SHRAPNEL BOYS

When life is full of battles, you learn
who your true friends are…

To David and Eleanor Browne.

With thanks to the Imperial War Museum for reviewing the historical accuracy of this book.

First published in the UK in 2025 by Usborne Publishing Limited, Usborne House, 83-85 Saffron Hill, London EC1N 8RT, England, usborne.com.

Usborne Verlag, Usborne Publishing Limited, Prüfeninger Str. 20, 93049 Regensburg, Deutschland VK Nr. 17560.

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A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

JF AMJJASOND/25 ISBN 9781805312963 9328/1

Printed and bound using 100% renewable energy at CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon, CR0 4YY.

FSC www.fsc.org MIX Paper | Supporting responsible forestry FSC® C013604

JENNY PEARSON

SHRAPNEL BOYS

USBORNE

CHAPTER 23

Eight hours the Germans came at us. The all-clear siren didn't sound until five-thirty in the morning. It's hard to explain how I felt that night. How, after the initial couple of hours of terror, we almost got used to the sound of destruction around us. The silence after we heard a bomb fly, the relief when we knew it had fallen on some other poor blighter. The guilt at having felt that way.

Johnny got down off my bunk and stretched. His hair was stuck up at all angles and he looked dog-tired. I suppose we all did. But while the rest of us looked at each other with the bond of people who had been through something and come out the other side, Johnny struggled to look anyone in the eye.

We stumbled outside into the dark of the morning. Heston Street had survived that day. Windows had broken, roof tiles had fallen and shrapnel littered the pavement, but the houses were still standing.

A group of men in volunteer firefighter uniforms ran down our street, I suppose heading somewhere that had fared far worse.

An air-raid patrol warden stopped to talk to us. The ARP that was printed on his helmet was hardly visible under all the brick dust. "Don't go far," he said. "Reports of unexploded bombs round Deptford. Stumble into one of those and it will blow you sky high."

Vera said, "The only place I'm going, is to my bed."

The air-raid warden looked Johnny up and down. "Good night, was it, safe in your shelter?"

"He'd be out there if he could." Mum looked cross. "He's got a bad heart!"

The warden raised an eyebrow. "Righty-ho." Then made his way down the street.

"Pompous git," Micky muttered, then caught a clip round the ear from Mum.

Johnny put his cap on his head and shoved his hands in his pockets. "Cathy, thanks for the hospitality, but I best be going. Work to do."

Mum frowned. "But you heard what the pompous git said, unexploded bombs."

"Oh right, so it's okay for you to say it!" Micky said but Mum ignored him.

"Johnny, I really think you should stay here." She had her serious face on. "It's not safe."

"Tell you what, if I see an unexploded bomb, I won't step on it. How's *that*?"

His words came out sharp. Think Mum was a bit taken aback. She folded her arms to show him leaving was not

acceptable, and neither was his tone.

I think Johnny realized he'd shown a little of his true self, and he forced his face into a smile. "Sorry, just tired that's all." He kissed Mum on the cheek, then said, "I'll pop back this afternoon. You get some rest. Don't worry, I'll be careful." Then he turned to Micky, "See you later, Micky." He jumped over the wall and headed off down the road with slightly less swagger than usual.

"I'll tell you something," Vera said as she headed off to hers, her knitting bag bundled up in her arms. "If I can't make a cup of tea when I get in, I'll commandeer a plane and bomb Hitler myself."

More and more of the neighbours started to emerge from their shelters and houses and Mum went off to chat over the night's events with them in the middle of the street.

Micky suddenly shouted, "Cripes! My bike!" and dashed over to see if it had been damaged.

A bit of shrapnel, lodged in the grass, caught my eye. I bent down to pick it up. It was still warm to the touch. It had cut down deep in the ground and it took some effort to pull it up. Eventually, I wiggled it free. I turned it over in my hands. Don't know what it was about it, but holding it made me feel alive. Almost like it was a reminder that I'd survived. Proof that I was part of the war.

"My bike's fine," Micky said. To be honest, I wished it'd been blown to bits. That would have slowed his deliveries down. He bent down next to me. "What's that you got there?"

"Shrapnel," I said. "Reckon it's a piece of anti-aircraft shell that our boys must have fired off to welcome the Germans."

He tried to snatch it from me. "Gerroff! Get your own, not like there's a shortage. Look at the place!"

We spent much of that morning, first in our garden, then working down the street, collecting fragments of shells and scraps of iron. The bigger it was, the better. Our knees were scratched to pieces by the time Mum called us in for our lunch. Micky and I both found boxes to put our collections in.

We were upstairs looking through our new treasures when we heard a knock at the door.

"Hiya, Billy, love, I hope you took care getting here, there's unexploded bombs about."

I shouted down the stairs, "He's alive, isn't he?"

"Alright, you cheeky so-and-so," Mum bellowed back. "The boys are up in their room."

Lugs thundered up the stairs and burst through the door.

"Germans didn't get you then?" I said.

"Nope. It was a bit of a rough night though, wasn't it?"

"Just a bit," Micky said.

"Mum was in a right mood the whole time. Water came up through the floor of the shelter again last night. She had a right go at Dad for digging it too deep, even though he wasn't there to hear it."

"Heard anything from him since he left?" I asked.

Lugs bit his lip and shook his head.

Micky and I didn't say anything – really, what could we have said?

Lugs was the one who changed the subject. "Heard Jerry dropped incendiary bombs all over the park. Burned it to bits."

"We've been collecting shrapnel," I said, nodding towards my box. "Want to see?"

"Nice," he said, but he stayed in the doorway, like he didn't want to stay long. "Actually, I came round to ask for your help."

"Go on," I said.

"Tiger did a runner. Don't know where he is. Thought you might come out and help me look for him."

"He get scared off by the bombs?" I asked.

Lugs ran his hand through his hair. "Nah, would you believe it, but he shot off after a rat."

"He picked his timing!"

"I know, the rascal."

"We'll come, won't we, Micky?"

Micky put the lid on his box. "Sure."

"Thanks. I know he's just a cat but it's not his fault there's a war on."

We headed downstairs to go and look for Tiger. Johnny Simmons came in through the front door as we were grabbing our gas masks.

"You off out, Micky?" he said.

"Thinking of it, why?"

"Need you to do something for me that's all."

"He's busy," I said. "Come on, Micky, let's go."

Micky hesitated. I looked him right in the eye. "Micky?"

"Sorry, Lugs," he said, "if you don't find him, I'll come out tomorrow."

Lugs, who had sort of pressed himself back against the wall, as far away from Johnny as possible, said, "No bother, Mick."

But I wasn't going to let him off the hook so easy. "Micky, you already said you'd help Lugs. You going to let him down?"

Lugs said, "It don't matter, Ron."

"Yeah, it does," I said, keeping my eyes on Micky. "So, you coming?"

Micky stared back but didn't say anything.

Johnny put his hand on Micky's shoulder. "Go with them if you want."

"Nah, Johnny," Micky said. "I'll come with you."

"That's a good lad," Johnny said. Then he looked at me. "Off you go, boys. Go and play."

I shook my head, then turned away from Micky – I couldn't bear to look at him no longer. When I walked out, I slammed the door behind me.

We spent a good couple of hours walking the streets trying to find Tiger. There were houses with broken windows, one with the whole front blown off, like a doll's house, with its innards exposed to the air. We saw families carrying what was left of their belongings under their arms, heading off to find

somewhere else to stay. It was hard to look at the destruction. The war that I'd been waiting for had arrived and it was more terrible than I could ever have imagined.

In the end it was Lugs who suggested we call it a day, which I was relieved about. He sat down on the pavement and said, "I'm too tired to keep looking. Didn't get much sleep last night."

I sat down next to him. "I'm sure Tiger will be alright. He's a very clever cat." I wasn't sure that was true, but I wanted to give Lugs some hope.

Lugs let out a weary sigh. "Ugh. School tomorrow. Can you believe we still have to go?"

"You never know, maybe it'll be blown up in the night."

"Fingers crossed, hey?"

We wandered back together, and Lugs peeled off when we got to the end of his road. We were saying goodbye when Lugs said, "Hey, isn't that Micky going like the clappers on his bike?"

I looked down the street and sure enough, Micky was bombing towards us.

"Oi, Micky!" I shouted but he didn't stop.

"I'd better go," I said, starting to run after him. "Find out what's up."

I ran all the way back to ours. When I got home, Micky's bike was lying on the ground, wheels still turning.

Vera was propped up against the fence, cigarette in hand. "Your brother seemed in a hurry. What's up with him?"

"I dunno," I said, "but I swear I'm going to find out."

I ran up the stairs to find my brother sitting on the bed, chest heaving, eyes full of fear and his arm clutching his side.

"Micky?" I said. "What's going on? I think it's time you started telling me the truth."

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I stood at the end of Micky's bed waiting for him to answer. My mind turned over all the possibilities. He'd got caught thieving – or maybe someone turned him over knowing he might be carrying an exemption certificate. Perhaps Johnny or one of his Blackshirt buddies had roughed him up to get him to do what they wanted.

Micky sniffed, wiped his eyes. "Nothing. Came off my bike, that's all."

"Your cheek's swelling up something rotten. It looks like you've been in a fight."

"I told you, I fell."

"That's the story you're sticking to, is it?"

"It's not a story."

I let out an exasperated yell. Right then, I really wanted to knock some sense into him. But then I remembered what Mum had said about me looking like Dad, and I took a breath. "I can't help you if you're not honest with me, Mick."

"I don't need your help," Micky shouted back.

I took another breath and calmed myself. "I think you do, and I'm just going to sit here until you tell me what's going on." I folded my arms and sat cross-legged on my bed and stared at him.

"What? You're going to just sit there looking at me?"

"Yup," I said. "All day if I have to."

Micky rolled his eyes. "Suit yourself."

I would have stayed there all day too, but I heard Mum and Johnny talking to Vera outside.

I looked at Micky, all bashed up and bruised and something inside me snapped. I jumped off the bed, threw the door open and took the stairs two at a time. I burst in to the front garden and shouted, "You need to leave our Micky alone."

Mum spun round, confusion on her face. "Ronnie, what are you talking about."

"Micky's been beaten up and it's got something to do with Johnny – I'm sure of it."

"Micky's been beaten up?" Mum said, her face etched with concern.

"I haven't! I fell off my bike!" Micky came charging out of the house after me.

When Mum saw him, she covered her mouth with her hands. "Micky, love!"

"Blimey, Micky, are you alright, son?" Johnny said.

"No, he isn't, thanks to you!" I shouted.

"How's him falling off his bike anything to do with me?" Johnny jabbed his finger in my face. "You need to watch that

mouth of yours." I felt the anger vibrating through me, and before I knew what I was doing, I'd shoved him with both hands, hard in the chest. It was like pushing a brick wall. He didn't even move. I tried again, then again, pushing him as hard as I could. I was so angry. I couldn't stop.

"Ronnie, stop it! What's got into you?" Mum cried.

I swung round and looked at her, angry tears prickling my eyes. I proper shouted at her then. "Why can't you see? Why can't you see what he's like? Micky, tell her! Tell her what's going on."

Mum said, "Micky, I need you to be honest with me. How did you get hurt?"

I stared Micky right in the eyes, pleading with him to speak up, to tell the truth, but he looked straight back at me and said, "Like I said, I fell off my bike."

It felt like my whole world tilted on its axis.

He'd chosen Johnny over me, and the pain of knowing that was almost unbearable.

I charged past him – Johnny was saying something and Mum was shouting after me, but I couldn't hear them. I thundered up the stairs and threw myself on my bed. Then I sobbed. I really sobbed.

The door opened half an hour or so later. Mum came in with a cup of tea. She handed it to me, then she sat down on the end of my bed. "Ronnie, what's wrong? I'm worried about you. Why are you so angry?"

"I hate him, Mum. I really hate him."

She closed her eyes and let out a long, heavy sigh.

"I understand that it's hard, but not everyone is like your father. You've never given Johnny a chance."

"He doesn't deserve a chance."

"Everyone deserves a chance." She sighed again. "I know it's difficult for you to trust people, with how your father was. Micky didn't see everything, you shielded him from a lot, so maybe he finds it easier to let Johnny in."

"But, Mum, he—"

Mum, put her hand on my face. "Ronnie, I want you to listen to me. You've been doing an awful lot of talking, been making all sorts of accusations and I'm trying to understand why you're behaving like this. We've talked and decided that Johnny's going to go away for a little while."

"You've told him to leave?"

"No, it was his idea. He has some work to do and we both hope that, over the next few weeks, you can find a way to get past this vendetta you have against him. And Micky won't be delivering any more letters or medicine."

"Johnny won't like that."

"That was Johnny's idea too. It's clearly worrying you, and Johnny and me are worried too. The streets aren't safe for him to be cycling about on."

I couldn't quite take in everything Mum was saying.

"But you must promise me something. You have to work on your anger. Shoving Johnny, shouting at me like you did, it's not

like you. I won't have it, not in my house. Not again."

I thought of all the times I'd heard Dad shouting at her, how I hated him for it, and I felt a wave of shame wash over me and the tears started to fall again. I didn't want to be anything like him. "I'm sorry, Mum, truly I am."

Mum took the cup from my hands and placed it on the bedside table. Then she pulled me back into a hug and rested her chin on my head. "We all get angry, Ronnie, and sometimes it's right to be. Sometimes things happen and the only thing you can do is feel angry. Take this war, my goodness, if I could tell you how angry I am about it. How angry I am that it's robbing you and Micky of your childhoods. There are days I feel like I could run out into the street and throw rocks into the sky and scream about how unfair it all is! But see, it's not the anger that's the problem, it's when you let it overcome you. And you, my sweet, courageous boy, aren't the sort to let anything overcome you."

She kissed me on the head again. "Now, what do you say we forget about all this? Why don't you get yourself into that bathroom and freshen up?" She held up my hand in front of my eyes. "You could grow spuds under those fingernails! What have you been doing, scratching around in the dirt?"

I shrugged. "Pretty much. Micky and I were collecting shrapnel this morning."

"I hope you're being careful. Now, I'm going to send Johnny up. He wants a quick word with you before he goes and, Ronnie, try to be nice for me."

I nodded but my insides twisted at the thought. I went to wash my hands and when I got back to my room, Johnny was sitting on my bed, waiting for me. I took a breath and stepped inside.

"Close the door," he said. "You and I, Ronnie Smith, need a word."