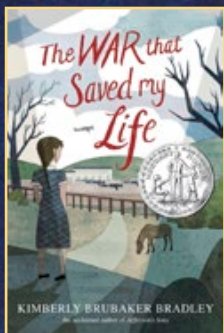


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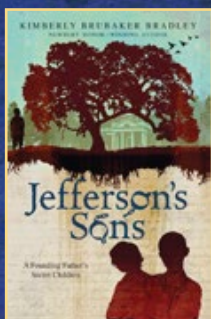
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Chapter 1

You can know things all you like, but that doesn't mean you believe them.

"Ada! You need to drink something!" Susan's voice, scolding. Susan's hands, pushing a cup of cold tea into mine.

"I don't want to," I said. "Really I don't."

Susan curled my fingers around the teacup. "I understand," she said, "but please try. It's the last thing they're going to let you have. You'll be thirsty in the morning."

My right foot was twisted sideways at the ankle. It had been all my life. My ankle bones grew curled, so my toenails scraped the ground and what should have been the bottom of my foot faced the sky. Walking hurt like anything. Despite the calluses, the skin on my foot tore and bled.

This night in the hospital—nearly three years ago now—was September 16, 1940. A Monday. It was

a little over a year into the war between Hitler and most of the rest of the world. Eleven years into the war between the rest of the world and me.

The very next day surgeons were going to chop my curled ankle bones up and rearrange them. Maybe into something like a functional foot.

I put the teacup Susan gave me to my lips. I forced myself to sip. My throat closed. I choked. Tea splattered across the bedcovers and my tray.

Susan sighed. She mopped up the spilled tea, then motioned for one of the nurses that was putting up the blackout to come take away my tray.

Since the start of the war, we covered our windows with blackout screens every night, so that German bombers wouldn't be able to aim at our lights. My hospital wasn't in London, which was getting bombed every night right now, but that didn't mean it wouldn't be hit. You never could tell what Germans would do.

"Letter for you, Mum," the nurse said, handing Susan an envelope as she scooped up the tray.

"Delivered to the hospital? How odd." Susan opened it. "It's from Lady Thorton." She unfolded the letter inside. "She must have sent it before she got my note with the boardinghouse's address. Ada, are you quite sure you don't want something to eat? Toast?"

I shook my head. The mouthful of tea I'd swallowed swirled in my stomach. "I think I'm going to be sick."

Susan gasped. She looked up at me, snatched a basin from the bottom shelf of my bedside table, and thrust it beneath my chin. I clenched my teeth and held everything in.

Susan's hand shook. The basin shook too. I looked at her face. She'd gone pale, her eyes dark and wide.

"What's wrong?" I asked. "What does that letter say?"

"Nothing," she said. "Breathe deep. That's it." She put the basin down, folded Lady Thorton's letter, and tucked it into her handbag.

Something was wrong. I could see it on her face. "Is it Butter?" I asked.

"What?"

"Has something happened to Butter?" Butter was Susan's pony. I loved him. He was staying in Lady Thorton's stables while I was in hospital.

"Oh," Susan said. "No. That is, Lady Thorton didn't mention Butter, but she would have if anything were wrong."

"Maggie?" Maggie was Lady Thorton's daughter, my best friend.

"Maggie's fine," Susan said. Her hands still shook

very slightly. Her eyes didn't look right. "Everyone's fine in the village."

"And Jamie's fine," I said. It was a statement, not a question, because it had to be true. My brother Jamie wasn't in the village—he was here with us. Susan and Jamie and Bovril, Jamie's cat, were staying in a rented room in a boardinghouse near the hospital. Jamie was there with the landlady now.

Jamie was six years old. We'd guessed he was seven, but we had his birth certificate now and he wasn't, not quite.

I was eleven. I had my birth certificate too. I'd known my real birthday for just over a week.

Susan nodded. "Jamie's fine."

I took a deep breath. "Is something stopping my surgery?" Before last week, when Mam tried to snatch us away from her, Susan had said she couldn't give permission for me to have surgery. She still couldn't give permission, but she didn't care anymore. She said that what was right and what was permitted were sometimes different things. I needed surgery and I was going to have it.

I didn't ask questions.

Susan smoothed my hair back from my forehead. I pulled away. "I won't let anything stop your surgery," she said.

There was still something off about her voice and expression. I knew it had to do with Lady Thorton's letter. Lady Thorton could upset just about anyone. When I'd first met her, before I knew her name, I called her the iron-faced woman. She was sharp like an ax.

Lady Thorton couldn't meddle with us here. We'd lost everything inside Susan's house, but I still had Jamie, Susan, Bovril, and Butter. And surgery tomorrow. It was more than enough.

You can know things all you like, but that doesn't mean you believe them.

A little over a year ago, I'd taught myself to walk in Mam's one-room London flat. I kept it secret, wiping up the blood before Mam came home every day. I'd only wanted to be able to leave the flat, not the city, but learning to walk saved me. When Mam sent Jamie away from London with all the other kids, because of Hitler's bombs, I snuck out too. We ended up with Susan and Butter in a seaside village, in Kent.

Susan didn't want us then. We didn't want her either, but I wanted her pony, and Jamie and I both liked her food and eventually we all three wanted to stay with each other. Of course that was when Mam showed up to take us back. Only a week ago, that

was. Susan decided to fight for us. She followed us to London, which meant we were all away from Susan's house the night German bombers destroyed it entirely. So the worst thing—Mam's return—became the best thing—not dying from the bombs.

Now everyone was acting like my surgery tomorrow would be the best thing ever, which made me worry it might turn out bad. Susan said it couldn't be bad. She said she hoped my foot would work properly after the surgery, but if it didn't I would be fine. I was fine now and I would be fine afterward, no matter what.

Maybe.

Depended entirely on what you meant by *fine*.

We were still in a war. The nurses claimed they'd be able to get all the patients into the basement quickly enough if the air raid sirens went off. They hadn't had to do it yet, so who knew if they really could.

Susan leaned forward. She hugged me. It was awkward for us both. I let out my breath. My stomach still churned. "Don't worry," Susan said. "I'll see you in the morning. Go to sleep."

I couldn't sleep but the night passed anyhow. In the morning Susan held my hand while a nurse wheeled

my bed down the hall. We stopped outside a heavy white door. The nurse said to Susan, "This is as far as you can go."

I hadn't realized Susan would have to leave me. I clung to her. "What if it doesn't work?"

For a moment her fingers tightened around mine. "Courage," she said, and let go.

In the operating theater a man in a long gown held a mask in front of my face. "When I put this over your mouth," he said, "I want you to very slowly count to ten."

I only made it to four before I fell asleep.

Coming out of the ether was harder. My right leg was pinned, trapped. I couldn't move. I broke into a sweat struggling to pull myself free. I'd been caught in a bombing, buried in rubble. I couldn't move my leg. Then somehow I was trapped again in the dank cabinet beneath the sink, in our old flat in London. Mam had locked me inside. The cockroaches—

"Shh." Susan's voice, soft in my ear. "Settle down. It's over. You're fine."

I was not fine. Not in the cabinet, not with Mam—
Someone pinned my arms. Threw a blanket over

me, tucked it tightly around my sides. “Open your eyes,” Susan’s voice said, still gentle. “The surgery’s over.”

I opened my eyes. Susan’s face swam blurrily in front of me. “You’re safe,” she said.

I swallowed hard. I said, “You’re lying.”

“I’m not.”

“I can’t move my leg. My right leg. My clubfoot leg—”

“You haven’t got a clubfoot,” Susan said. “Not anymore.”

I woke properly in the middle of the night. Screens surrounded my bed. A dim light shone behind them. “Susan?” I whispered.

One of the night nurses came to my bedside. “Thirsty?” she asked. I nodded. She poured me water and I drank. “How badly does it hurt?”

I couldn’t move my right leg because the doctors had put a cast on it after the surgery. I remembered that now. Beneath the plaster, a strong dull ache centered around my right ankle and pulsed toward my knee. “I don’t know,” I said. “It always hurts.”

“More than you can bear?”

I shook my head. I could bear almost anything.

The nurse smiled. “That’s right,” she said. “Your

mother said you were a tough one.” She handed me a pill. “Swallow this.”

I said, “Susan’s not my mother.” Thank God for that. I swallowed the pill and fell back asleep.

When I opened my eyes again Jamie’s face was inches from mine. His hair looked like it hadn’t been brushed in weeks. His eyes were red and swollen. He was crying. I pushed myself up in a panic. “What’s wrong?”

Jamie launched himself onto the bed. He banged into my cast. I winced.

“Easy,” Susan said, pulling him back.

Jamie burrowed against me.

I put my arms around him and looked over his head to Susan. “Tell me what’s wrong,” I said.

“It was in Lady Thorton’s letter,” Susan answered.

I nodded. I knew that.

Jamie said, “Our mam’s dead.”

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