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The **WAR** that
Saved my
Life

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Kimberly Brubaker Bradley has written several historical novels for children and young adults, and has done many riskier things with horses than Ada ever tried. She competes in the Olympic sport of eventing—but at a decidedly non-Olympic level. She lives on a farm in Tennessee with her husband and two young children. *The War I Finally Won*, the sequel to *The War That Saved My Life*, was published in 2017. Her most recent book is *Fighting Words*.

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***For Kathleen Magliochetti, who first
introduced me to England***

Chapter 1

'Ada! Get back from that window!' Mam's voice, shouting. Mam's arm, grabbing mine, yanking me so I toppled off my chair and fell hard to the floor.

'I was only saying hello to Stephen White.' I knew better than to talk back, but sometimes my mouth was faster than my brain. I'd become a fighter that summer.

Mam smacked me. Hard. My head snapped back against the chair leg and for a moment I saw stars. 'Don't you be talkin' to nobody!' Mam said. 'I let you look out that window out a' the kindness of my heart, but I'll board it over if you go stickin' your nose out, much less talkin' to anyone!'

'Jamie's out there,' I mumbled.

'And why shouldn't he be?' Mam said. 'He ain't a cripple. Not like you.'

I clamped my lips over what I might have said next, and shook my head to clear it. Then I saw the

smear of blood on the floor. Oh, goodness. I hadn't cleaned it all up from this afternoon. If Mam saw it, she'd put two and two together, fast. Then I'd be in the soup for sure. I slid over until my bottom covered the bloodstain, and I curled my bad foot beneath me.

'You'd better be making my tea,' Mam said. She sat on the edge of the bed and peeled off her stockings, wiggling her two good feet near my face. 'I'm off to work in a bit.'

'Yes, Mam.' I pushed my window chair sideways to hide the blood. I crawled across the floor, keeping my scabbed-over bad foot out of Mam's line of sight. I pulled myself onto our second chair, lit the gas ring, and put the kettle on.

'Cut me some bread and dripping,' Mam said. 'Get some for your brother too.' She laughed. 'And, if there's any left, you can throw it out the window. See if Stephen White would like your dinner. How'd you like that?'

I didn't say anything. I cut two thick slices off the bread and shoved the rest behind the sink. Jamie wouldn't come home until after Mam left anyhow, and he'd always share whatever food there was with me.

When the tea was ready Mam came to get her mug. 'I see that look in your eyes, my girl,' she said. 'Don't

start thinking you can cross me. You're lucky I put up with you as it is. You've no idea how much worse things can be.'

I had poured myself a mug of tea too. I took a deep swallow, and felt the hot liquid scald a trail clear down to my gut. Mam wasn't joking. But then, neither was I.

There are all kinds of wars.

This story I'm telling starts out four years ago, at the beginning of the summer of 1939. England stood on the edge of another Great War then, the war we're in the middle of now. Most people were afraid. I was ten years old (though I didn't know my age at the time), and while I'd heard of Hitler—little bits and pieces and swear words that floated from the lane to my third-floor window—I wasn't the least concerned about him or any other war fought between nations. You'd think from what I've already told you that I was at war with my mother, but my first war, the one I waged that June, was between my brother and me.

Jamie had a mop of dirt-brown hair, the eyes of an angel, and the soul of an imp. Mam said he was six years old, and would have to start school in autumn. Unlike me, he had strong legs, and two sound feet on the ends of them. He used them to run away from me.

I dreaded being alone.

Our flat was one room on the third floor above the pub where Mam worked nights. In the mornings Mam slept late, and it was my job to get Jamie something to eat and keep him quiet until she was ready to wake up. Then Mam usually went out, to shop or talk to women in the lane; sometimes she took Jamie with her, but mostly not. In the evenings Mam went to work, and I fed Jamie tea and sang to him and put him to sleep, and I'd been doing all that for as long as I could remember, from the days when Jamie still wore nappies and was too small to use the pot.

We played games and sang songs and watched the world out the window—the iceman and his cart, the rag-and-bone man and his shaggy pony, the men coming home from the docks in the evenings, and the women hanging out washing and talking on the steps. The children of the lane skipping and playing tag.

I could have got down the stairs, even then. I could have crawled, or scooted on my bottom. I wasn't helpless. But the one time I did venture outdoors, Mam found out, and beat me until my shoulders bled. 'You're nobbut a disgrace!' she screamed. 'A monster, with that ugly foot! You think I want the world seeing my shame?' She threatened to board over my win-

dow if I went downstairs again. That was always her threat to me.

My right foot was small and twisted, so that the bottom pointed skyward, all the toes in the air, and what should have been the top touched the ground. The ankle didn't work right, of course, and it hurt whenever I put weight on it, so for most of my life I never did. I was good at crawling. I didn't protest staying in one room so long as it held both Jamie and me. But as Jamie grew older he wanted to be with the other children, playing in the street. 'Why shouldn't he?' Mam said. 'He's normal enough.' To Jamie she said, 'You're not like Ada. You can go wherever you like.'

'He can't,' I said. 'He has to stay where I can see him.'

At first he did, but then he made friends with a gang of boys and went running out of sight all day. He came home with stories about the docks on the River Thames, where big ships unloaded cargo from around the world. He told me about trains, and warehouses bigger than our whole block of flats. He'd seen St. Mary's, the church by whose bells I marked time. As the summer days grew longer he stayed out later and later, until he came home hours after Mam left. He was gone all the time, and Mam didn't care.

My room was a prison. I could hardly bear the heat and the quiet and the emptiness.

I tried everything to make Jamie stay. I barred the door so he couldn't get out, but he was already stronger than me. I begged and pleaded with Mam. I threatened Jamie, and then one hot day I tied his hands and feet while he was sleeping. I would *make* him stay with me.

Jamie woke up. He didn't scream or shout. He thrashed once, and then he lay helpless, looking at me.

Tears slid down his cheeks.

I untied him as quickly as I could. I felt like a monster. He had a red mark on his wrist from where I'd pulled the string too tight.

'I won't do it again,' I said. 'I promise. I'll never do that again.'

Still his tears flowed. I understood. In all my life I'd never hurt Jamie. I'd never hit him, not once.

Now I'd become like Mam.

'I'll stay inside,' he whispered.

'No,' I said. 'No. You don't need to. But have some tea before you leave.' I gave him a mug, and a piece of bread and dripping. It was just the two of us that morning, Mam gone I don't know where. I patted Jamie's head, and kissed the top of it, and sang him a song, and did all I could to make him smile. 'Very

soon you'll be going to school anyhow,' I said, astonished that I hadn't fully realized this before. 'You'll be gone all day then, but I'll be all right. I'm going to make sure I'll be all right.' I coaxed him into going out to play, and I waved to him from the window.

Then I did what I should have done to start with. I taught myself to walk.

If I could walk, maybe Mam wouldn't be so ashamed of me. Maybe we could disguise my crippled foot. Maybe I could leave the room, and stay with Jamie, or at least go to him if he needed me.

That's what happened, though not the way I thought it would. In the end it was the combination of the two, the end of my little war against Jamie, and the start of the big war, Hitler's war, that set me free.

Chapter 2

I began that very day. I pulled myself up to the seat of my chair, and I put both feet onto the floor. My good left foot. My bad right one. I straightened my knees, and, grasping the back of the chair, I stood.

I want you to understand what the problem was. I could stand, of course. I could hop, one-footed, if I wished to. But I was far faster on my hands and knees, and our flat was so small that I didn't bother to stand straight very often. My leg muscles, particularly in my right leg, weren't used to it. My back felt weak. But all that was secondary. If the only thing I'd had to do was stand upright, I would have been fine.

To walk I had to put my bad foot to the ground. I had to put all my weight on it, and pick my other foot off the ground, and not fall down from my lack of balance or from the searing pain.

I stood by the chair that first day, wobbling. I

slowly shifted some of my weight from my left foot to my right. I gasped.

Maybe it wouldn't have been so bad if I'd been walking all along. Maybe the little curled-up bones in my ankle would have been used to it. Maybe the thin skin covering them would have been tougher.

Maybe. But I'd never know, and none of this standing business was getting me any closer to Jamie. I let go of the chair. I swung my bad foot out. I pushed my body forward. Pain stabbed my ankle like a knife. I fell down.

Up. Grab the chair. Steady myself. Step forward. Fall down. Up. Try again. Good foot forward first this time. A quick gasp, a swinging of the bad foot, and then—crash.

The skin on the bottom of my bad foot ripped. Blood smeared across the floor. After a while, I couldn't take it anymore. I dropped to my knees, shaking, and I got a rag and wiped up the mess.

That was the first day. The second day was worse. The second day my good foot and leg hurt too. It was hard to straighten my legs. I had bruises on my knees from falling, and the sores on my bad foot hadn't healed. The second day all I did was stand, holding the chair. I stood while I looked out my window. I

practised moving my weight from one foot to the other. Then I lay down on the bed and sobbed from the hurt and from exhaustion.

I kept it secret, of course. I didn't want Mam to know until I was good at walking, and I didn't trust Jamie not to tell her. I suppose I could have shouted the news down to the street, but what good would that have done? I watched people out my window every day, and sometimes I did speak to them, but while they often waved, and even said, 'Hello, Ada!' they almost never really tried to speak to me.

Maybe Mam would smile at me. Maybe she'd say, 'Aren't you clever, then?'

In my mind I went further. After a hard day, when I was holding my leg on the bed and shaking from the effort of not crying more, I thought of Mam taking my hand to help me walk down the stairs. I thought of her leading me out on the street, saying to everyone, 'This is Ada. This is my daughter. See, she's not so hopeless as we thought.'

She was my mother, after all.

I imagined helping with the shopping. I imagined going to school.

'Tell me everything,' I said to Jamie, late at night. I

held him on my lap near the open window. 'What did you see today? What did you learn?'

'I went into a shop like you asked me,' Jamie said. 'Fruit shop. Fruit everywhere. Piled up on tables, like.'

'What kind of fruit?'

'Oh—apples. And some like apples, but not quite. And round things that were orange and shiny, and some that were green—'

'You've got to learn the names of them,' I told him.

'Can't,' Jamie said. 'When the shop man saw me he chased me out. Said he didn't need dirty beggars stealin' his fruit, and he ran me off with a broom.'

'Oh, Jamie. You're not a dirty beggar.' We had baths sometimes, when Mam got to disliking the way we smelled. 'And you wouldn't steal.'

'Course I would,' Jamie said. He put his hand inside his shirt and pulled out one of the not-quite-apples, lumpy and yellow and soft. It was a pear, though we didn't know it then. When we bit into it, juice ran down our chins.

I'd never tasted anything so good.

Jamie swiped a tomato the next day, but the day after that he got caught trying to take a chop from a butcher's shop. The butcher walloped him, right on the street, and then marched him home to Mam and