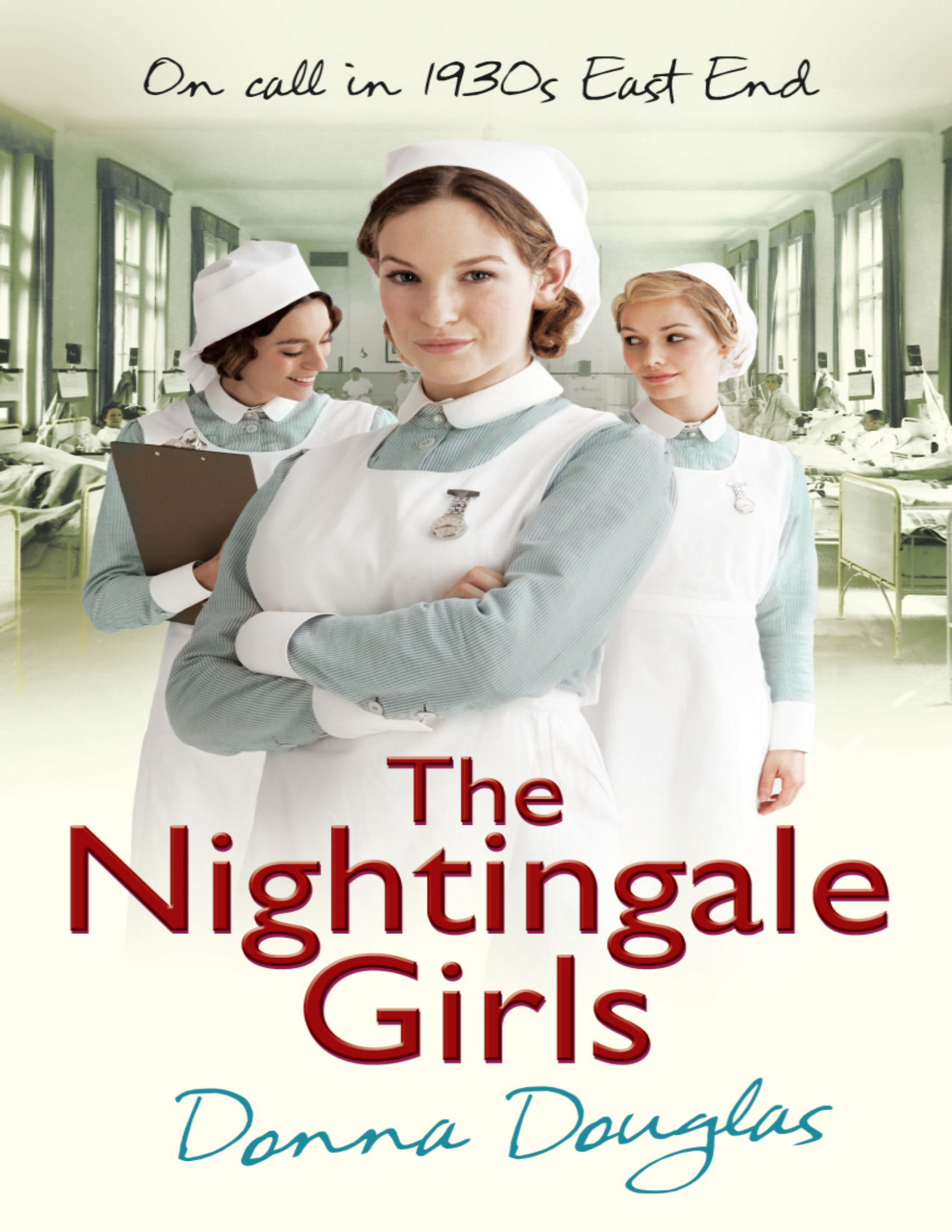


On call in 1930s East End

A photograph of three young women in 1930s nursing uniforms. They are standing in a hospital ward with several beds in the background. The woman in the center is looking directly at the camera with her arms crossed. The woman on the left is holding a clipboard and looking down at it. The woman on the right is looking towards the camera. They are all wearing white caps, white aprons over light blue long-sleeved shirts, and have a small badge on their chests.

The Nightingale Girls

Donna Douglas

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About the Book

In at the deep end

Three very different girls sign up as trainee nurses at a big London teaching hospital in 1934.

DORA

Leaves her overcrowded, squalid East End home for a better life. But has she got what it takes to keep up with other, better educated girls? And will her hated stepfather ever let her go?

HELEN

Born for the job, her brother is a doctor, her all-powerful mother a hospital trustee. But will Helen's secret misery be her downfall?

MILLIE

An aristocratic rebel, her carefree attitude will find her up in front of Matron again and again. Will she ever care enough to make a nurse? Or will she go back to the glamorous life she was born to?

THE NIGHTINGALE GIRLS

What have they let themselves in for?

About the Author

Donna Douglas is a freelance journalist and – as Donna Hay – had a number of successful romantic novels published by Orion.

The Nightingale Girls

Donna Douglas



arrow books

Chapter One

‘TELL ME, MISS Doyle. What makes you think you could ever be a nurse here?’

After growing up in the slums of Bethnal Green, not much frightened Dora Doyle. But her stomach was fluttering with nerves as she faced the Matron of the Nightingale Teaching Hospital in her office on that warm September afternoon. She sat tall and upright behind a heavy mahogany desk, an imposing figure in black, her face framed by an elaborate white headdress, grey eyes fixed expectantly on Dora.

Dora wiped her damp palms on her skirt. She was sweating inside her coat, but she didn’t dare take it off in case Matron noticed the frayed cuffs of her blouse.

‘Well—’ she began, then stopped. Why did she think she could ever be a nurse? Living on the other side of Victoria Park from the Nightingale, she had often seen the young women coming and going through the gates, dressed in their red-lined cloaks. For as long as she could remember she’d dreamed of being one of them.

But dreams like that didn’t come true for the likes of Dora Doyle. Like any other East End girl, her destiny lay in the sweatshops or one of the factories that lined the overcrowded stretch of the Thames.

So she’d left school at fourteen to earn her living at Gold’s Garments, and tried to make the best of it. But the dream hadn’t gone away. It grew bigger and bigger inside her, until four years later she had taken her courage in her hands and written a letter of application.

‘What have you got to lose?’ Mr Gold’s daughter Esther had said. ‘You’ll never know if you don’t try, *bubele*.’ She’d

even lent Dora her lucky necklace charm to wear for the interview. She could feel the warm metal sticking to her damp skin beneath her blouse.

‘It’s a hamsa,’ Esther had explained as Dora admired the exquisite little silver hand on its delicate chain. ‘My people believe it brings good fortune.’

Dora hoped the hamsa’s powers weren’t just extended to Jews. She needed all the help she could get.

‘I’m keen and I’m very hard-working,’ she found the words at last. ‘And I’m a quick learner. I don’t need telling twice.’

‘So your reference says.’ Matron looked down at the letter in front of her. ‘This Miss Gold clearly thinks a lot of you.’

Dora blushed at the compliment. Esther had taken a real chance, writing that reference behind her father’s back; old Jacob would go mad if he found out his daughter was helping one of his employees to find another job. ‘Miss Esther reckons I’m one of her best girls on the machines. I’ve got the hands, she says.’

She saw Matron looking at her hands and quickly knotted them in her lap so the woman wouldn’t see her bitten-down nails, or the calluses the size of mothballs that covered her fingers. ‘Grafter’s hands’, her mother called them. But they didn’t look like the right kind of hands to soothe a fevered brow.

‘I have no doubt you’re a hard worker, Miss Doyle,’ Matron said. ‘But then so is every girl who comes in here. And most of them are far better qualified than you.’

Dora’s chin lifted. ‘I’ve got my certificates. I went back to night school to get them.’

‘So I see.’ Matron’s voice was soft, with an underlying note of steel. ‘But, as you know, the Nightingale is one of the best teaching hospitals in London. We have girls from all over the country wanting to train here.’ She met Dora’s eyes steadily across the desk. ‘So why should we accept you and not them? What makes *you* so special, Miss Doyle?’

Dora dropped her gaze to stare at the herringbone pattern of the polished parquet. She wanted to tell this woman how she took care of her younger brother and sisters, and had even helped bring the youngest, Little Alfie, into the world two years ago. She wanted to explain how she'd nursed Nanna Winnie through a bad bout of bronchitis last winter when everyone thought she'd had it for sure.

Most of all, she wanted to talk about Maggie, her beautiful sister, who'd died when Dora was twelve years old. She'd sat beside her bed for three days, watching her slip away. It was Maggie's death more than anything that had made her want to become a nurse and to stop other families suffering the way hers had.

But her mother didn't like them talking about their personal business to anyone. And it probably wasn't the clever answer Matron was looking for anyway.

'Nothing,' she said, defeated. 'I'm nothing special.' Just plain Dora Doyle, the ginger-haired girl from Griffin Street.

She wasn't even special in her family. Peter was the eldest, Little Alfie the youngest. Josie was the prettiest and Bea the naughtiest. And then there was Dora, stuck in the middle.

'I see.' Matron paused. She seemed almost disappointed, Dora thought. 'Well, in that case, I don't think there's much more to say.' She began gathering up her notes. 'We will write to you and let you know our decision in due course. Thank you, Miss Doyle . . .'

Dora felt a surge of panic. She'd let herself down. She could feel the moment ebbing away, and with it all her hopes. She would never wear the red-lined cloak and walk with pride like those other girls. It would be back to the machines at Gold's Garments for her until her eyes went or her fingers became so bent with rheumatism she couldn't work any more.

Esther Gold's words came back to her. *What have you got to lose?*

‘Give me a chance,’ she blurted out.

Matron looked askance at her. ‘I beg your pardon?’

Dora could feel her face flaming to the roots of her hair, but she had to speak up. ‘I know I don’t have as much proper schooling as the other girls, but I’ll work really hard, I promise.’ The words were falling over themselves as she tried to get them out before she lost her nerve.

‘Really, Miss Doyle, I hardly think—’

‘You won’t regret it, I swear. I’ll be the best nurse this place has ever seen. Just give me the chance. Please?’ she begged.

Matron’s brows lifted towards the starched edge of her headdress. ‘And if I don’t?’

‘I’ll apply again, here or somewhere else. And I’ll keep on applying until someone says yes,’ Dora declared defiantly. ‘I’ll be a nurse one day. And I’ll be a good one, too.’

Matron stared at her so hard Dora felt her heart sink to her borrowed shoes.

‘Thank you, Miss Doyle,’ she said. ‘I think I’ve heard enough.’

Matron Kathleen Fox watched from the window as Dora Doyle hurried across the courtyard towards the gates, head down, hands thrust into her pockets. The poor girl couldn’t get away fast enough.

‘Well?’ she asked Miss Hanley. ‘What did you think?’

‘I’m sure it’s not my place to say, Matron.’

Kathleen smiled to herself. Her Assistant Matron’s mouth was puckering with the effort of not voicing her opinion. Veronica Hanley was a tall, broad-shouldered woman, strong-featured, with sensibly short greying hair, large hands and a deep, booming voice. ‘Manly Hanley’ Kathleen had overheard some of the younger nurses calling her. She had just turned fifty, a good ten years older than Kathleen herself, and had been at the Nightingale since she was a pro. She struck terror into the hearts of all the nurses,

including the sisters. Even Kathleen sometimes had to remind herself who was in charge.

‘All the same, I would value your opinion,’ she said.

‘Her shoes were scuffed, there was a hole in her stocking and a button coming loose on her coat,’ Miss Hanley said without hesitation.

‘I’ll admit she was hardly promising.’

‘She could barely string two words together.’

‘That’s quite true.’

Matron was used to interviewing girls who couldn’t wait to gush about their talents, their dedication to nursing and their admiration for Florence Nightingale. But Dora Doyle had just sat there, staring out from under that explosion of frizzy red hair like a trapped rabbit.

And yet there was something about her, a spark of determination in those green eyes, that made Matron think she had real potential.

‘Perhaps she might be better applying to the Infirmary?’ Miss Hanley suggested.

The City Infirmary was an old Poor Law hospital, a former workhouse just down the river in Poplar. It was small, badly funded and run by ill-trained staff and auxiliaries. It also had a shocking reputation among the locals, who referred to it as The Graveyard.

‘After all, she’s hardly Nightingale’s material, is she?’ Miss Hanley went on.

They were interrupted by the maid bringing in afternoon tea. They paused as she set the tray down on the console table just inside the door and arranged the bone china cups and saucers.

‘What makes you say that, Miss Hanley?’ Kathleen asked when the girl had gone.

‘I would have thought that was obvious. We only accept girls with education and breeding.’

‘Miss Doyle is adequately qualified.’

‘From a night school!’ Miss Hanley’s lips curled over the words.

‘Which surely shows determination and character, if nothing else.’ Kathleen moved across to the table to pour the tea. ‘I can’t imagine it was easy for a young girl, working long hours in a garment factory then trooping off to study in the evening, can you?’

‘That may be. But it takes more than that to be suitable for the Nightingale.’

It certainly does, Kathleen thought as she passed a cup to her.

As the Nightingale was a prestigious teaching hospital, it tended to attract girls of a certain background. Well-bred, well-spoken, middle-class girls who were looking for a respectable way to fill their time until they found themselves a young doctor to marry.

It was the same in most hospitals, she knew. But even more so at the Nightingale. Sometimes when she heard the young students talking among themselves, she wondered if she’d accidentally strayed into an exclusive finishing school.

Miss Hanley had even boasted that the previous Matron’s sure-fire way of discovering if a girl was suitable for training was to ask if she belonged to a tennis club. Kathleen doubted if Dora Doyle had ever seen a tennis racquet, let alone picked one up. But she was passionate, determined, and obviously no stranger to hard work. Which was more than could be said for many of the students who came through the Nightingale’s doors. Most of them were totally unprepared for the rigours of nursing; many of them didn’t make it through the twelve weeks of preliminary training.

‘Obviously it’s your decision, Matron,’ Miss Hanley conceded stiffly. ‘But I have to say, girls of that class seldom do well as nurses. They simply don’t have the character for it.’

‘Oh, I don’t think Miss Doyle is short of character.’ Kathleen lifted the teacup to conceal her smile.

She wondered what Miss Hanley would say if she knew that Kathleen was once just like Dora Doyle, a millworker's daughter from a small Lancashire town, who had dreamed of something beyond life in the blowing room of a cotton mill. She too had once sat across the desk from a forbidding-looking Matron and begged for the chance to show what she could do. And now look at her. Barely forty and already in charge of the nursing staff of one of the country's top teaching hospitals. Sometimes she had to pinch herself to believe it was true. Not everyone approved, of course. She knew there were some people at the Nightingale who thought that she and her newfangled ideas would lead to the ruination of the hospital's good name.

Change was a dirty word at the Nightingale. The hospital had been run the same way for the last thirty years, under the iron rule of its old Matron. And when she retired, many had believed Miss Hanley was the natural choice to carry on her good work – including Miss Hanley herself. But the Board of Trustees decided the Nightingale needed new blood, and so Kathleen had been appointed instead.

Now, after a month in the job, she still felt like the new girl. She could hear the whispers of the senior staff following her down the corridors as she did her morning rounds, everyone wondering what to make of the new Matron, who smiled too much and talked to the young nurses in the same friendly way she did to the senior consultants.

It didn't help that Miss Hanley didn't miss a chance to remind her: 'That really isn't the way we do things here at the Nightingale, Matron.'

She went to look out of the window. Beyond the gracious Georgian façade of its main building which fronted the road overlooking Victoria Park, the Nightingale Hospital was a sprawl of blocks, extensions and outbuildings arranged loosely around a central paved courtyard with a small cluster of plane trees at its centre. These housed the wards, the operating block and the dispensary. Beyond them lay

more buildings, including the dining rooms, nurses' homes and the doctors' quarters.

Up until a few weeks ago her office had also been situated down there. But when she took over as Matron, Kathleen had insisted on moving into the main hospital building so she could be closer to the wards.

It had caused much consternation among the senior nursing staff. 'Why does she need to keep an eye on us?' the disgruntled sisters asked amongst themselves – stirred up, Kathleen suspected, by Miss Hanley. But it was worth the trouble. She was now in the heart of the hospital, where she belonged. Not only was she closer at hand to deal with emergencies on the wards, but her new office gave her a good view over the courtyard, where she could see everyone going about their business.

The damp chill of early September had given way to a few glorious days of Indian summer. Patients basked in their wheelchairs under the shade of the plane trees, enjoying the autumn sunshine. As she watched, a young nurse emerged through the archway from the dining block, heading back across the courtyard to the wards, doing the brisk heel-toe walk that almost but didn't quite break the 'no running' rule.

As if she knew she was being watched, the girl suddenly caught Kathleen's eye. She ducked her head, but not before Kathleen saw the guilty flush on her cheeks.

She turned away, smiling to herself. 'So you don't think we should give Miss Doyle a chance?' she said.

'I don't believe she would fit in.'

I know how she feels, Kathleen thought.

Perhaps for once Miss Hanley had a point. If the new Matron couldn't even fit in, how would someone like Dora Doyle ever cope?

Chapter Two

DORA HAD MANAGED to convince herself she didn't want to be a nurse by the time the letter came.

She was walking back to Griffin Street with her friend Ruby Pike on a drizzly October evening after their shift at Gold's when her little sister Beatrice came running up the street, boots undone, curls flying.

'All right, Bea? Where's the fire?' Dora laughed.

'Your letter from the hospital's come!' she panted. At eleven years old she looked like a miniature version of Dora, with her snub nose, ginger hair and freckled face. 'Nanna wanted to open it but Mum says we've got to wait for you. Come on!' She pulled at her sister's hand, dragging her along the street.

Dora looked at Ruby. 'This is it,' she said.

'Just think, this time next month you'll be out of that ruddy sweatshop!' Ruby grinned back.

'I doubt it.' Dora knew she'd made a proper fool of herself in the interview. She was surprised they'd even bothered to write.

'Course you will. They'd be daft not to take you on. Haven't we always said, you've got the brains and I've got the looks?'

Dora grinned. With her wavy blonde hair and buxom curves, Ruby looked more like a movie star than a machinist. But she could have been clever too, if she hadn't been too busy flirting with the boys at school.

Ruby saw Dora's smile wobble and took her arm, propelling her down the street after Bea, who'd run on

ahead to warn the rest of the family at number twenty-eight.

‘Stop worrying, you’ll get in,’ she said. ‘You’re doing the right thing, I reckon. I wouldn’t mind being a nurse myself, come to think of it. Think of all those handsome doctors. Not to mention all those rich old men with incurable diseases, just waiting to die and leave me all their worldly goods!’

‘I think the idea is to keep them alive, Rube.’

They reached Dora’s front doorstep. ‘Go on.’ Ruby gave her a little shove. ‘You can’t put it off forever, y’know.’

‘I wish I could.’ She dreaded seeing the disappointment on her mum’s face. Dora might have given up on the idea, but it was all Rose Doyle talked about.

‘Well, you can’t. Now get in there before your nanna changes her mind and opens it for you. Let me know how you get on, won’t you?’ said Ruby as she let herself in next door.

‘I won’t need to,’ Dora said. ‘If I get in, you’ll be able to hear my mum screaming all the way to Aldgate!’

The letter was on the kitchen mantelpiece, tucked behind the old clock. The rest of the family were ranged around the fireplace, doing anything but looking at it. Dora’s mum Rose was mending shirts, while her younger sisters Josie and Bea played cards and Nanna Winnie peeled potatoes while sitting in her old rocking chair. The only one who genuinely paid no attention was Little Alfie, who played with his wooden train on the rug instead.

Her mother pushed the mending off her lap and shot to her feet as soon as Dora walked in. ‘There you are, love,’ she greeted her with a fixed smile. ‘Had a good day? I’ll put the kettle on, shall I?’

‘Oh, for Gawd’s sake!’ Nanna Winnie rolled her eyes and dropped another potato in the pan of water at her feet. ‘Dora, open that bleeding letter and put your mother out of her misery or we shall never get any peace in this house. She’s been on pins all day.’

Dora pulled out the letter from behind the clock and stared down at the Nightingale's crest: the silhouette of a woman carrying a lamp. The thick cream envelope felt heavy. Her heart started to flutter in her chest.

'Can I read it on my own?' she asked her mother. She knew it would be bad news and she needed time to compose herself before she faced her family.

'No, you bleeding cannot!' Nanna Winnie snapped. 'We haven't sat here all afternoon so you can go and—'

'Of course you can, love.' Rose Doyle shot her mother a silencing look. 'You just take your time.'

'But don't be too long about it,' her grandmother warned. 'I told you we should have steamed it open,' Dora heard Nanna Winnie saying as she let herself out of the back door. 'She would never have known if we was careful.'

Their narrow strip of back yard was sunless and damp, overshadowed by a high brick wall that separated it from the railway line high above. Dora took refuge in the privy at the end. The cold October wind whistled through the gaps in the old wooden door as she sat on the weathered pine seat and read her letter by the fading evening light.

Dear Miss Doyle,

The Board of Governors of the Nightingale's Teaching Hospital is pleased to inform you that you have been accepted in their three-year programme leading to State Registration. Please report to Sister Sutton at the Junior Nurses' Home on Tuesday, 6 November 1934 after 4 p.m. Enclosed is a list of equipment you must bring with you. You will also need to send us the following measurements for your uniform, which will be waiting for you when you arrive . . .

A train rumbled past, rattling the privy door and shaking the ground under her feet, while Dora read the words over and over again, right down to the signature: Kathleen Fox (Matron). Then she snatched up the envelope and checked the address, just to make sure it had come to the right person.

She lowered the letter and stared ahead of her at the yellowing squares of newspaper stuck on a rusty nail on the back of the door. From somewhere outside she could hear their neighbour June Riley singing tunelessly. The sound seemed to be coming from miles away. None of it felt real.

When she finally emerged she found her mother in the yard, sweeping the cracked paving slabs, her eyes fixed on the privy door. She froze when she saw Dora.

‘Well?’ she said.

Dora nodded, not trusting herself to speak. Rose Doyle gave a yelp of joy and dropped her birch broom with a clatter.

‘You did it!’ she cried, putting her arm around Dora. ‘Oh, Dor, I’m so proud of you!’

The rest of the family, who had been gathered around the back door, came out of the house and suddenly Dora was lost in a clamour of jumping, cheering and hugs. Nanna Winnie looked on from the doorway, her arms folded across her chest.

‘I don’t know why she’s bothering,’ she grumbled. ‘The glue factory was good enough for you and me, Rosie. Why does she have to be different?’

Next door, June Riley flung open the back door and stuck her head out, her thin face framed by a halo of spiky curlers. ‘Hello, what’s all the ruck about?’

‘Our Dora’s going to be a nurse,’ Rose called back, loudly enough for the rest of the street to hear.

June rushed out into the back yard in her dressing gown and slippers and stepped over the section of fence where the slats had broken, into the Doyles’ back yard.

‘Fancy, our little Dora, a nurse!’ Dora could smell the gin on June’s breath as she was trapped in her bony embrace. ‘Wait till I tell my Nick. He’s a porter up at the hospital, he’ll look after you.’

‘We know all about your Nick,’ Nanna Winnie muttered. ‘You stay away from him, Dora. There’s plenty of girls round

here wish they'd done the same, the dirty little sod.'

'Nanna!' Dora hissed, as June moved over to hug Rose.

'I speak as I find,' Nanna said primly. She looked at June and shook her head. 'Look at the state of her. I expect she's just got up. Down the pub till all hours, I daresay.'

Dora blushed, but luckily June hadn't heard Nanna. Drink made June Riley unpredictable, and she was as likely to go for Nanna Winnie with a poker as she was to laugh it off. They'd lived next door to the Rileys for the last ten years, ever since Dora's father had died and they'd moved back in with Nanna Winnie. Poor June had turned to drink four years ago when her husband ran off, leaving her to bring up her two sons alone.

The Turnbulls and the Prossers came out of the house they shared on the other side, to see what all the noise was about, and Rose recounted their news over and over again. It gave Dora a warm glow to see the pride on her mother's face; this was her moment of triumph as much as Dora's own.

'It's good news, then? What did I tell you?' Ruby stuck her head out of the upstairs window, alongside her mum Lettie's. She and June greeted each other with the curtest of nods. The Pikes lived upstairs from the Rileys, but the two women rarely saw eye to eye. 'What am I going to do without you, Dor? Gold's Garments won't be the same!'

'You'll have to find someone else to cover for you while you sneak outside for a fag!' Dora called up to her.

'I won't have anyone to have a laugh with, that's for sure. They're a miserable lot there. And as for that cow Esther—' Ruby rolled her eyes.

'She's all right,' Dora said, thinking of the hamsa, still nestling under her blouse. She'd tried to return it, but Esther had insisted she keep it.

'Only 'cos you're her favourite.'

'You'd be her favourite too, if you put a bit of effort into your work and didn't give her so much cheek!'

'I put enough effort into that place just by turning up, thank you very much. I'm not killing myself to line that old Jew's pockets!'

'I hope you don't think you'll have it easy?' Lettie joined in. She worked as a ward maid at the Nightingale. Unlike her pretty, easy-going daughter, she was a thin-faced, sour little woman, always ready to look on the black side of life. 'I've seen the way they treat them up at that hospital. They work them into the ground, and keep them locked up in that home like nuns. It's do this, do that, all day long. And those young nurses are right stuck up, too. Very posh they are, don't give the likes of us the time of day.' She looked Dora up and down. 'Don't know as they'll take to you.'

'Gawd, Mum, do you have to be so bloody cheerful all the time?' Ruby rolled her eyes at Dora.

'I'm only telling the truth,' Lettie said huffily.

'Take no notice of her,' Nanna Winnie muttered as Lettie and Ruby went back inside and closed the window. 'She's always been a bitter old cow. Just because her daughter's a trollop.'

'Nanna! That's my best mate you're talking about.'

'That doesn't stop her being a trollop, does it? Like I said, I speak as I find.'

'They're not really going to lock you up, are they, Dora?' her sister Josie asked. She was fourteen, and the only one of her sisters not to inherit their father's red curls and sturdy figure. Josie was dark, slender and pretty like their mother.

'Course they're not, Jose. But I will have to live at the nurses' home.'

'How long for?'

'Dunno. Forever, I s'pose.'

'You mean, you won't live here with us no more?' Josie's wide brown eyes filled with tears as she took in the news.

'I'll be able to come and visit,' Dora said. 'I'll keep an eye on you all, make sure you're keeping up with your schoolwork and Bea's behaving herself.'

‘That’ll be the day!’

‘Then you’ll just have to keep her in line, won’t you?’ Dora put her arm around her sister’s skinny shoulders. ‘You’re the big sister now, Josie. It’s your turn to show the little ones what’s what.’

‘I’ll try,’ Josie promised. ‘I’ll miss you, Dor,’ she whispered.

‘I’ll miss you too.’

As she looked around the shabby back yard, it began to dawn on Dora what she was leaving. Griffin Street was far from fancy. The narrow terrace of cramped houses, overshadowed by looming railway arches, had seen better days. Brickwork cracked, roofs sagged, and damp seeped through the walls.

Dora’s stepfather Alf had been all for renting them a better place when he and Rose got married. He was earning enough for them to move into one of those new blocks of flats the Corporation was building, with electricity, inside toilets, proper bathrooms and the rest of it. But Rose wouldn’t go without her mum, and Winnie had no intention of leaving the only home she’d known for fifty years.

‘I’ve lived here since I got married, and they’ll have to carry me out in my box,’ she’d declared. ‘I don’t want to live somewhere not a soul speaks to each other.’

And she was right. In spite of its faults, Griffin Street was a close-knit community of neighbours who laughed together, cried together, and saw each other through good times and bad. There was always someone to have a giggle with, a shoulder to cry on or to lend you a few bob when the rent man was due.

At least when Rose married Alf, they had been able to afford to take over the whole house, instead of making do all cramped together in a couple of rooms on the ground floor, as they had been.

It still wasn’t grand. They did all their cooking on an ancient range in the kitchen, and washed at the sink in the tiny curtained-off scullery. But it was homely, and Rose kept

it like a palace. The step was whitestoned every day, the windows shone, net curtains sparkled and the house always smelt of polish.

Dora knew she'd miss it. But there was one person she wouldn't miss.

'Aye-aye. What's all this, then?' As if on cue, Alf Doyle stood in the back doorway, smiling around at the scene. He was a big man, over six foot tall, with thick black hair, a broad face and bright blue eyes.

Bea ran to him, Little Alfie toddling behind her, and he scooped them up easily, one under each arm.

'We're celebrating.' Rose's face lit up at the sight of her husband. 'Dora's got a place to train as a nurse.'

'Is that right?' Alf turned to face her, the two children still wriggling under his arms. 'Aren't you the clever one?'

'But she's got to leave home and move away forever,' Josie put in.

'Has she now? I don't remember anyone asking me if that was all right,' he frowned.

'You can't stop me,' Dora's chin lifted defiantly.

'I can do what I like until you're twenty-one, my girl.'

Their eyes met, clashing in mute challenge.

'He's only teasing,' her mother broke the tense silence. 'Your dad would never stop you bettering yourself.'

'He's not my dad.'

'I still say what goes.'

Not for much longer, Dora was about to say. Then she caught the pleading look in her mother's eyes and kept silent.

'We should celebrate,' Nanna suggested. 'I dunno about you, but I reckon a nice bottle of stout would go down a treat.'

'Good idea,' Rose said brightly. 'What do you say, Alf?'

All eyes turned to him. Still glaring at Dora, he lowered Bea and Little Alfie to the ground and dug into his pocket.

‘Not seeing your miserable boat race around here would be a cause for celebration, I s’pose.’ He pulled out a handful of change. ‘Josie, go to the chippie. Fish and chips all round, I reckon.’

‘But I’ve made a stew!’ Nanna Winnie protested.

Alf grimaced. ‘All the more reason to get fish and chips, then.’

‘Can I have a saveloy?’ Bea asked.

‘You can have anything you like, my darlin’, as long as it keeps you quiet.’

Dora watched her mother as she followed him inside. At forty-two years old, Rose was still a beautiful woman. Her dark hair was threaded with grey but no one would ever have guessed her slim figure had brought six children into the world.

‘I wish you wouldn’t talk back to him like that,’ Nanna said to Dora as they went back inside. ‘Alf’s not a bad bloke. And he makes your mum happy. She deserves that, after everything she’s been through.’

Dora knew her mum hadn’t had much to smile about over the years. Widowed at thirty-two with five children, she had struggled to bring up her family on her own. She’d had to work all hours, cleaning offices and taking in mending for the local laundry.

And then, when Dora was thirteen, Alf Doyle had come into their lives. He didn’t look like anyone’s idea of a knight in shining armour, with his big lumbering body and hands like ham hocks. But he had certainly rescued Rose Doyle and her kids.

A gentle giant, everyone called him. He worked as a van driver on the railways. Not the best-paid job in the world, but it was steady and at least he didn’t have to line up with the other men at the dock gates every morning, looking for work.

Everyone said Rose was lucky. After all, it wasn’t every man who would take on a widow and all those children. But

Alf loved the kids as if they were his own. He took them all on outings to the coast and the countryside and the boating lake at Victoria Park, treated them to sweets and ice creams and all kinds of other delights.

Dora couldn't have hated him more if she'd tried.

By the time Josie returned with the food, they'd warmed the plates and were crowded around the table. The hot fried rock salmon and chips was a lot better than Nanna Winnie's notoriously inedible stew, especially when Dora was allowed the batter scraps soaked in salt and vinegar to celebrate her big achievement.

'Don't suppose they'll be feeding you like this in that nurses' home!' Rose said.

'It's hard work, from what I hear,' Alf mumbled through a mouthful of chips.

'I'm not afraid of hard work,' Dora said.

'A bit of hard work never hurt anyone.' Nanna Winnie took out her teeth and slipped them into her pocket.

'Mum!' Rose protested. 'Do you have to do that at the table?'

'Why not? I don't need 'em now I've finished eating. And they rub my gums raw.'

After tea, Dora and Josie cleared the plates away while Alf relaxed in his armchair beside the fire. Rose sat opposite with her mending, while Nanna Winnie half dozed in her rocking chair.

'You know what I'm going to do one day, Rosie?' Alf said. 'Buy you a house. A proper modern house, out in Loughton near your sister Brenda's place. You'd like that, wouldn't you? Somewhere with a decent garden, not that stinking little back yard.'

'Oi, do you mind? That back yard's been good enough for me all these years,' Nanna said, opening one eye. But Alf wasn't listening.

'You can grow flowers, and I can grow fruit and veg, and keep chickens. And we'll have electricity in all the rooms.'

'I don't hold with electricity,' Nanna grumbled.

'That sounds nice.' Rose smiled down at her mending. She never stopped working, no matter what the occasion. King George himself could come round for his tea, and Rose would still be turning the collars on a couple of shirts.

'Nice? It'll be more than nice, love. And it's what you deserve.' Alf scratched his expanded belly and sighed with contentment. 'I'm the luckiest man in the world, do you know that? I've got a beautiful wife, lovely kids - what more could a man ask for, eh?'

'Listen to him go on, making all kinds of stupid promises he can't keep,' Dora whispered to Josie as they loaded plates into the sink in the scullery. 'I don't know how Mum puts up with it.'

'She doesn't mind.' Josie shrugged, stacking the dishes in the deep sink. 'She knows how Alf likes to talk.'

'All the same, I wish he'd shut up about the bloody house in Loughton. He's only a van driver, not Governor of the Bank of England.'

'Dora!' Josie laughed at her in surprise. 'I don't know why you don't like him.'

Dora looked at her sister. Josie was very grown-up for her age. There were four years between them, but since their middle sister Maggie had died they'd become more like friends than sisters. They had once shared all kinds of secrets, tucked together in their big bed, whispering and laughing together under the covers so Bea couldn't hear.

But there were some secrets Dora couldn't share, not even with her sister.

'I just don't,' she mumbled, picking a plate off the draining board to dry. 'I won't miss him when I leave, that's for sure.'

'Don't talk about leaving, I don't like it,' Josie said, pulling a face. Then in the next breath she added, 'Do you think I could have your old bedroom when you go?'

'No!' She shouted it so forcefully Josie stared at her in surprise.

‘Why not? It’s no fun being stuck in a bed with Bea. She kicks me in the night, and she snores worse than Nanna. And she’s so nosey too. She’s always into my things.’

‘All the same, you don’t want to be in my old room. It’s so cold and draughty, and – it’s haunted.’

Josie’s dark eyes widened. ‘You’ve never said.’

‘That’s ’cos I’ve never wanted to frighten you. But there’s a ghost all right.’

Just then Rose appeared in the scullery doorway, her cheeks flushed pink from the port and lemon she’d had.

‘Everything all right?’ she asked. ‘I thought I heard our Dora shouting.’

‘She says her bedroom’s haunted,’ Josie said.

Dora didn’t meet her mother’s eye, but she could feel her frown. ‘Your sister’s having you on,’ she said briskly. ‘The only thing haunts this place is your Nanna. And she’d be enough to scare any ghost off. Now Dora, stop filling Josie’s head with nonsense.’

I wish it *was* nonsense, Dora thought.

After they’d washed up the dishes, Alf went to the pub, and for the first time in the evening, Dora felt herself relax. She played Snakes and Ladders with Josie and Bea while they listened to Henry Hall on the wireless. Nanna dozed by the warmth of the fire and her mother got on with the rest of her mending for the laundry.

Later, they all went to bed. Nanna Winnie complained loudly, claiming the fish and chips had made her ill.

‘I’ll probably die in my sleep,’ she predicted gloomily, as she rose stiffly from her rocking chair.

‘No one ever died of indigestion, Mum!’ Rose laughed.

‘That’s what you reckon,’ Nanna said darkly. ‘You lot will be laughing the other side of your faces when you find my cold dead corpse in the morning.’

Dora and Josie stood side by side at the scullery sink, brushing their teeth.

‘It’s going to be lonely here without you,’ Josie said.

Dora spat toothpaste down the plug hole. 'You'll have Bea and Little Alfie.'

'But I won't have you.'

'I told you, I'll come home for visits.'

'Promise?' Josie rinsed her mouth out and turned to face her sister, her dark eyes shining. 'Promise you won't forget me?'

'How could I forget you? I'm your big sister, ain't I?' Dora stroked her silky dark hair. 'I'll always look out for you, Jose.'

When they'd all gone to bed Dora lay in the darkness under the weight of her old eiderdown, listening to Nanna's snores through the thin wall. From next door, she could hear June Riley yelling at her sons.

Tired though she was, she didn't dare sleep until she heard the sound of Alf's key scraping in the lock.

Her stomach clenched in fear as she heard his heavy tread in the passageway. Please God, she prayed. Please don't let him come in. Not tonight.

His footsteps stopped outside the bedroom door. Dora held her breath as the knob began to turn, ever so slowly . .

He moved quietly for a big man. Dora felt him standing over her as she lay still, her eyes tightly shut, pretending to be asleep.

But he wasn't fooled. 'I know you're awake.' He leaned closer to her, his hot breath fanning her face, stinking of beer and cigarettes. 'Waiting for me, are you?'

'Leave me alone,' she whispered into the darkness, her eyes still closed.

'Not until I get what I've come for.' He wrenched off the bedclothes, leaving her trembling and exposed. Dora curled up in fear, head down, knees pulled up to her chest, as if she could disappear inside her flannel nightdress.

But it was no use. He had already pinned her to the bed with his knee as he fumbled with his trouser buttons.

‘I’ll tell Mum,’ she threatened, twisting away from him. ‘I’ll scream and everyone will come running.’

‘And then what?’ Alf mocked her. ‘What do you think will happen then? She might kick me out, but I’m telling you now, you won’t be far behind. D’you really think she’d want to see your face again, knowing what you and me had done?’ He was on top of her, his bulky body stifling her. His breathing was hard and ragged as his rough hands pawed under her nightdress. ‘And what about the rest of the family? They’ll be on the streets before you know it, without me to pay the rent. Is that what you want?’

‘I want you to leave me alone.’

He grunted with laughter. ‘No, you don’t. You love it.’ He grabbed her hand and plunged it into his trousers. She tried to pull away but he gripped her tightly, forcing her against him until she felt her arm would snap in two. ‘You should count yourself lucky. Ugly little cow like you, no other man would ever look at you.’

He suddenly yanked her arms back, pinning them above her head as he thrust himself clumsily against her. All the fight gone out of her, Dora could do nothing but blank her mind. She turned her face to stare at the crack of dim lamplight between the faded rose print curtains, listened to the distant sound of June Riley’s screeching voice, and told herself it would all be over soon.

Chapter Three

IF THINGS HAD gone as her grandmother had planned, Lady Amelia Charlotte Benedict should have been celebrating her engagement by her eighteenth birthday. The Dowager Countess of Rettingham had even taken the trouble to draw up a list of the most eligible prospects, starting with the son of a duke and ending with a minor baronet from Lincolnshire – not ideal, but better than nothing, as she'd pointed out.

And yet here Millie was, on a November morning six months after her nineteenth birthday, standing in Matron's office yet again. It was simply too tiresome.

Matron obviously felt the same. 'So, here you are once more, Benedict,' she said with a heavy sigh.

'I'm afraid so, Matron.'

'Do you realise you are the only one in your set to have failed Preliminary Training?'

Millie stared down at the parquet floor. 'Yes, Matron.'

'Do you know why you have failed, Benedict?'

'I think so, Matron. But it was an accident,' she added quickly. 'If that soap enema solution hadn't exploded in my hands—'

She saw Matron's forbidding expression and stopped. A student was not supposed to speak to her superiors unless spoken to. Even making eye contact with Matron was discouraged. Millie knew some pros who hid in the sluice room during her ward rounds so they wouldn't have to be in her presence.

Which was a shame, really. Matron looked as if she might be rather fun, once you got to know her.