

Chapter One

‘He saved the lives of the men who killed my brother’

**Sunday, 3 September 1939: Castle
Bromwich, England**

Brigit Furst was not a popular girl. The girls in her class tried to bully her. Brigit Furst didn't care.

‘You talk funny,’ Gladys Turnbull would sneer. And it was true. Brigit didn't talk with the same English Midlands accent as the other girls.

Brigit wasn't all that pretty, so Gladys and her gang couldn't envy her good looks, but she

did have glossy red-brown hair that shone in the September sun. Like the others in the class, her school uniform was frayed and worn, but always clean as rainwater.

‘Clean as the queen,’ the gang sneered. Yet they didn’t really hate her for that.

No. Brigit’s real crime, in the mean little eyes of Gladys, was being too *clever*. Tests? Brigit always came top of the class. Exams to get to grammar school? Brigit would sail through and Gladys would fail, they all knew that.

‘Miss Smarty Pants,’ Gladys jeered, so jealous she made her thin pale face turn red with rage. ‘Let’s get her.’

Not everyone hated Brigit. Jessie Burdess wondered at Brigit’s brains and trembled at Gladys’s spite. She met Brigit at the school gate that September morning. Jessie’s eyes were wide and her breath came in gasps. ‘Brigit, oh Brigit,’ she panted. ‘You’ll never guess what Gladys Turnbull’s done now.’

Brigit stopped and looked at her fair-haired friend. ‘No, Jessie, I’m sure I won’t. Far better if you just tell me.’

Jessie's words tumbled out. 'She's got a pepper pot in her school bag and she's going to wait till you leave your gas mask in your desk at break time, and then she's going to put pepper in the mask so when we do gas-mask practice with Miss Dennison it's going to blind you and choke you and make you sneeze as soon as you try to breathe.'

Brigit patted the dull cardboard gas-mask box that hung round her neck on a string. She sighed. 'Thank you, Jess. Forewarned is forearmed,' she said as she marched towards the classroom door.

'What does that mean?'

Brigit gave a small smile. 'It means that now you've told me, I can plan what I'm going to do about it.'

The class were shouting and arguing, gossiping and gabbling, as Brigit and Jessie walked in. The noise dropped a little. Brigit calmly and carefully placed her gas-mask box on her desk, then turned her back on it.

Brigit walked to the blackboard and picked up the rubber. She began to clean off the chalk. By now the class was almost silent so the girl could

hear the soft scuff as someone lifted the cardboard lid. Someone giggled, then the lid was closed again.

Brigit turned in time to see Gladys Turnbull slip a wooden pepper pot into her school satchel. Gladys looked guilty. 'Cleaning the blackboard won't make Miss Dennison like you,' she snarled.

Brigit gave her warmest smile. 'I know.'

For once the mask of hate slipped from Gladys's thin face. 'You're the cleverest girl in the class... except me, of course. But Miss Dennison hates you. Why's that?'

'Her brother died in the Great War,' Brigit said.

'So?'

Before Brigit could answer, the door was thrown open and banged against the doorstep. Miss Dennison's face was wrinkled like an old cooking apple and twice as bitter. There was a scrambling and scraping as the girls threw themselves on to the wooden benches behind their desks. 'Why are you out of your seat, Brigit Furst?' the teacher asked sourly.

'I was cleaning the blackboard for you, Miss Dennison. So it would save you the trouble and give you more time to share your wisdom with us.'

Miss Dennison's eyes went narrow as she looked to see if Brigit's words were meant as insolence. She placed her gas-mask box on her high desk. 'If I want my blackboard cleaned then I'll ask someone I can trust, not some grubby little kraut,' she snapped.

'What's a kraut, miss?' Jessie Burdess asked.

'Never mind,' the teacher muttered. 'You have been called into school today, a Sunday, for an important announcement. But you will treat it like any other school day. This morning's assembly will take place at eleven o'clock.'

'Why, miss?' Jessie asked.

The teacher glared and spoke slowly. 'Because Mr Cutter has said so. And it is not our business to question the headmaster's orders.' Then her words came out machine-gun fast. 'What is it not our business to do, Jessie Burdess?'

Frightened, Jessie swallowed hard and whispered, 'It is not our business to order Mr Question's cutter.'

The teacher shook her head. 'We will study history for ninety minutes, have our morning break, and then go straight to the hall. Susan Wilson, help me give out the history books.'

Miss Dennison opened the door to a book cupboard in the wall, turned on the light and disappeared inside, followed by the smallest girl in the class. Brigit rose to her feet, took her gas mask carefully from its box and walked silently to the teacher's desk. She opened Miss Dennison's gas-mask case, took out the glass, rubber and metal mask inside, and replaced it with her own. She put Miss Dennison's mask in her own box and sat down, folding her hands on the scarred desktop.

The class gasped, then fifty children seemed to hold their breaths as the teacher came out of the cupboard and ordered Susan Wilson to give out the dusty books.

Gladys Turnbull's face lit up and she raised a hand. 'Please, miss.'

'Yes, what is it, girl?'

Brigit turned and looked across at her enemy two seats away. She pointed at Gladys's satchel and mouthed the words, 'Who has the pepper pot in her bag?'

Gladys's mouth went dry as she muttered, 'I like history, miss. Can we do the bit where Dick Turpin rode Black Beauty from London to York?'

The teacher tried not to look pleased. ‘It was Black *Bess*, Gladys, not Black Beauty. But I like that story too. Open your books at page one hundred and ninety-seven and let us take turns at reading around the class. Begin, Gladys.’

A fly buzzed against the grimy window and the droning noise was as dull as the reading. The pupils wrote a story in their dark red (history) exercise books: ‘My great race, by Black Bess’.

At last Miss Dennison passed a handbell to a girl by the door and told her to ring it in the corridor to signal break. ‘Leave your gas masks on your desks and go out to play,’ the teacher ordered.

Brigit fussed with her pencil case, so she was the last one left in the room and her gas mask was guarded. ‘Out, kraut,’ Miss Dennison snarled.

Brigit closed her eyes for a moment then looked at her teacher. ‘My father is German. I was born in France. We moved here to escape the hatred of the French. We thought the British would be more forgiving.’

The teacher put her podgy hands on the girl’s desk and leaned forward so she was breathing in her face. She smelled like an ashtray. ‘I will be

forgiving when you bring my brother back to life.
Your father was one of the Huns that killed him.'

'My father acted as a nurse in the Great War. He killed nobody.'

Miss Dennison smiled, showing her light brown teeth. 'He saved the lives of the men who killed my brother. It's the same thing. I am ashamed to have a German in my class, and I will be glad when you leave.'

'I am French,' Brigit said calmly. 'But I shall be so sorry to leave the best teacher I've ever had.' She gave a little sniff of sorrow. 'Probably the best teacher in the whole of Castle Bromwich.'

Miss Dennison's mouth opened but she couldn't find any words. 'Out,' she finally croaked.

Brigit turned away with a secret smile and left.