

HIDE AND SEEK

A BLETCHLEY PARK
MYSTERY



RHIAN TRACEY

circling menacingly, their hunting spoilt 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.

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.