April 1942*

‘Shall we start walking and hope we’re heading in the right direction?’

He knew the concert didn’t start until midday, which should give him and Kip enough time to deliver the picture.

‘Why don’t we ask someone rather than relying on hope? I don’t think it’s safe to just start walking around. Look at the state of the place.’ Robyn gestured around them.

Melted stubs of railings lined a street dotted with sandbags. They walked past a collection of shovels and wheelbarrows, some abandoned, some filled with debris. A row of houses had been halved and the remains of a garage looked like a collection of pencil shavings, piled up with lumps of lead sticking out of softer materials, torn to shreds and ribbons. There were no cars, bicycles or buses; in fact, there was no one at all on this stretch of street. Perhaps they’d been evacuated, Ned thought.

‘Look at the state of us! We don’t want to draw attention to ourselves, not that there’s anyone about to ask.’ He felt

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as dreadful as he looked around. ‘And you need to ditch that Welbike, Robyn.’ He nodded at the massive bag on her back.

‘You’re right. Look, we could hide it in there.’ Robyn pointed to what looked like an old ambulance station at the end of the street.

‘Good idea,’ Ned agreed. ‘And I promise we’ll come back for it.’

‘Hello, love. Can I help you? Oooh, I can see the problem from here.’ A woman in a white medical coat, with a red cross on it, came out of a storage hut next to the station.

She was carrying a bucket of sand in one hand and a bucket of water in the other.

‘Sorry?’ Ned said, thinking she was referring to him and his ribs.

‘Bring him in, then, and we’ll take a look at that tail.’ She nodded at Kip. ‘That’s why you’re here, isn’t it?’ she prompted.

Ned and Robyn looked at one another. ‘Yes, that’s right,’ Ned said, following Kip.

‘Best to be prepared,’ the woman said, pointing at the buckets as Kip acquainted himself with her coat pocket. ‘Treats after, young hound. Let’s tend to your wounds first. You are a big lad, aren’t you? Bet he eats you out of house and home.’ The woman went to take Kip’s lead and harness from Ned.

‘No!’ he hissed. ‘I’ll bring him. He won’t go to anyone else.’ Ned began babbling to cover up his rudeness.

‘That’s true. He’s a Guide Dog, see his training jacket,

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there.’ Robyn tried to smooth things over. ‘He has to stay with Ned.’

‘All right.’ The woman took off her tin hat. ‘I can see that. That jacket’s filthy, you been digging holes? And that harness needs looking at. You hold him while I examine him. I don’t think we’ll get him up onto the table; he’s too big,’ she told Ned. ‘I’m Eloise, by the way.’

‘Are you a vet?’ Ned asked, uncertain whether to trust this Eloise woman. There was no knitting, and she wasn’t wearing a russet-red hat, but you couldn’t be too careful.

‘No. But I’m with the animal ambulance. See?’ she pointed at the wooden box next to the storage hut. It had writing in white capital letters on the side.

‘Right.’ Robyn nodded at Ned encouragingly. ‘That’s good.’

‘Thanks,’ Ned said. She did seem legitimate.

‘He should rest that tail. Same thing happened to my little dog; it’ll heal in time. Now, I’m going to give him breakfast, since you’re up with the lark. Is that all right with you? Looks like you could do with some tea and toast yourselves. You look a bit pale, young man. Tell you what, I’ll give you two a decent breakfast, if you clean out the back of my wagon,’ Eloise offered.

‘Sounds fair,’ Ned agreed, without consulting Robyn. Once again, his stomach gave him away. At least his appetite was back – that had to be a good sign.

‘And try to keep your dog nice and calm. Though that’s easier said than done with a Golden Retriever. I wouldn’t be surprised to hear there’s some Newfoundland in him too.

What a lovely mix. He’ll be right as rain in a few days, but you bring him back to me if he’s not wagging by Wednesday. We’re open all hours.’

‘But we don’t live round here . . .’ Robyn started, then clapped her hand over her mouth.

‘Oh. Well, I’m sure there’ll be someone who can look at him wherever you do live. We’re off to Green Park, once that wagon’s clean.’

Ned and Robyn exchanged looks then Ned asked, ‘Could you give us a lift? We need to make sure Kip rests and mends his tail, like you suggested. I don’t think I . . . I mean, I don’t think he can walk another mile.’





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At Green Park they waved goodbye to Eloise and the animal ambulance crew then sat on the nearest bench to discuss strategies. Next to the bench was a sign threatening prosecution to anyone who wasted their bread on feeding the birds. Robyn tutted. And at the far end of the park, anti-aircraft guns reared their terrifying heads. Treetops had been cut off, leaving the trees looking oddly misshapen and out of place. There were no lakes, no playgrounds, no flowerbeds, no monuments or statues. Everything ornamental had been pruned away, making way for the machinery of war.

‘I’ve got to take these boots off,’ Ned said.

‘Please don’t!’ Robyn grimaced. ‘I do not want to smell your sweaty socks!’

Ned ignored her and unlaced his hobnailed boots. He was grateful once again to Mr Howse for looking after him. He shook out both boots, expecting to find a stone or grit. Instead, a tiny folded-up piece of paper fell onto the grass.

‘What’s that?’ Robyn bent down to pick it up and passed it to Ned.

‘I don’t know. I didn’t put it in there!’

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‘Come on, then, open it up, let’s see.’

‘It’s . . . Morse code! It’s from Anni!’ Ned said, laughing.

‘Who’s Anni and what on earth possessed her to go near your boots?’

‘Anni’s a friend. She’s a refugee.’

‘Oh. Where did you meet her?’

‘Where Mum and I’ve been staying. I’ve been teaching her Morse code.’

‘Did you hear the BBC have started transmitting news bulletins in Morse code?’ Robyn said excitedly.

‘That’s brilliant! We’ll be able to listen in and maybe even understand some of it. I’m so glad Mary taught us.’ Ned was thrilled. Anni would be pleased too.

‘Oh, I miss Mary *so* much! Did I tell you she came back to Bletchley for a bit? She said she was a teacher but couldn’t tell me what she was teaching. Then she disappeared again, and she hasn’t written in ages. Read it out, then.’

‘It’s . . . you’re not going to believe this . . . it’s instructions, No . . . It’s directions. Look!’ They peered at the paper with dots and dashes on, deciphering Anni’s instructions.

‘It’s from a park, I think. This should lead us to the . . .’ Ned stopped.

‘Go on, lead us where? I won’t tell. Cross my heart and hope to die.’ Robyn theatrically crossed her heart.

He knew he could trust her. They’d been through enough together. And surely now they were in London and had Anni’s amazing directions, it was safe to tell her. She was his absolute best friend, after all.

‘To the National Gallery. Kip’s carrying a painting.

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'But I will one day! Just you watch me.' Robyn stuck her tongue out at him, looking much like the green gargoyles protecting every corner of the cream brick hotel.

Just like Bletchley Park, Ned thought. They were travel-weary, filthy faced and accompanied by a scruffy dog.

'We're hardly their usual clientele,' Robyn joked.

'Making the place look dirty,' Ned agreed.

'Probably stink to high heaven too. When did you last have a wash?' Robyn asked.

'I can't even remember.' Ned wiped his nose on his sleeve. 'But after the war, we'll come back here, and we'll remember this moment.'

'Even if we washed, we'd still not be allowed in! This place isn't for the likes of us. But I tell you what, we'll do the conga out here instead to celebrate.' Robyn spun around and grabbed Ned, ready to dance, when someone almost crashed into them.

'What are you doing here?' Robyn asked the young woman who had come to a standstill in front of her.

'Mary! How did you get in there?' Ned asked her. 'And why are you in London? I thought you were in the countryside somewhere, learning languages.'

'Robyn! Ned!' Mary threw her arms around both of them. They all hugged each other tightly.

'Ouch!' he groaned, ribs aching. 'Ow, ow, ow!'

'Sorry! Are you all right, Ned?' Mary checked.

'Fine, fine.' He winced as Kip nudged the three of them, wanting to be part of the action.

'What are you doing here, Mary? Why didn't you come

back to Bletchley? I haven't had a letter from you in ages.' Robyn sounded hurt.

'I'm sorry. You know what it's like. What are you two doing in London? And who's this handsome boy?' Mary held her hand out to Kip, who accepted the fuss and attention and gave her handbag a thorough investigation. Robyn and Ned exchanged a look at the sight of Mary holding a woman's handbag. She looked a bit like . . . a mam, Ned thought.

'We're on a day trip,' Robyn lied.

'Seeing the sights,' Ned added.

'*With a dog?*' Mary questioned.

'Yes, we're training him.' Ned felt awful lying to Mary and tried to stick as closely to the truth as possible. 'He's a Guide Dog.'

'Oh, I didn't realise you knew someone who's blind,' Mary said in surprise.

'And you? Why are you here?' Robyn ignored the tuts from passers-by.

'I'm working in London, for a while,' Mary said evasively, adjusting her hat, which was also new and odd.

Mary's plaits had disappeared. Her hair was pulled back into a boring bun at the base of her neck.

She checked her wrist. 'In fact, I'm late. I've got to go.'

Mary was wearing a watch, like a grown-up. She almost looked like she was wearing a costume or dressing up as someone else. Ned felt like a schoolchild in comparison, in his shorts and V-neck jumper. He'd decided against wearing a boilersuit to travel in, but now he was regretting it.

'Where are you working?' Robyn seemed unable to stop

herself asking. 'Surely not in there?' She juttred a thumb at the Ritz.

'No! No! I'm not working in there.' Mary laughed strangely. 'I'm working in a hat shop,' she said quickly, touching her hat as if to prove it. 'And . . . my lunchbreak's over.'

'But it's nowhere near lunchtime,' Ned pointed out sadly.

They were lying to one another, and they all knew it. It felt miserable.

'Fancy you working in a posh shop! It's like we don't know you any more,' Robyn tried to joke.

'Look, I've got to go. I'll write! I promise.' She didn't say when or how but Robyn and Ned both nodded and hugged her goodbye.

'Wait! Do you know the way to Trafalgar Square?' he asked.

'Yes. Why?'

'Because . . . I want to see that tall column,' Robyn said.

'Nelson's Column?' Mary checked. 'I've heard the enemy have plans to relocate it to Berlin.'

'Sounds like we're just in time, Ned,' Robyn said.

Mary reached into her handbag, pulled out a small pad of paper and quickly jotted down directions.

'You seem to know London rather well,' Ned said admiringly.

'Oh, only this bit, really,' she said before thrusting her whole notepad at him. 'I barely go anywhere else. It's too dangerous,' she added mysteriously.

They watched her walk off at a brisk pace, her smart court shoes clipping up the street.

'I think I can see the sign for Fortnum & Mason. Anni said that's next.' Ned got out the Morse code directions

and compared them to Mary's neatly drawn instructions.

'Wait!' Robyn cried.

'She remembered! Look, Mary's drawn the directions rather than written them. Though I don't know why she gave me the whole pad. She must have been in a rush.'

This cheered him up immensely; she knew how he'd much rather follow a drawing than a boring list of words.

'Wait,' Robyn repeated, putting her hand on his arm.

'What? Why?' Ned was impatient to get going again.

'We're going to follow her,' Robyn said plainly.

'But what about the gallery?' he hissed.

'There's still time, now we know where we're going. I want to see what she's up to.'

They followed Mary at a distance, trying to keep a low profile. This wasn't easy as Kip stopped to sniff every shop doorway and people were keen to say hello to him.

'He's a Guide Dog. A Seeing-eye Dog. You can't pet him. He's working,' he repeated over and over to passers-by.

Mary went into a shop. They stopped several paces behind her and watched. And waited. When she didn't come back out, Robyn marched towards the shop. Ned grabbed her and pulled her back.

'Look. It is a hat shop. That's what she said.' He pointed. 'See. Nothing suspicious. Come on, let's go.'

'And dresses. It is suspicious. Everything about her was suspicious. And she didn't mention dresses,' Robyn replied. 'I'm just popping in quickly. You two wait here. They'll never let you in.' She ran her fingers through her hair in a futile effort to smarten herself up.



'You've got five minutes and then I'm off!' Ned warned, and he wasn't joking either.

He hadn't come all this way to turn up late at the National Gallery. He had his mother's reputation to protect. And the sooner they got there, the sooner he could find her. He stood and watched the steady stream of soldiers, exercising or marching somewhere, file past him and Kip. He heard a range of languages being spoken but the only one he could make out was Polish, because he'd heard a bit of that at Bletchley Park. When Robyn came back only two minutes later, Ned was relieved He'd expected a much longer wait.

'Good. Satisfied?' he asked.

'No. They'd never heard of her in there. It's a tiny hat and dress shop with the type of clothes your mother and mine would wear.'

'And she wasn't in there?'

'Not a sniff of her. It's like she went inside then disappeared into thin air.'

'Like my mum,' he couldn't help adding.

'Now we've got two mysteries to solve,' Robyn said wearily.

Robyn loved a mystery, but she wouldn't be able to solve this one quickly. Still, Ned knew from experience she would nuzzle away at it until a thread came loose. And then she'd pull it until whatever Mary was up to unravelled.

'We're going. Right now,' Ned said.

They trekked down the long street past Fortnum & Mason. Silver barrage balloons, set at different heights, glinted in the sun. Ned could see one clearly enough to read the word *Joyance* on it. The National Gallery queue

snaked around the fountains; a mixture of men and women in uniform and civilians on their lunchbreak from work, women in headscarves clutching sandwiches in brown paper and men opening flasks of tea. As they approached the four large lions lounging in Trafalgar Square, Kip grumbled and barked at one. This made them both smile.

'I see old Nelson's still standing, then.' Robyn blinked, looking up at the admiral on his column. 'The enemy haven't blown him to smithereens or got their hands on him just yet. The king will be relieved.'

They came to a halt outside the National Gallery doors. Its grand pillars and steps were surrounded by window boxes full of peas, beans and lettuce growing. There was a helpful sign with an arrow directing them towards the correct entrance for the concert. There was another sign directing visitors to the gallery, towards the War Artists Exhibition.

'One o'clock. The orchestra of the central band H.M. Royal Air Force with Miss Myra Hess, pianoforte.' Robyn read out the sign to him and he was grateful he hadn't needed to, as he hated reading information signs as the words seemed to move around. Ned gave himself a little shake, stood straight and smart, and then, despite tuts and murmurs of 'don't you know how to queue?' he walked to the front, Robyn by his side, smiling, telling the people she passed that 'it's as busy as Piccadilly Circus!' Ned still wasn't sure where that was in relation to the National Gallery but now was not the time to find out, he thought, letting Kip in his Guide Dog jacket, with its precious cargo hidden inside, proudly lead the way.



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Once he had successfully delivered the painting, Ned felt the tension ease from his shoulders as they found two chairs at the back of the room where the concert was taking place, inside the gallery. He and Robyn grinned at each other, and both gave Kip far too many treats. And finally, he had word that his mother was safe too. No longer trapped in Bletchley, they'd told him but had arrived right here in London, yesterday. Although he hadn't been able to see her yet – that would have to wait until after the concert – he'd been promised that the woman she was staying with would take Ned to her.

'My mother will have a whole basket of kittens when I tell her I saw Buckingham Palace. And that I sat next to the queen,' Robyn whispered gleefully.

'You're not sat next to her. You're sat next to me. The queen – and we can only see the back of her head – is rows and rows away from you, right at the front sat with very important men with shiny slicked-back hair. Far away from us waifs and strays at the back here,' Ned pointed out.

'Hmm, well, that's not how I'll tell the story.' Robyn folded her arms.

'And you won't be able to tell your mum because she'll kill you when she finds out that you disappeared into the night!'

'I haven't disappeared. Don't be so melodramatic, Ned. I wrote on the note that I was with you. Mum always said you were a good sort,' Robyn said casually.

'Did she?' He was surprised and pleased.

'Anyway, Mary's the one who's disappeared, not me,' she started again. 'At least we know where your mum is now. One less disappearing act to worry about.' Robyn turned Mary's drawn instructions over and over in her hand.

'It was a good job I mentioned her to the gallery's security guard.'

'Bit of a risk, wasn't it?' Robyn looked at him almost in awe.

'I had to start somewhere. And he had a friendly face, for a guard.' He smiled, thinking of the nightwatchmen at Manod.

'And he said your mother had been kind to him when she'd been at the gallery, remembering to ask after his evacuated children.'

'Sounds like Mum. He was the one who called my father. I wish he hadn't.'

'He wasn't to know, though, was he. Your mother probably had to put your father's name down as her next of kin.'

'True,' he had to agree.

'So, this person who's taken your mother in, this Myra Hess, who is she exactly and how does your mother know her? I thought you said your mother didn't know anyone in London.'

‘Other than her name being on the programme as the pianist, I don’t know anything else about her. Bizarrely, I think Myra’s a friend of Anni’s father. I think Miriam knows Myra too. My mum must have met her at the gallery on one of her Picture of the Month trips and asked to stay with her.’

‘Wait, who’s Miriam? And how does Anni’s father know Myra? You seem to have made a whole bunch of new friends, Ned.’

‘Miriam is amazing! And I want you to meet her one day, you’d get on like a house on fire. Anni’s father . . . well, it’s a very long story. Do you mind if I tell you later? I’m so tired, I don’t think I can talk any more. I just want this to be over with because then we can find Myra.’

‘And Myra will take us to your mum?’

‘Yes.’ He let out a long sigh. ‘Do you think mum knows about Robert? That’s he’s safe?’

‘I hope so. I’m sure she would have got someone to find out, to tell her.’

‘Good. Good.’ He managed a small smile.

‘OK, no more questions or talking, as long as you help me work out what Miss Mary Clark is up to.’

‘You’re not going to let this go, are you? Pass it here, then,’ Ned instructed, taking a pencil out of his bag. ‘If Mary’s leant heavily enough on her notepad,’ he said as he shaded it in with a pencil, ‘whatever she’s written or drawn should be revealed! *Ta-da!*’

Robyn leant forward to look at the shapes and patterns appearing.

‘It worked but I’ve no idea what these drawings mean.’ Ned shrugged, disappointed.

‘I’ll get to the bottom of what Mary’s up to, OK?’ Robyn promised, taking the notepad back.

‘The gallery said they’ll get a message to Mrs Thomas to let her know Harri’s in hospital. And that the animal ambulance treated Kip. I wrote it all down for them to read to her. Anni be worried too.’

‘Do you think Mrs Thomas will be able to come and see Harri? Without Kip?’

‘I don’t think so. I need to get Kip back to Mrs Thomas as soon as possible. Harri shouldn’t be stuck in hospital too long, should he? It’s all my fault.’

‘He’ll be fine, it’s just a broken leg, could have been a lot worse. For both of you. Which reminds me, we need to get you looked at.’

‘After I’ve seen my mum,’ he bargained. ‘We can get my ribs checked out once I’ve seen Harri.’

‘Deal. It looked like they were taking good care of your friend. He’ll probably be in a nice comfy hospital bed with nurses fussing around him.’

‘We didn’t do a bad job in the end, did we?’ Ned pointed out, sitting higher in his seat to gaze at the back of the queen’s head. The feather in her hat was taller than anyone else’s.

‘Are you looking at the picture or her majesty?’ Robyn teased.

‘The picture, of course.’ He smiled, dragging his eyes away from the queen, whose presence had lent an air of glamour and excitement to the occasion. He was drinking in every detail to share with Anni and Mrs Thomas.



'Do you think she'll bring the princesses with her? Maybe next month?' Robyn asked hopefully.

'No idea.'

'To think no one had ever thought of bringing the picture into the concert room. You're full of ideas and surprises, Ned Letton. Maybe they'll carry on doing it, you know, for the rest of the war?' Robyn said excitedly.

There was beauty everywhere in the gallery, despite the sandbags stacked in front of taped-up and blacked-out windows, framed by fire and water buckets. The audience were flanked by blank walls with empty gilt frames, other than the one in front of them displaying the Picture of the Month. Ned looked down at Kip, who was cooling himself on the mosaic floor. He now understood why the artist had chosen to paint, of all the things in the world, the National Gallery itself. He looked up into the glass-domed roof and counted the panes, then stopped himself. He didn't need to count. He was here. They were here.

'What's the painter you picked called again? What's his name?' Robyn elbowed him.

'Her name is Lily Delissa Joseph. And the painting is *The National Gallery*,' Ned whispered as the orchestra began to tune up.

'It's very blue. And purple. Clever idea, really, to paint a picture of paintings.' Robyn nodded in approval.

Ned was admiring the frames Lily Delissa Joseph had painted. There were some gilt ones in there; Mr Howse would be pleased. He tuned in to the conversations of the people around him. Some opened paper bags and tucked into sandwiches, as it really

was lunchtime now. Others were discussing the painting over cups of tea. Every single chair was occupied, and several men stood leaning against the wall. Smartly dressed men in forces uniform walked onto the stage and began tuning up violins, then were followed by a woman who arranged herself and her sheet music at the polished piano, which had STEINWAY printed on the side in capital letters. A man stood next to her, ready to turn the pages of her music. She was wearing a sparkling dress with geometric squares all over it and her wavy chestnut-brown hair was held back off her face. She was smiling.

'That's Myra Hess,' someone behind him whispered and he turned around.

It was the knitting woman, sitting with the man from the van. They both nodded at him.

'Well done. Well done indeed. We didn't think you'd manage it,' the knitting woman said.

'What do you mean? How did you get here?' Ned was ready to stand up and well . . . not fight them, but shout at them at least.

'What's wrong, Ned?' Robyn asked as Kip stood up, hackles raised.

'It's them! The knitting Nora and the van man!'

'It's all right. We're on your side. Sit down, you're causing a dreadful scene,' the woman said curtly. The first aider must have cleaned the blood off her face, although there were bruises from the train accident at Bletchley station.

She continued, 'Don't worry. We're with K. He sent us to find you once he realised your mother had gone AWOL.' 'AWOL?' Robyn looked puzzled.

‘Absent without leave,’ the woman replied.  
‘And then K heard that you were missing, and guessed you must have stolen the picture.’

‘I didn’t steal it! I was bringing it to my mother,’ Ned interjected.

‘K had a right to-do with someone called Bob, at the quarry. Bob tried to protect you. Quite the row until it all came out. Anyway, I am sorry it turned out the way it did,’ the van man apologised.

‘What do you mean you’re with K?’ Robyn asked. ‘Who are you?’

‘I’m B and she’s . . .’ the van man began.

‘We’re part of his underground network and that’s all you need to know,’ the knitting Nora cut across him.

‘A knitting network? Trying to pull the wool over the enemy’s eyes, are you?’ Robyn laughed. ‘Next you’ll be telling me that your knitting needles are actually poisoned arrows!’

‘Well, not quite, but there’s certainly more to them than meets the eye.’ She pulled a knitting needle out of her sleeve, pressed the end and a small sharp blade shot out.

Robyn gasped as the woman quietly tucked the needle away.

‘There’s plenty more where that came from. After K found out about your mother, he sent us to find you. But we were told it was just one boy travelling alone. Didn’t even know if we’d got the right boy,’ she shared. ‘An ordinary-looking boy in shorts and a jumper wasn’t much to go on. And no one said anything about an enormous dog!’

‘Our network had people stationed across the country, on Opps. Between us, we knew we’d find you,’ the van man said.

‘That’s why you had the *Echo* in your van!’ Ned said, the pieces of the puzzle falling into place.

‘Yes. We all received copies via K. Never did find the culprit. Though of course I knew your mother wasn’t a Person of Interest.’

It was such a relief to hear someone say those words out loud.

‘K has officially closed the investigation, but I’d put good money on him still being on the lookout,’ said the van man.

Of course he was. Ned felt sure K wouldn’t rest until he’d found out who was behind the leak. And wouldn’t they all like to know who had caused them all such trouble!

‘Anyway, after the train crash, I thought I should step in.’ The knitting woman had the grace to look embarrassed. ‘Things had got out of hand. I thought it was unfair to put this on you. I guessed the artwork must have been hidden on the dog, which was a very risky move, although a bold one.’

‘What would you have done, then?’ Ned challenged.

‘I’ve carried documents in a corset before,’ she snapped back. ‘To be honest, I simply didn’t think you children were up to the job, and I didn’t have time to explain myself to you. Nor should I have to.’

‘But here we are!’ Ned said too loudly.

A woman darning socks shushed them.

‘That’s right. We did it!’ Robyn snapped.

‘You did. And we’re glad. Aren’t we?’ The van man nudged the knitting Nora.

‘Yes, yes,’ she agreed reluctantly.

'But the Guide Dog was confusing. Put us off,' the van man explained. 'We thought we'd got the wrong boy, see. Course, you can't trust anyone these days, but I was going to explain the situation to you once we got to my lockup. Hard enough to drive in the blackout as it is without having a difficult conversation. And I had to get off the road first. I'm convinced we were being followed.'

'That's why you drove like a maniac!' Robyn said.

'But then you ran away,' the van man finished. 'I'm sorry I gave you a fright.'

'We were worried the enemy would pick you up and then God knows what would have happened to the art!' the woman added coldly.

'And to you!' the man said more gently. 'We were worried about you too, of course.'

'What's on the back of that paper?' the knitting Nora asked, gesturing to the pad Mary had given them and holding her hand out. 'Just scribbles,' Robyn said dismissively. 'Ned did the shading thing with a pencil but it doesn't make any sense.'

'Can I have a look?' The van man asked. Robyn reluctantly handed it over. The knitting Nora and the van man studied it together, pointing at different markings and whispering before handing it back to Robyn.

'What is it?' Ned asked. 'What's the matter?' They both looked concerned.

'It's Japanese codes. Excellent work with the shading,' the van man said.

'What does it say?' Ned asked.

'No idea. There's only two people in the whole of Britain

who know Japanese and it's not easy to learn. Or so I hear, anyway,' the van man said cagily.

'Where did you get this?' the knitting Nora leant forward, unable to hide the fear on her face.

'Found it on the pavement,' Robyn lied quickly.

'Stop talking,' a man next to the knitting Nora said directly. 'I spent my whole lunchbreak queuing for this. It's the only time we're relatively safe from air raids. And I've paid my shilling. So, if you want to gas, go outside.'

The knitting Nora opened her mouth. She clearly had a lot more questions for Ned and Robyn but then Myra Hess and the orchestra started to play. Ned, happy to stop talking to K's network of knitting spies, willingly gave himself up to the orchestra and Lily Delissa Joseph's creation. But by the third piece of music, he was getting twitchy and so was Kip. The dog kept turning around in the tiny space before settling back down again, grudgingly.

'Stop fidgeting, Kip,' Ned whispered as a rumble came from outside.

He grabbed Robyn's hand and instinctively ducked, pulling her down onto the floor. He covered Kip and Robyn, as much as he could, with his body. The orchestra stopped playing. There were a few screams from audience members, followed by a deadly hush. Questions flew around the room like shrapnel. *Was it a bomb? Is this it? Where's the shelter? Is there a basement we can get to? This is it! They're invading!*

'Please. Calm, please.' Myra Hess stood centre stage, her dark hair still neatly in place.



Someone from the gallery ran onto the stage and whispered in her ear.

'A bomb has exploded outside, in the courtyard. There are no injuries. The gallery staff are dealing with it and clearing the debris. Happily, the disposal crew were having their lunch in the canteen. They will put their sandwiches aside for our safety.'

This was followed by a cheer and then applause from the audience. He saw the men lean in and reassure the queen, who applauded and turned and smiled at the audience. For a second, Ned thought he recognised one of the men sat next to her but before he could place him Myra Hess addressed the audience again.

'If you would like to leave, please do so. And for those who wish to stay . . . the band will play on! And perhaps we'll even have time for some Bach.'

The packed room stood and applauded, whistling and shouting encouragement. Ned looked around at the faces of these strangers, and even gave the knitting Nora and the van man a quick smile. Not one single person left the room or dashed off to find the nearest air-raid shelter. People were stamping their feet and so he joined in. As did Robyn. And Kip barked. Everyone wanted more music, more art and for the concert to continue – and he did too, he realised. He stared at the Picture of the Month, in awe of the artwork, then turned to watch Myra Hess fan her dress out before sitting back down at the piano. She raised her hands and started to play. And this time, Ned was more than ready to listen.

## Epilogue

'Hello, I'm Myra. I hear you were looking for me?' The pianist stood up from the piano and walked over to him.

'Yes, I'm Ned. I think my mum is staying with you.' He held out his hand. It was about time he started shaking hands.

'Oh! *You're Ned*. I'm afraid your mother wasn't making much sense when she arrived last night. She looked like she hadn't slept in days. I'm so glad you're here,' Myra said, clasping both of his hands in hers and shaking them enthusiastically.

Robyn had taken Kip outside to stretch his legs, giving Ned some privacy.

'Is she all right? What happened to her?' he asked, as Myra led him to the piano stool. 'I thought she was in Bletchley, with my father, but when I got there, she'd already left.' He didn't have to hold back now, as the gallery was empty, apart from the guards and cleaners.

'She collapsed on my doorstep. She'd been to the gallery and found someone who gave her my address. We'd met quite a few times over the past few months and got on very well. I'm glad she thought to come to me. I'd already agreed

'Yes, I found it at the back of the . . .' He wasn't sure what he was allowed to say.

'Wherever it was, I don't think I could have asked for a better painting to accompany my concert. Do you know, Ned, *and sidekick*, Delissa Joseph was one of the first Jewish suffragettes and ended up missing her debut showing because of it! *The Jewish Chronicle* reviewed her work and apologised for her absence because she was detained at Holloway prison.'

Robyn gasped.

'Her work was regularly shown at the Royal Academy, but she's never had a showing at the National Gallery, despite painting almost a dozen interiors of this very gallery. Few women have their work hung here. Until now, Ned!' Myra said in delight.

'You've made history.' Robyn looked at him in awe.

'And what a brave act it was too.'

'Oh, I'm not brave! And it wasn't just me! My friend Harri came with me, until he broke his leg after the train crash – after I check on Mum, I really need to get back to Bletchley and find out which hospital they took him to.'

'I'll come with you,' Robyn immediately offered.

'And the dog jacket thing was Anni's idea. And Sadie, Robyn's friend, she loaned us a Welbike, which we need to return. And lots of other people helped too, like Mr Howse who drove us to the station. And you too, Robyn.' He gestured to his best friend. 'You see, it wasn't just me, Miss Hess.'

'Well, what a team. They must all think the world of

you, to have put themselves in such danger,' she said in admiration.

He hadn't thought about it like that before.

'We did! *We do!*' Robyn cried, causing Kip to wag his tail.

'You know you've started something revolutionary, Ned, by pairing the picture with the music in the concert hall, instead of outside on the steps. I'll be speaking to C about it in the morning.'

'*You know C?*' Ned said in amazement.

'Yes. He was sat with the queen, she's a great patron of the gallery. Look, that's a photo of him there, with K.' Myra pointed at a framed portrait on the wall near the exit door.

Ned walked closer to it, Kip following. He peered at the portrait and felt the shock all over his body, like electricity running up and down his arms. It was the man with the shiny slicked-back hair, the one who had reassured the queen after the bomb went off.

'Robyn, come here,' he whispered.

'What? What is it? Who's this C you keep banging on about . . .' As her eyes took in the portrait Robyn too fell silent.

'Is everything all right?' Myra called.

'Yes, it's nothing,' Ned replied, trying to sound as normal as he could.

'It's him,' Robyn breathed out the words. 'I don't believe it but it's . . . the Heron.'

It didn't seem possible, but at the same time, nothing surprised him any more. The Heron, their arch nemesis from Bletchley Park, was also C. Ned had known he recognised

the man sitting in the front row, next to royalty no less. C and the Heron had been the same person all along. It kind of made sense. It all fit together, like a jigsaw puzzle.

‘Where’s a heron?’ Myra asked, confused.

‘Oh, nothing, no one,’ Ned said. How on earth would he begin to explain to Myra that her boss, C – *everyone’s boss* – had been their number one suspect when things had started to go wrong at Bletchley Park?

‘I always said that man was everywhere all at once!’ Robyn huffed. ‘Like a bad penny. I can’t believe *he* of all people got to sit next to the queen.’

‘I’d like to make your idea a tradition, and I’m sure your mother, once she’s better, will be on board too. Who knows, there might even be a job for you here, after the war,’ Myra offered.

‘After the war! *After the war!* That’s all we ever hear.’ Robyn jumped away from the portrait of C and K and bent down to rub Kip’s head, her tiredness suddenly catching up with her. ‘I’m so fed up,’ she said wearily.

‘But all things end. All things . . . I can’t keep calling you *sidekick*, what’s your name?’ Myra asked.

‘Robyn Audrey Lewis,’ she said automatically.

‘Well, Miss Robyn Audrey Lewis, as I said, all things end. We must weather them out. And this is why we need music and art and brave people, like you, Ned.’

‘And Kip!’ Ned added.

‘And Kip. If there’s something that brings you happiness or pleasure, whether it’s art, music, singing or your dog, hold onto it because it will give you hope. And hope will

get you through. And while we still have the power to make such choices, I choose to live and to see this war end, Robyn. Living is the most important thing of all, you know. And art makes all this living,’ she waved her hand around them, at the sandbags and the buckets of water, ‘bearable,’ Myra finished.

‘Maybe even beautiful?’ Ned offered.

‘Steady on, Ned!’ Robyn snorted.

‘That’s right, Ned! You know, you’re just like your mother.’

‘Can we please go and find her now?’ he asked, because there was living to be done. Whether it was in Wales or London, as long as he had his mother by his side, and art and music in their lives, it wouldn’t be perfect – *there is a war on after all* – but it would be *his* life to live.

indents

*The End*



## Historical Note

About eight years ago, during the school holidays, I visited Upton House in Warwickshire with my children and was fascinated to find out that it had been owned by Jewish philanthropist and art collector Walter Samuel, Lord Bearsted, who created one of the nation's finest private art collections of the twentieth century and was the chairman of the board of trustees at the National Gallery. During the war, not only did he rescue Jewish refugees, but he also had a secret role under the code name K; he never once revealed his mission. As war continued, Walter became concerned for the safety of his valuable art collection. He wrote a letter to Kenneth Clark (K in *Hide and Seek*), the then Director of the National Gallery, asking if his paintings could be stored alongside the national collection in a disused slate quarry. The location in Wales was top secret, and his paintings remained safe for the duration of the war in a chamber alongside paintings belonging to the King! I suddenly remembered a primary-school trip I'd been on to that very slate quarry and a story began to grow, although very slowly.

In the course of my research, I also discovered that Walter's wife Dorothy, Lady Bearsted, employed Kathleen 'Kitty' Lloyd-Jones, one of the first female professional garden designers, who came to Upton in the 1930s and changed the face of the gardens forever; eagle-eyed readers may have spotted Kitty working in the Bletchley Park gardens in *I, Spy*.

After writing *I, Spy*, I knew I wanted to continue Robyn, Ned and Mary's journeys through the war, as well as the story of what happened to the nation's art treasures, and what better place to set a novel than in a secret slate quarry in the wild wilderness of Wales with the world at war.

## Jewish Refugees

I discovered during my research that a substantial number of Jewish refugees and evacuees arrived in Wales during the war. Jewish children were fostered, and Wales was heavily involved in the Kindertransport effort. Many refugees and evacuees remained in Wales, as well as across the rest of Great Britain, contributing greatly to literature, political life, society, culture and in particular art.

## War Artists

In Germany, the Nazis recognised art, alongside books, as an influential force, ripe for manipulation. Artists regarded as non-traditional in style, different in politics or racially 'non-Aryan' were labelled 'degenerate' and forbidden from working. Their work was confiscated or destroyed, and some

were beaten, intimidated or imprisoned. More than 200 artists from Germany and the countries it annexed or invaded were murdered in the Holocaust. Between 1933 and the Second World War over 300 artists came from Europe to Britain. They were supported by the art community and most stayed for the rest of their lives, going on to influence some of the most important British artists of the mid-twentieth century. In *Hide and Seek*, I wanted to capture the spirit of a welcoming community in a time of war. Anni is fostered and cared for by Mrs Thomas, but she is also the victim of anti-Semitism, when there is a leak about the artwork hidden in Manod in the *Liverpool Echo*, an event which really happened.

## National Gallery

Winston Churchill, then Prime Minister of Great Britain, declared that 'not one picture shall leave this island' and suggested that the nation's treasures be hidden in caves and cellars if need be, and Kenneth Clark, director of the National Gallery, took this quite literally by organising a huge mobilisation of art. To begin, the artwork was sent across Wales to be stored in castles<sup>1</sup>, mansions, and grand stately homes, however, as the war progressed, Clark decided to gather the art in one place, Manod slate quarry.

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<sup>1</sup> It wasn't just art hidden in castles across Wales, children were too. As part of the Kindertransport operation, 200 Jewish children were housed in the ancient Gwrych Castle in north Wales, more recently the site of ITV's *I'm a Celebrity . . . Get Me Out of Here!*.

## Miriam Rothschild

Miriam Rothschild was a renowned Jewish British scientist, who published over 300 scientific papers throughout her lifetime. She was the first woman to serve on the Committee for Conservation of the National Trust and the first woman to become a trustee of the British Museum of Natural History. Miriam's family had held one of the finest art collections in the world, until they had to sell some of it to escape Nazi Germany. At the beginning of the war, Miriam was drafted into the Enigma decryption project at Bletchley Park where she spent two years decoding German wireless messages with Alan Turing. Miriam, a conservationist, actually worked for the Foreign Office throughout the war and it's with artistic licence that I have placed her in Manod.

The real Miriam aided refugee Jewish scientists during and after the war and also worked with several organisations dedicated to helping Jewish children escape from Germany and Austria, housing some of these refugees in her own home at Ashton Wold, Oundle, Northamptonshire, which was also used by the Red Cross as a convalescent hospital for military personnel.

### Picture of the Month Scheme

Following the evacuation of the artwork from the National Gallery, letters of complaint were printed in *The Times* newspaper, and Kenneth Clark realised that he needed to do something to appease culture-hungry Londoners,

so he devised the Picture of the Month scheme, whereby each month one piece of art was transported from Wales to London, to be put on show. The Picture of the Month scheme still runs today in the National Gallery.

## Lily Delissa Joseph

My daughter, ever supportive of my research process, helped me in my quest to pick the perfect Picture of the Month for *Hide and Seek* and came across a female portrait, landscape and interior artist whose work was shown everywhere but the National Gallery, despite the fact that she painted interior portraits of the National Gallery. This woman was Lily Delissa Joseph, née Solomon, a Jewish suffragette and artist, who failed to attend her own first art exhibition because she was detained at Holloway Gaol, on a charge in connection with the Women's Suffrage Movement. As soon as I saw her painting, which is just small enough to be hidden in Kip's Guide Dog jacket, I knew this was the Picture of the Month that Ned and Kip would carry from Manod to the National Gallery.

## Dame Myra Hess

Jewish concert pianist Dame Myra Hess initiated affordable lunchtime chamber-music concerts at the National Gallery as soon as war broke out and didn't stop until 1946. Her concerts were a great success and were even attended by Queen Elizabeth the Queen Mother, wife of King George



VI. If you look on YouTube, there's a video of Myra playing during one of these lunchtime concerts, with the Queen and Kenneth Clark looking on, and the camera picks out a little girl sitting on her mother's lap – that little girl was Erica Kurz.

After writing the first draft of *Hide and Seek*, by sheer serendipity I was lucky enough to be introduced to Erica Barrett née Kurz. (Thank you, Sharon and Caroline!) Erica's parents were persecuted as Jews and forced to flee Austria. They emigrated to England, where Erica's father, Otto Kurz, an eminent art historian, author, professor and librarian, assisted with the evacuation of art treasures from London and helped to catalogue the King's art collection at Windsor Castle, with Sir Owen Morshead. Erica's mother, Hilde, also an art historian, worked for Sir Kenneth Clark, which is how Erica found herself evacuated very close to Manod during the war! Erica's father never disclosed if he had signed the National Secrets Act.

Erica and I have since become friends and she has shared with me her memories of her extraordinary parents, as well as her time as an evacuee in North Wales during the war. *Hide and Seek* would have been much the poorer without Erica's carefully curated collection of her parents' letters, photographs and wonderfully moving stories about her family's life in Vienna, London and Wales. Thank you, Erica, for being so generous with your time and your unique experiences.

Thanks to **Guide Dogs** for helping me with historical information and photographs to ensure my representation

of Kip was accurate. Guide Dog's expert staff, volunteers and life-changing dogs help 2 million people affected by sight loss live actively, independently and well. Founded in 1934, following their first partnership in 1931, they are a charity that is almost entirely dependent on donations. Find out more at [guidedogs.org.uk](http://guidedogs.org.uk)

## Acknowledgements

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