

The
VALLEY
of LOST
SECRETS

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For Mammy



CHAPTER ONE

A DIFFERENT TYPE OF COUNTRYSIDE

There isn't as much sky as I thought there'd be. And what I can see is clear and blue, not the never-ending rain clouds we were told we'd get in Wales.

The guard blows his whistle and the train hoots back. I watch it pull away and my heart squeezes a bit. I want to get back on. I don't know why; it's not as if it's going back to London.

We've been through three stations today – from Paddington to Cardiff Central to here. This one's tiny,

with only one platform. It's like our lives are shrinking. I straighten Ronnie's tag and we join the back of the line.

Dad said we'd be able to see for miles and miles in the countryside. He got us some library books with pictures of fields and hedgerows with little houses dotted around. But this isn't like that.

Massive, looming bulges of land – mountains, I suppose – have stolen most of the sky. I turn on the spot. They're all around, as though the village was dropped into the middle of a big fat cushion. Before now, the closest thing to a mountain I'd ever seen was a sand dune on Camber Sands. And it wasn't green. And it didn't have houses stuck on the side of it.

There's a tug at my sleeve. Ronnie's looking at me, eyes wide and teary. I lean down so he can whisper in my ear.

'This isn't like the pictures,' he says, sniffing.

'I know.'

'But Dad said—'

'He didn't know, did he? He didn't know we were coming here. He just knew it wasn't a city.' I look



around again. ‘There must be different types of countryside.’

‘Well, this is the wrong type.’ Ronnie sticks out his bottom lip.

This is all I need – a sulky little brother. No one will pick us if he looks a proper misery guts.

‘Be quiet and try to look like a nice boy,’ I say, making sure the string of his gas mask box sits properly on his shoulder. ‘Nice and smart.’

I look over his head to the far end of the platform. The smoke’s thinning, but it still stings my eyes and catches in my throat. I can see the face of the station clock now; it’s almost teatime. The sign is clear too:

LLANBRYN

Funny word. Too many Ls.

Here we are, a wriggling, squiggling line of school-children. Duff’s at the front with his little sister. She’s even younger than Ronnie; too young to understand any of this. I can’t see many faces; most are looking at our teacher, Miss Goodhew. Some of us seem excited,



some curious, but I bet everyone's nervous. Even the ones pretending not to be. Maybe even Duff.

Ronnie's crying again. It's OK for little brothers to cry but big brothers have to be the brave ones. Not that I would cry, anyway. I'm twelve. He watches sadly as a guard puts our suitcases in a pile near the gate at the end of the platform.

'I want my Dinky van,' he splutters.

'You can't have it. It's packed. You know what Nan said.'

'But—'

'Ronnie, it's safe,' I say. 'Remember how well you wrapped it in your pyjamas? You did a really good job there.'

He nods and blinks back more tears. I know he's trying to be brave too.

Next to the guard, Miss Goodhew is talking to a man and a woman. The man is tall and has a thick overcoat buttoned over his large stomach, and he's got the biggest moustache I've ever seen. The woman's all done up like she's in her Sunday best. She's walking down the line now, giving out custard creams as she



counts us. When she gives one to Lillian Baker, Lillian thanks her for having us in their village. Duff's close enough to pull her plaits but he doesn't. He's not usually worried about getting into trouble; perhaps he *is* nervous. I bet Lillian Baker will get picked first. She's got long dark hair and her socks never fall down and all the grown-ups say she's pretty.

When the woman hands a biscuit to Ronnie, she stops and wipes away his tears with her hanky. She's got a metal badge pinned to her coat that says *WVS Housewives Service Identification*.

'What's your name?' she asks. Ronnie gulps and says nothing.

Now that she's close, I can smell lavender and peppermints. She lifts Ronnie's tag and says, 'Ronald, now that's one of my favourite names, that is.'

'We call him Ronnie,' I say, a bit harder than I mean to.

But she keeps on smiling, eyeing my tag. 'And you're a Travers too. Ronnie's brother, is it? So are you a James or a Jimmy?'

'Jimmy.'



‘All right then,’ she says. She gives me a custard cream and moves back up the line.

‘She smells like Nan,’ Ronnie whispers. His lip’s wobbling again, so I take his hand and give it a squeeze, just like Dad would do.

‘Eat your biscuit,’ I say.

Miss Goodhew claps her hands and calls out to us. We all go quiet.

‘These nice people are Mr and Mrs Bevan,’ she shouts down the platform, using her fake-posh voice. ‘They are here to take us up to the institute.’

I wonder what an institute is. It sounds grim.

‘Welcome to Llanbryn!’ Mr Bevan booms. I’m not surprised he booms. He looks like a boomer.

I glance at the sign again. It doesn’t look like it says what *he* just said. Ronnie’s copying him, screwing up his face, trying to make his mouth fit around the letters.

‘Lll ... clll ... claaa ...’

‘Stop it,’ I whisper. ‘No one will pick us if they think you’re simple.’

‘Don’t worry about your cases,’ Mr Bevan says. ‘We’ve got men taking them up for you.’



Ronnie tightens his grip on my hand and I know he's thinking about his Dinky van again. Those men – whoever they are – had better be careful with his case. If he loses that van, he won't stop crying till the end of the war.

We set off, our gas mask boxes bumping against us. Mrs Bevan and Miss Goodhew chat at the head of the line. Mr Bevan waits as we cross the road outside the station, then joins Ronnie and me at the back.

'Are you ready for your adventure, boys?' he asks, grinning.

What's he talking about? Adventures happen in jungles or on raging rivers or in the Wild West. Not here. Not in Wales with a whimpering little brother and a custard cream.

Ronnie's stopped crying, so that's something. He's twisted the top off his biscuit and is licking the creamy bit.

'Are we going up there?' he asks, his eyes darting nervously from Mr Bevan to the mountainside houses.

Mr Bevan nods. 'We are.'

'It's a long way up,' Ronnie says.



Mr Bevan turns to the houses and tilts his head from side to side. A big grin breaks out on his face, stretching his moustache and making him look like a happy walrus.

‘Not for a big strong boy like you!’

Ronnie beams.

‘Come on then!’ Mr Bevan ruffles Ronnie’s hair. I smooth it down again. No one will pick us if he looks a proper mess. I might not want to be here, but I don’t fancy us being the last ones chosen, either – the dregs in the bottom of a bottle.

We start to climb a wide track. Bushes and trees grow on either side. Ronnie asks if it’s a forest. I catch Mr Bevan’s eye and see his moustache twitch over his smile.

‘Stop asking stupid questions,’ I hiss in Ronnie’s ear.

Then, up ahead, Duff’s little sister drops her custard cream. She stops dead and just stays there until her face turns a greyish shade of blue. I’ve seen her do this lots of times before, when we’ve been out playing, but Mr Bevan looks horrified.



‘What’s she doing?’ he asks.

‘Holding her breath,’ I answer. ‘She can only do it for so long, then she really starts.’

‘Starts what?’

‘Wait for it.’

I don’t know if it’s got anything to do with the mountains curving all round us, but her wails are even louder here, not far off an air-raid siren. The two women rush over to her and Mrs Bevan opens her handbag. She feels around inside, pulls out a chocolate bar and snaps off a piece.

‘Dairy Milk,’ Ronnie groans. ‘I should’ve dropped *my* biscuit.’

As we move off, Florence Campbell picks up the custard cream and stuffs it in her pocket. I pretend not to see. I don’t think Florence can believe her luck – two biscuits in one day. I bet she’s never had two biscuits in her whole life.

We keep climbing until we reach another road. We follow it round the corner until an enormous brown-brick building comes into view. It’s three storeys high, bulky and strong-looking.



'I'll just catch up with Miss Goodhew and my wife at the front,' Mr Bevan says. 'You two wait by here.'

'Jimmy calls her Miss Badhew,' Ronnie says, 'because she isn't nice, so she can't be a *good* hew, can she?'

'Ronnie!' I mutter.

But Mr Bevan is laughing. 'Don't worry, Jimmy. We had nicknames for teachers when I was a boy too.'

He walks away and I can't believe I haven't been told off.

'Here we are,' he says, standing in the arched doorway. He looks really proud, like he's showing us Buckingham Palace. 'The Llanbryn Miners Institute.'

I look from Mr Bevan to the institute. They match, the way some people do with their dogs. There's something about him that says he belongs here, like he's a part of this place. But that just makes me feel even more like an outsider.

'Everyone's in the main hall. They can't wait to see you.'

The room is massive, much bigger than our school hall. It's all dark timber, polished up till it shines.

There are steps and a raised platform at the far end, a bit like a stage. The room's bursting with people all staring and muttering; surely they can't all want an evacuee? Some must be here to gawp. They sit in rows in front of the platform and, as we walk past them to the raised bit, I can feel the place swallowing us up – my little brother, all the others and me.





CHAPTER TWO


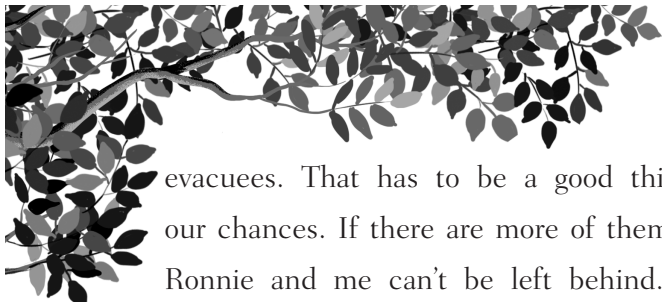
SCARED CITY RABBITS

Mrs Bevan steers all of us evacuees on to the stage, helping the littlest ones up the small steps. Ronnie's sticky hand slips into mine.

'Jimmy,' he whispers, 'what if no one picks us?'

I look down at him, at his little cowlick fringe and big doe eyes. 'Don't be silly. Who wouldn't want us?' I don't tell him I'm terrified that no one will.

It's so noisy. People are talking, shifting in their seats, coughing. There are a lot more villagers than



evacuees. That has to be a good thing, increase our chances. If there are more of them than of us, Ronnie and me can't be left behind. Some men bring in our cases and Mrs Bevan shows where to put them on the floor in front of us. Mr Bevan steps on to the stage and the hall goes quiet. Ronnie's gripping my hand so tight it's starting to hurt but I don't care. All that matters is that someone wants us.

Mr Bevan clears his throat and says in his booming voice, 'As president of the Miners Institute and representative of the people of Llanbryn, I'd like to welcome our London visitors.'

He turns and waves an arm towards us as if we're being revealed in a magic trick. Twenty-six scared city rabbits waiting to be pulled out of a hat.

'Now, we'll do our best to get this done as quickly as possible,' Mr Bevan says, unfolding a sheet of paper. 'Miss Goodhew and the children have had a very long and tiring journey.'

I watch his eyes travel down the page. Ronnie's trembling. I drag my hand out of his and put my arm

around his shoulder, pulling him close to me. He takes a big, shuddering breath and lets it out into my side. I feel the warmth of it through my jacket.

‘I have the Joneses ...’ Mr Bevan says. Quite a few people stand up and Mr Bevan laughs but I don’t get why it’s funny. He carries on, ‘I mean Ralph and Megan ... those Joneses.’

I wonder how many Joneses are in this place. All the people, except a young-looking couple on the front row, sit down again.

‘Down for one girl, I see,’ Mr Bevan says.

The woman nods and points at Lillian Baker, who almost does a curtsy before moving along the stage and down the steps.

Lillian Baker first. I knew it.

Someone shuffles behind me; I look around to see Florence Campbell trying to smooth down her hair. It won’t make any difference; there are so many nits it’s practically moving on its own. She sees me looking and pokes out her tongue. I edge forward so no nits can jump on me. Ronnie caught them once and Nan had to rub his head with Lethane oil; he wailed for



hours and coughed for weeks. No wonder the nits cleared off.

Duff and his sister go next with a woman whose nose is so far in the air I'm surprised she can see where she's going. A woman in a huge purple hat says in a loud voice that they are lucky little children. Duff glances back and gives me the thumbs up. I try to smile but it gets stuck halfway and I'm sure I must look properly daft.

Ronnie's face is still buried in my jacket. I haven't seen him like this since Mum went.

'Come on,' I whisper, 'it's like Mr Bevan said, this is an adventure, yeah?'

He sniffs and peers around the hall. Mrs Bevan smiles at him and mouths, 'Chin up.' Ronnie sticks his chin into the air and I almost laugh.

The hall's emptying quite quickly now – some evacuees go happily, some cry. A tall man with a smiley face takes the four Turners together. He and his wife hold their hands as they leave, two children each. Mr Bevan called him Dr Jenkins so I suppose he must have a big house.



About half of us have gone when a round, flushed woman wearing a flowered apron hurries in. She rolls her eyes and shakes her head like she's laughing at herself.

'Sorry, sorry!' she says, coming to the front of the hall. 'Can I go next, please, Ceri? I've had to shut the shop, see.'

My heart beats faster; she's got a shop. Even if rationing starts, I reckon an evacuee would do all right with a shopkeeper. Especially if it's a *sweet* shop.

'Come on then, Phyllis,' says Mr Bevan, checking his list. 'No preference for a boy or a girl, as long as it's just the one. Is that correct?'

Just the one. Angry tears prick at my eyes.

The woman gives us all the quick once-over and her gaze settles somewhere behind Ronnie and me.

'That girl,' she says gently.

'The one scratching her head?' Mr Bevan asks.

Florence! Florence Campbell is being picked before us! Picked before some of the other girls,

girls with clean faces and cardies with all the buttons on!

Florence steps off the stage. As she passes, I hear her breath quick and hard. I get a whiff of her smell; like when our old dog used to come in from the rain and dry off by the fire. The woman puts her arm around Florence. I can't believe it – no one ever touches a Campbell – you get Campbell Germs that never wash off. That's what Duff says.

Phyllis the shop woman and Florence leave the hall too.

Mr Bevan calls the next name on the list. Mrs Thomas. A fair-haired woman gets up from one of the middle rows, her eyes on Ronnie. Some people whisper and make huffing noises. Mr Bevan glares at them and she nods to him as if to say thank you, then smiles at Ronnie. He giggles.

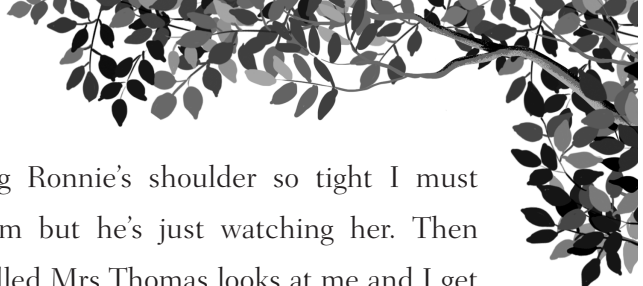
This is it; we won't be last.

'One boy, I believe,' Mr Bevan says.

One.


I think I might really be sick, properly sick, all over my shoes sick. I just want to go home.





I'm gripping Ronnie's shoulder so tight I must be hurting him but he's just watching her. Then the woman called Mrs Thomas looks at me and I get the same smile.

'I've changed my mind, Ceri,' she says. 'We can make room for two.'





CHAPTER THREE

21 HEOL MABON

We get off the stage and Mrs Thomas holds out her hand to Ronnie. He reaches for it but I pull him closer. She looks at me and nods her head once and I notice that her eyes are really, really blue.

‘I’ll just take the suitcases then, shall I?’ she says. Her voice is soft and goes up and down.

I say nothing. A few people nudge each other. The woman in the purple hat frowns and shakes her head. Maybe they think Mrs Thomas can’t make room for two?

‘Follow me, boys,’ she says. ‘You can carry your gas masks.’

We follow. Outside, I look up at those mountains again – they make me feel smaller than Ronnie.

‘Well, you already know I’m Mrs Thomas but you must call me Gwen. Aunty Gwen if you like.’ She swaps the cases around in her hands. I don’t offer to take one – and I’m not calling her ‘Aunty’ either. ‘Turn right here, boys, up the hill.’

Another flipping hill.

‘And what are your names then?’ she asks.

‘Ronnie,’ Ronnie says. ‘And my big brother is Jimmy.’

She smiles and looks right at me, like she’s taking me in. I put my head down and keep walking, the backs of my knees tightening with every step. It’s no bother for Mrs Thomas though; she’s hardly out of breath, even with the cases. Rows of terraced houses lead off the hill on both sides. Each street looks the same and each house has a front step that meets the pavement.

‘It isn’t just me, mind, there’s my husband as well,’



she says. 'Alun. But you won't see him today; he's over in Aberbeeg building a shelter for my cousin Jean. He's a collier so you'll have to be quiet when he's on nights. He sleeps in the day then. And if you can't manage that then you can go out to play. But don't go far. And always tell me where you'll be.'

Play where? All I can see are houses and fields stuck on the side of a mountain.

'What's a collier?' Ronnie asks.

'Oh, of course!' Even her laugh has a Welsh accent. 'You boys wouldn't know, would you? A collier is another name for a miner. Most of the families round here are mining families.'

After three more streets with names I can't pronounce, we turn right again. The sign says Heol Mabon; I think I might be able to manage that. Almost every door is open as women, old people and children watch us move along the pavement. Some are smiling, but others, like the woman in the purple hat at the institute, frown. Mrs Thomas says hello to them all. Some try to talk to her but she says she has to get us home; we've had a long journey.



‘Home’ isn’t the word I’d use.

We stop outside a dark blue front door. ‘This is us,’ Mrs Thomas says. ‘Number twenty-one.’ Someone opens an upstairs window of the house next door. A tiny, thousand-year-old woman with grey hair up in a bun waves a duster at us. Her eyes and nose are really small but her mouth is wide in her wrinkly face. She looks like a tortoise.

‘Got two, have you, Gwen?’ she calls. ‘Thought you were only going for one. How will you manage?’

I already feel like a parcel, wrapped up, labelled and sent far away. The tortoise is making it worse. Mrs Thomas whispers to us, ‘Take no notice of Mrs Maddock, we’ve got room.’

To the old woman she says, in a much tighter voice, ‘We’ll manage fine, Menna.’

I’m sure Mrs Thomas adds ‘*nosy old bat*’ under her breath as she goes inside, which makes me want to like her but I don’t know if I should. Ronnie follows but I hang back. The passage is dark but not gloomy; there’s a closed door to the right – probably the parlour – and stairs ahead. Mrs Thomas and Ronnie

go through another door further down.

I walk after them, through a living room into the kitchen that smells of Lux soap. It's got a stove at one end with washing hanging over it, just like Nan's washday back home. I swallow down the lump in my throat. From the window above the sink, I can see a small yard that looks like it leads round to the back garden. Mrs Thomas points to a table and chairs and tells us to sit down. Without even asking if we're hungry, she starts cutting bread, then gives us each a slice with margarine on. 'That'll do you till supper. I'm going to take your things upstairs; you stay here and eat up. Oh! Before I do ...' She opens a drawer, pulls out a pair of scissors and snips off our name tags. 'Now that's better. Shows you belong here, see.'

I don't know where we belong any more but it's not here.

'Have you got any boys or girls?' Ronnie asks, watching Mrs Thomas over the top of his slice. 'Or are they big now?'

She pauses and her smile doesn't look completely real.



‘Don’t you ever listen?’ I say. ‘She said it was just her and Mr Thomas, cloth ears!’

‘It’s all right, Jimmy.’ She turns to him. ‘No we don’t, Ronnie – but it means we have room for you. That’s nice, isn’t it?’

She leaves. Ronnie watches her go.

‘I like Auntie Gwen,’ he says. ‘When she talks it sounds like she’s singing.’ He smiles and licks some margarine off his bread.

‘Stop licking your food,’ I say. ‘You’re not a blooming kitten – and don’t call her Auntie.’

‘Can if I like, she said so.’

‘Well, I’m saying not to. I’m your family, not her.’

He looks right at me, his big green eyes searching mine. Just like she did. Then he miaows and licks his bread again and I laugh.

After ten minutes, Mrs Thomas calls us up to the bedroom. It’s small and narrow with a window to the left. She’s standing in front of a chest of drawers. Our empty cases lie open on top of a candlewick bedspread.

One bed.



'Your things are here,' she says, opening and closing the drawers one at a time to show us.

'I could've done that,' I say quickly.

'You could have carried your case too, but you didn't.'

It feels like she's scolding me but I'm not sure because she's smiling. Ronnie steps closer to the bed and looks in the cases, then his eyes dart around the room. He goes over to the drawers and pulls them open. I can see the panic building in him and I know what he's looking for. The trouble is, I can't see it either.

'What is it? What's the matter?' Mrs Thomas is staring at him.

'He's looking for his Dinky van,' I say. 'It's yellow.'

'Oh my goodness, it's here!' She pulls the little metal toy out of her skirt pocket. 'I'm so sorry, Ronnie. It fell out of your pyjamas and I picked it up and slipped it in here.'

He takes it off her and clutches it tight to him.

'He loves it,' I explain. 'And he had to pack it with his clothes in case he lost it on the journey.'



‘Nan made me,’ he mutters grumpily.

‘He isn’t usually allowed to take it out of the house any more,’ I say. ‘Not since he lost it in the sand on holiday, but Nan said he could bring it here because he can’t sleep without it.’

Other little boys sleep with teddies or bunnies, but not my brother.

‘She said we might be here for lots of weeks,’ Ronnie says.

‘But we won’t,’ I say.

Mrs Thomas looks at me like she’s a bit sorry for me, like I don’t know anything about the war because I’m twelve. But she smiles at Ronnie. ‘Then we’ll take extra-special care of it here, won’t we?’

He nods.

She points at the single bed. ‘It’ll be a bit of a squeeze. There’s just this at the moment but you can bunk up, can’t you? The bedspread’s lovely and soft and we’ll get another mattress as soon as we can.’

‘We don’t mind, do we, Jimmy?’ Ronnie says, sitting on the bed. ‘As long as we’re together. That was my brother’s worst worry, that we’d be split up.’

I don't know why he had to tell her that. It's none of her business.

Mrs Thomas puts the cases on top of the wardrobe. 'You boys get settled, then come down when you're ready.' She closes the door behind her.

'I wonder what she sounds like when she really sings,' Ronnie says. 'Nan said Wales people sing all the time.'

'Welsh people.'

'What?'

'They're *Welsh*, not Wales. Wales is the country.'

'Oh.'

From the window, I can see the back garden. It's long, bigger than ours, and slopes up to a hedge that meets another garden. It looks a bit like the allotment Grandad used to have with its rows of vegetables and sticks that make a wigwam for runner beans. But Grandad's allotment was flat. Nothing in Llanbryn is flat. Next to their air-raid shelter is a pen with a little wooden hut in it. Up above the rows of rooftops are the mountains. They overlap each other, making it impossible to see what's behind



them. I suppose it's more mountains. Like there's no way out.

So this is it. The countryside. Evacuation. No more getting covered in oil in the garage with Dad. No more Nan telling us off for it. Just other people's biscuits and houses and a single bed. None of it's ours.

I turn to Ronnie. He's running his fingers over the candlewick bedspread, tracing patterns in and out of the flowers and leaves. I know he's itching to tug out the fluffy bits; Nan's always telling him off for it.

I look around properly. We share at home but our bedroom's much bigger, big enough to play a really good game of cowboys. Dad let us have it after Mum left – said he preferred to be cosy – but I think he just didn't like it in there without her.

Ronnie pulls at the bedspread.

'No!' I yell.

He jumps and I feel bad. I sit next to him and put my arm around his shoulders.

'I'm sorry for shouting,' I say, 'but you can't do that, especially not here. Remember what Nan said?'



‘To behave like we do at home.’

‘Better. She said we have to behave *better* so we don’t show her up. You don’t want to show her up, do you?’

He shakes his head.

I fluff up the candlewick so the gaps don’t show. Mrs Thomas was right; it is soft. ‘This isn’t our home, Ronnie, this isn’t your bed.’

This isn’t our home. Saying it out loud makes it even worse. I dig my fist into the pillow. Ronnie kneels up on the bed, both of his arms stretched around me.

‘We’ll be all right, Jimmy,’ he says. ‘You can have the bed if you like. I’ll sleep on the floor. I don’t mind.’

I have to smile. He thinks I’m upset about the bed. He doesn’t get it. He never really gets it; Mum leaving, evacuation, the war. It must be nice to be six and daft.

