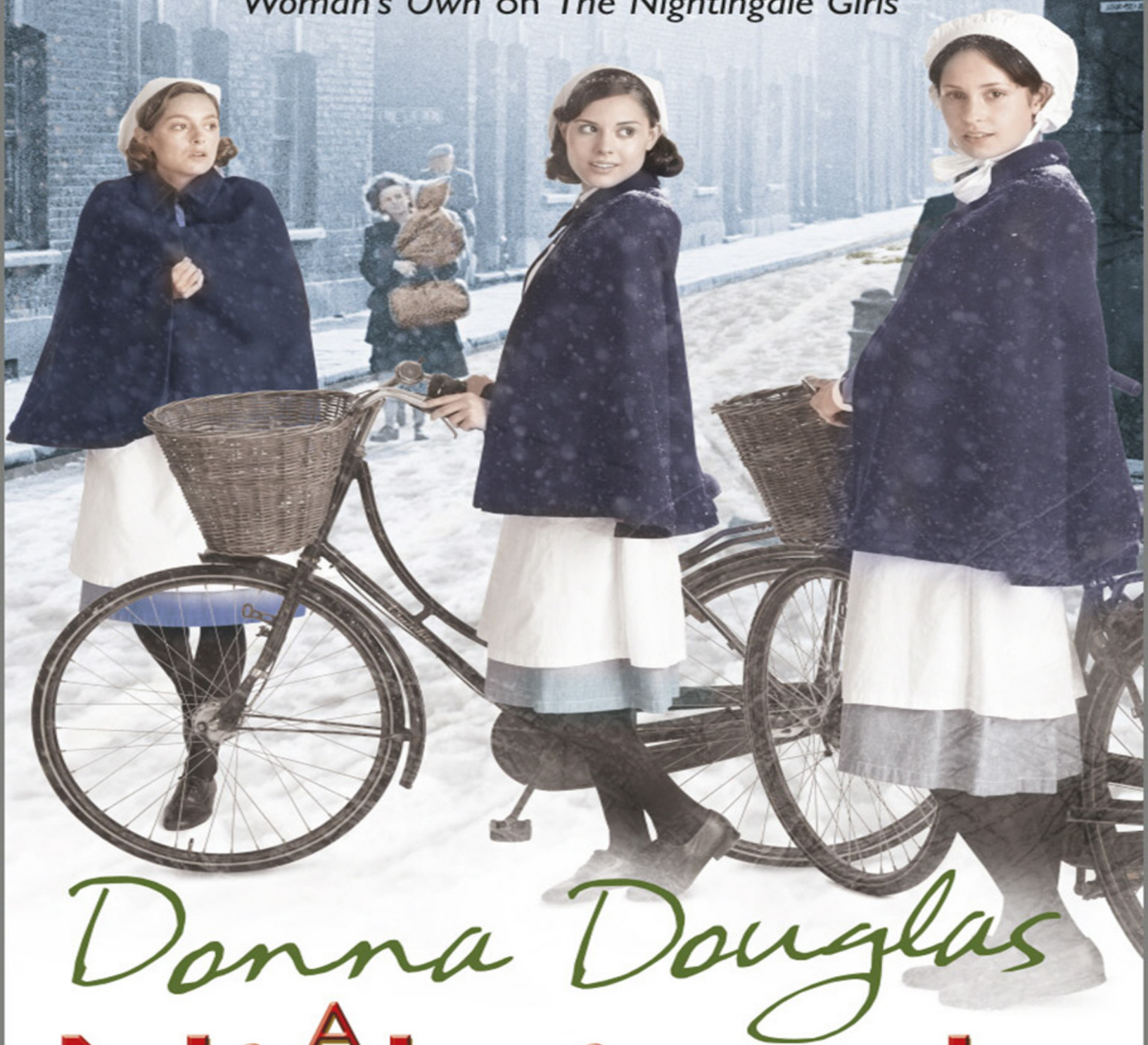


'Fans of *Call the Midwife* will enjoy this'
Woman's Own on *The Nightingale Girls*



Donna Douglas
**A
Nightingale
Christmas Wish**

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About the Book

It's Christmas at the Nightingale Hospital...

Sister Blake is revisited by a face from the past. Will buried secrets stop her from being happy?

Lonely Helen Dawson has new responsibilities and trials, but is she looking for love in all the wrong places?

And Matron puts the Nightingale first, even before her own health. With war looming large, will Matron and the Nightingale survive?

With new hardships, new loves and new heartbreak, will anyone get their Christmas wish?

About the Author

Born and brought up in south London, Donna Douglas now lives in York with her husband. They have a grown-up daughter.

Also available by Donna Douglas

The Nightingale Girls
The Nightingale Sisters
The Nightingale Nurses
Nightingales on Call

A Nightingale Christmas Wish

Donna Douglas



arrow books

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Last, but not least, big thanks to my family and friends. Special thanks to my long-suffering husband Ken, who puts up with my long absences and short-temperedness with a ridiculous amount of patience; and to my daughter Harriet, who reads my work as I write it, and who manages to be both brutal and encouraging at the same time. I love you both and I couldn't do it without you.

To my sister Jane

Chapter One

ON A FREEZING cold December morning in 1914, seventeen-year-old Frannie Wallace gathered with the rest of her Pennine village on a frosty railway station platform to see their loved ones off to war.

She barely recognised any of the men in their unfamiliar khaki uniforms, kitbags slung over their shoulders. Fathers, husbands and sons, all hugging their tearful wives and children, smiling as if it didn't matter.

'Come on now, love. Buck up, it won't be for long.'

'I'll be back home by Christmas, you'll see. Won't take us long to finish off that Hun!'

'Be sure to write to me when the baby arrives, won't you?'

In the middle of the platform stood Matthew, laughing and joking with his pals, their breath curling on the crisp winter air. They'd signed up together, all the boys. It was hard to believe that in a few days the lads Frannie had shared a classroom with would be in France, fighting for their country.

Especially Matthew. He looked so young and fresh-faced, his dark hair cut short over his ears, stamping his shiny new boots on the ground to keep out the cold. Tears stung Frannie's eyes but she blinked them away determinedly. She'd promised him she wouldn't cry.

Not that his mother and sisters kept their promise. Alice Sinclair was sobbing as she fussed over her son, straightening his collar and smoothing down his tunic.

Matthew brushed her aside impatiently. 'Get off, Ma. Do you want the other lads laughing at me?'

'Now, have you got everything?' Alice said, ignoring him. 'Did you remember that chocolate I gave you, and those

extra socks?’

‘Leave him be, Alice,’ Matthew’s father said, his voice hoarse with emotion. ‘If the boy’s old enough to fight a war then he’s old enough to take care of himself!’

Of course that set his wife off crying again. Frannie couldn’t imagine what Alice would do without her beloved only son. Even her three daughters knew he was the favourite, the one she truly doted on.

But then everyone doted on Matthew, including Frannie herself.

She looked around and suddenly noticed John. He stood apart from the others as usual, quiet and watchful. John had come from the local orphanage to work on the Sinclairs’ farm when he was thirteen, and he and Matthew had become good friends. At eighteen years old John was already a tall, strapping man, making the others look even more like boys.

He had no one to see him off, no one fussing over him. But he stood proud, a look of defiant indifference on his square-jawed face.

Frannie went over to him. ‘All ready, John?’ She smiled at him.

He looked round at her, whipping the cap off his cropped dark head. ‘Miss Wallace?’

‘Frannie,’ she reminded him. ‘I’m only a schoolmaster’s daughter, you don’t have to address me as if I’m a teacher!’

She regretted teasing him when she saw the blush creeping up from his collar. ‘Sorry,’ he mumbled.

Frannie felt so sorry for him, she handed him the bar of Fry’s Chocolate Cream she’d been keeping for Matthew. ‘Here, have this.’

John looked at it, then back at her. ‘Are you sure?’ he asked. ‘What about Matthew?’

‘He already has more than enough.’ Frannie glanced down the platform to where her sweetheart was still trying to squirm free from his mother’s embrace. ‘Look after him for

me, won't you?' The words burst from her, though Frannie hadn't intended to say them.

'I'll make sure he doesn't get into any mischief, don't you worry.'

Frannie smiled ruefully. 'You'll have a job doing that! Matthew finds trouble wherever he goes.' A lump rose in her throat, choking her. Don't cry, she told herself. Please don't cry.

'I'll look after him, I promise,' John said quietly.

'And mind you look after yourself, too,' Frannie said, when she'd mastered her emotions enough to speak again.

John scuffed the frosty ground with the toe of his boot. 'Doesn't matter about me,' he mumbled.

'Yes, it does.' Frannie felt a sudden surge of pity for the orphanage boy who had no one to care about him. Impulsively she plunged her hand into her pocket and pulled out the only thing of value she had. 'Here,' she said, handing it to him.

He stared down at the rough grey stone in his palm. 'What is it?'

'A pebble I picked up from the top of Kinder Scout. I call it my lucky charm. Perhaps it will bring you luck, too?'

He didn't laugh. Matthew would have laughed, which was why Frannie had had second thoughts about giving it to him. She knew he would think her foolish, tell her he didn't need luck.

But John looked at her as if she'd just handed him one of the Crown Jewels. His eyes met hers, clear and green.

'Thank you,' he said, tucking it in the top pocket of his tunic. 'I'll treasure it always.'

The train let out a sudden hiss, belching a cloud of steam that shrouded them for a moment. The air was filled with the oily smell of burning coal as the guard blew his whistle.

'All aboard!'

Suddenly everyone was jostling towards the train. Frannie turned and ran back down the platform, just in time to see

Matthew climbing aboard.

'Matthew?' she cried out, her voice lost in the hubbub. She pushed her way through to the front of the crowd, close to the platform's edge, lost in the billowing, acrid steam.

But then to her relief he appeared, hanging out of an open window. 'There you are!' He grinned down at her. 'I thought you'd forgotten about me.'

'How could I?' As she put up her hands to grasp his, the solitary diamond on her engagement ring caught the weak, wintry sunlight. It still gave her a surprise to see it there, less than a day after Matthew had slid it on to her finger.

To think yesterday she'd felt like the happiest, luckiest girl in the world. And now . . .

Panic seized her. 'I'm frightened, Matthew,' she whispered. 'I wish you didn't have to go.'

'I'll be home soon enough, you'll see.'

Frannie looked up into his smiling face. He was always so sure of himself. Not in an arrogant way, but his bright coppery-brown eyes gleamed with the confidence of someone who had never known a moment's self-doubt. It was one of the things she loved about him. She wished at that moment she had a shred of his self-assurance to bolster her.

'You will write to me every day, won't you?'

'Frannie! I'm going over there to fight, not to write love letters!' He laughed at her stricken expression. 'Don't look so worried, Fran. And for God's sake, smile. I don't want your long face to be the last thing I see here!'

'Sorry.' She tried to smile, but her lips were trembling.

'Oh, come here.' He leaned forward. Trapping her face between his hands, he kissed her long and hard. Frannie heard jeering and cheering around her and pulled away, embarrassed.

'Matthew!' She blushed to see all the faces around her, watching them.

'I'm allowed, aren't I? We're engaged.' Matthew lifted her hand and kissed the diamond on her ring. 'Wait for me,' he said. 'I promise I'll come home a hero and then we'll get married.'

'I don't want you to come home a hero. Just come home safe.'

His reply was lost in the shrill blast of the train whistle.

'All aboard!'

The guard was walking down the platform, waving his flag. Unseen hands dragged Frannie back from the platform's edge as the train started to inch away.

As it pulled out, the men all hung out of the windows, waving madly. Frannie caught a glimpse of John. He was sitting down, his face pressed to the glass. As the train rumbled past, he lifted his hand in the slightest of waves.

Frannie remembered Matthew's words and smiled until her cheeks ached and the train had disappeared out of sight.

She was glad she'd done as he asked. Especially when the telegram arrived.

Chapter Two

November 1938

THE YOUNG MEDICAL student made a perfect Assistant Matron.

It took all Frannie Wallace's self-control not to smile as he stood before her on the makeshift stage, grey dress skimming his hairy ankles, arms folded across his formidably padded bosom. Under the starched headdress, his frowning expression was exactly like Miss Hanley's.

'I'm sorry, Mr Evans, but it really won't do,' Frannie managed, when she could finally trust herself to speak.

Owen Evans looked put out. 'But, Sister, I've gone to so much trouble!'

'Then I'm afraid you've wasted your time. I can't allow you to appear in the Christmas show looking like that.'

There was a chorus of protest from the other young men gathered around him. Two of them were wearing the striped dresses of student nurses. Frannie shuddered to think how they'd acquired them.

At the other end of the vast dining room, the other would-be performers were preparing, clutching their sheet music, sliding up and down scales to warm up their voices, or huddled in groups waiting to take their turn on the crudely constructed dais where Frannie sat, directing the proceedings.

'This is supposed to be an entertainment for the patients and their families,' she reminded the students, raising her voice above the din. 'I will not allow you to use it as an opportunity to lampoon members of staff. Poor Miss Hanley would be mortified.'

‘Miss Hanley?’ Mr Evans did his best to feign innocence. ‘Oh, no, Sister, I don’t know where you got that idea from. I wasn’t making fun of anyone in particular, truly I wasn’t. Really, I’m rather shocked that you should think that this – this gross parody remotely resembles our esteemed Assistant Matron—’

The other young men chortled. ‘Come on, Sister, be a sport,’ one of them piped up. ‘It’s only a bit of fun, after all.’

‘Fun, is it?’ Frannie shot him a chilly glance. ‘I would like to see you having fun at one of the consultants’ expense,’ she said. ‘Perhaps you could dress up as Mr Hobbs or Mr Cooper? Or what about Mr Latimer? I’m sure *he’d* see the funny side.’ The young men shuffled their feet and stared at the floor like naughty schoolboys. ‘I thought as much,’ Frannie said. ‘And yet you find it perfectly acceptable to poke fun at one of the senior nursing staff?’

There was an uncomfortable silence. Owen Evans whipped off his wig. He knew when he was beaten. ‘I suppose you’re right,’ he sighed.

As they shuffled off the stage, one of the young students grumbled, ‘You might let us have some fun, Sister. After all, we probably won’t even be here next Christmas.’

‘That’s true,’ another muttered. ‘I expect we’ll be in a trench somewhere, taking potshots at Germans.’

A chill brushed the back of Frannie’s neck. ‘Don’t talk like that,’ she said.

Owen Evans stopped and looked at her. ‘Why not? We all know there’s going to be a war.’

‘Everyone except Mr Chamberlain!’ his friend said.

‘No one wants to go to war,’ Frannie said quietly. ‘Not after last time.’

‘Yes, but we can’t ignore what Hitler’s doing in Europe,’ Owen Evans insisted stubbornly. ‘And it’s not going to stop just because he’s signed a piece of paper.’

‘He needs to be taught a lesson,’ another chimed in. ‘You’ve got to stand up for what’s right, haven’t you? If we

don't, it'll be us next.'

'Just let him try!' Another young man, a thickset chap with a pugnacious face, balled his hands into fists. 'Give me the chance to go over there. I'll show those Germans what for!'

'You don't know what you're talking about!' Tension made Frannie snap. 'You think it's all a big game, don't you? But war isn't like a football match. You don't shake hands and go home when you've had enough. Some of you won't come home at all—' She stopped talking, suddenly aware of the line of startled faces staring back at her from the makeshift stage. 'At any rate, things probably won't come to that,' she dismissed, shuffling the sheet music on the table in front of her. 'Now, about your act. If you want to take part in this Christmas show, you will have to come up with another sketch. That one simply won't do.'

'Yes, Sister.' This time they didn't argue. They hurried away, whispering among themselves.

'Well, I think you've given them something to think about.'

Frannie looked round to find Kathleen Fox standing behind her.

'Matron! I didn't hear you come in.' She started to her feet, but Kathleen waved her back into her seat.

'We're not on the ward now, Fran,' she said, smiling.

Kathleen Fox had been Matron of the Nightingale Hospital for more than four years now. But it was difficult for Frannie to look at her and not see the girl she'd shared a room with while training in Leeds. The girl she had been was still there in the warmth of Kathleen's grey eyes and the flash of auburn hair under her starched white headdress.

'You mustn't judge them too harshly, you know,' she said to her friend. 'You can't blame them for not understanding what war is like. They're just boys, Fran. They can't take it in.'

'That's just it, isn't it? They're boys. Signing up for a lark. Just like—' Frannie stopped herself.

Just like Matthew. And look how that had ended.

‘But we know what it’s really like, don’t we?’ Kathleen continued, steadying her voice.

Like Frannie, Kathleen had worked as a voluntary nurse at a military hospital before they’d started their nurse’s training. Frannie had volunteered as soon as she turned eighteen, so that she could feel closer to Matthew. But by the time she was posted to France, he was already missing, presumed dead.

‘All this talk of war is bound to stir up bad memories,’ Kathleen said to her kindly. ‘It’s everywhere you turn, isn’t it?’

Frannie nodded. Owen Evans was right about that, at any rate. The streets were lined with sandbags, and trenches had already been dug in all the parks to shelter people caught in air raids. There was even talk of families being separated and children being sent away from the city.

It was hard to believe that only a few weeks ago the country had rejoiced when the Prime Minister returned from Munich clutching a piece of paper promising peace. That Sunday morning the bells had rung out in churches across the land, and everyone had breathed a sigh of relief that they might not be going to war after all.

But it had soon become clear that whatever Hitler had promised, nothing was going to stand in the way of his ambitions. Gloom and resignation had settled over the country once more. Shortly afterwards, they had lined up to be issued with their gas masks by the council. Frannie’s was still in its cardboard box in her room. She couldn’t bring herself to touch it. Just seeing it on the shelf made her feel ill.

‘I’m sure good sense will prevail eventually,’ Kathleen said.

‘I hope so. I only wish everyone would stop talking about it.’

They were both silent for a moment, lost in their thoughts. Then Kathleen smiled and said, ‘Let’s talk about something

more pleasant, shall we? How are arrangements for the concert coming on?’

Frannie grimaced. ‘Much the same as usual, I’m afraid.’

Every year the staff of the Nightingale Hospital put on a Christmas show for the patients and their families. And every year Frannie promised herself she wouldn’t get involved with organising it. But as November rolled around and the festive season approached, she found herself confronted with all those hopeful faces and she couldn’t say no.

Kathleen smiled at her. ‘I’m sure you must secretly enjoy it?’

‘Perhaps I do,’ Frannie agreed ruefully. ‘But not when I have to spend all my time sorting out their squabbles. Not to mention explaining to Sister Wren yet again why she can’t do a duet with Mr Cooper.’

‘Oh, dear.’ Kathleen’s grey eyes lit up with mischief. ‘Perhaps Mr Cooper should just give in gracefully?’

Frannie leaned forward, lowering her voice. ‘Between you and me, Mr Cooper has begged not to be put with her. He was very firm on that point.’

‘Poor Sister Wren!’

‘Poor Mr Cooper, you mean!’ The ward sister’s relentless infatuation with the obstetrics consultant had been going on for several years now, even though he was a married man and clearly not interested.

‘Speak of the devil . . .’

Frannie followed Kathleen’s gaze to the far end of the room. Miriam Trott, sister of Wren ward, was making her way towards them, sheet music tucked under her arm. ‘Oh, lord. Don’t leave me,’ begged Frannie. ‘Pretend we have some important ward business to discuss.’

‘I can’t, I’m afraid. I have a meeting with Mrs Tremayne in ten minutes.’

Frannie pulled a face, her own problems instantly forgotten. ‘Oh, dear. What does she want?’

‘Heaven knows. I’m just wondering what she can possibly have found to complain about now.’

‘Perhaps she just wants a chat?’

Kathleen sent her an old-fashioned look. ‘I don’t think so. That woman is the bane of my life. And she’s been even worse since she was made Chairwoman of the Board of Trustees.’

‘You’re more than a match for her.’

‘I hope so. But I’m not really in the mood to do battle at the moment.’

There was something wistful about Kathleen’s expression that made Frannie look twice at her friend. ‘Are you all right, Kath? You look rather tired.’

‘I’m quite all right, thank you.’ Her smile was back in place. ‘I just have better things to do than listen to Mrs Tremayne’s complaints. And speaking of complaints . . .’

Suddenly Miriam Trott was standing beside them. ‘Excuse me, Matron, but might I have a word with Miss Wallace?’ she said, planting herself in front of Frannie and blocking her means of escape.

‘Of course,’ Kathleen said. ‘I’ll leave you to it.’

‘No, really, Matron, there’s no need—’ Frannie sent her a silent, imploring look, which she blithely ignored.

‘It’s quite all right, Sister. I must prepare for my meeting.’

And then she was gone. Frannie watched her making her way towards the dining-room doors, pausing here and there to exchange a few words with the nurses who had gathered to rehearse.

‘Miss Wallace?’ Sister Wren’s voice insinuated its way into her thoughts. ‘I wondered if I could talk to you about my music? I have a few ideas for duets. I thought perhaps Mr Cooper and I—’

‘I want to talk to you about the Casualty department.’

Constance Tremayne was not a woman to beat about the bush. She sat on the other side of the desk from Kathleen,

hands curled around her handbag. Everything about her was tightly drawn, from her ramrod-straight spine to the dark hair pulled into a severe bun at the nape of her long, thin neck. With her permanently pursed lips, she always put Kathleen in mind of a sucked lemon.

‘What about it?’ she asked. Behind her easy smile she was tensed, waiting for the blow to fall. In the four years she had been Matron of the Nightingale hospital, she had never known Mrs Tremayne come into her office without making a complaint of some kind.

‘I understand Sister Percival is leaving?’

‘That’s right. She’s moving down to Devon to nurse her sick mother.’

‘So you’ll be looking for a replacement. Do you have anyone in mind?’

Kathleen looked into Mrs Tremayne’s inquisitive face and fought the urge to tell her to mind her own business. Be nice, Kath, she warned herself. She knew from experience Constance Tremayne could be dangerous when crossed. ‘I was planning to move one of the other staff nurses. Perhaps Staff Nurse Lund—’

‘Is that wise?’ Constance Tremayne asked. ‘I mean, I’m sure Staff Nurse Lund is a perfectly adequate nurse, but wouldn’t Casualty be better run by someone with Theatre experience? I was talking to Dr McKay the other day, and he told me they are dealing with more and more surgical emergencies these days. Road accidents and so forth. He would very much like to be able to deal with more such emergencies in Casualty, rather than waste valuable time sending them up to Theatre. But for that he would really need a qualified Theatre nurse . . .’

‘I see.’ Kathleen could already tell where this conversation was going, and why Mrs Tremayne had been so keen to see her. The Chairwoman of the Board of Trustees might think she was being clever, but she was as transparent as the cut-glass paperweight on Kathleen’s desk.

‘Of course, as Matron it’s your decision,’ Constance went on. But before Kathleen could draw breath, she added, ‘Although it does occur to me that my daughter Helen might be a suitable candidate. After all, she has two years’ experience in Theatre.’

There it was. Constance Tremayne had shown her hand, and now it was Kathleen’s turn to respond.

‘I agree, Helen is a very accomplished nurse,’ she said. ‘I’ve certainly heard good reports from Sister Theatre. But,’ she added, as the self-satisfied smile widened on Mrs Tremayne’s face, ‘she is still very young. It’s barely two years since she passed her State Final. She needs more experience as a staff nurse before she takes on the role of Sister.’

‘I’m sure Helen would relish the challenge,’ Mrs Tremayne put in swiftly.

I daresay Helen wouldn’t have much choice in the matter, Kathleen thought. She wondered if Constance had troubled herself to ask her daughter’s opinion. In Kathleen’s experience, she seldom did.

She considered the suggestion. She had to admit, Constance Tremayne was right, they would benefit from having an experienced Theatre nurse in Casualty. Kathleen too had spoken to Dr McKay at length, and she knew he had high hopes of adding another operating theatre to the Casualty department.

But she worried for poor Helen. After only two years as a qualified nurse, she might be out of her depth.

As if she sensed Kathleen wavering, Mrs Tremayne pushed on. ‘I must admit, I have a personal reason for suggesting it,’ she said. ‘As you know, the last two years haven’t been easy for my daughter.’

‘Indeed,’ Kathleen agreed. Everyone knew Helen’s tragic story. She had married her sweetheart in a rushed wedding at the hospital, only for him to die two weeks later. Poor

Helen was so heartbroken that for a while it seemed she might not even get as far as taking her exams.

Now she appeared to be working well in Theatre, if the reports of her were anything to go by. Kathleen admired the young woman for her determination and courage.

'I think it would be good for her to take on a new challenge,' Mrs Tremayne said. 'She has shut herself away in Theatre for too long.'

Kathleen regarded the other woman across the desk. Perhaps there was a shred of humanity in her after all?

'I'll talk to her,' she promised. 'We'll see what she has to say on the matter.'

'I'm sure you'll find she's quite willing,' Mrs Tremayne dismissed this airily.

Kathleen sighed. Poor Helen. No doubt she would succumb to her mother's implacable will, as they all did eventually.

After Mrs Tremayne had left, Kathleen watched her from the window of her office. She marched purposefully across the courtyard, rigidly upright, as if even the howling November wind couldn't bend her. The sky was a leaden yellowish-grey, heavy with the promise of snow. Kathleen shivered in spite of the warmth of the blazing fire in her office. She disliked this time of year: the deadening hand of winter settling on everything, the gusty wind that stripped the trees, leaving them bare and shivering. It felt too much like death for her liking.

Chapter Three

ON A SNOWY Saturday morning in December, Helen Dawson laid flowers on her husband Charlie's grave. It would have been his twenty-fifth birthday.

'It was like this the day he was born.' His mother Nellie stood at the foot of the grave, her coat pulled tightly around her bulky figure. 'Snow piled up outside the door, it was. My old man had to dig a path down the alley for the midwife to get in.' She shivered. 'Charlie hated the cold, bless him. Never liked that his birthday was in the winter. "Why couldn't I have been born in the summer?" he used to say. "Winter's such a rotten time of year."'

She fell silent, her lips trembling. Helen pretended not to notice as she arranged carnations in an urn, a splash of scarlet against the white snow. She kept her eyes averted so she didn't have to look at Charlie's name, carved into the grey slab of a headstone. As long as she didn't allow herself to read the words, she could stay strong.

'It doesn't get any easier, does it?' Nellie seemed to read her thoughts. 'I know it's past two years, but I still miss him.'

'Me too,' Helen said quietly.

'Bless you, love, of course you do. It was cruel, him being taken so soon after you were married.'

'At least we *were* married.' Helen knew on her wedding day that they wouldn't have long together, but she was determined to take his name before he died. Sad as they were, those few days as man and wife had been the most special time she could remember.

She felt the hot tears brimming and dashed them away with her gloved hand. She wished she could be more like Nellie, letting her emotions spill out. But her own mother had taught her differently.

Nellie's hand settled on her sleeve, comforting her. 'Come on, love,' she said. 'I'll walk you to the hospital.'

They trudged back together through the streets of Bethnal Green. Thick white pelmets of snow clung to the roofs and window sills of the narrow terraces, but on the street it had turned to an ugly grey slush that seeped through their shoes. That didn't deter the children, who whooped with delight as they pulled their makeshift sledges up and down the middle of the street, laughing as they aimed gritty grey snowballs at each other. One whizzed past Helen's shoulder, narrowly missing her and Nellie.

'Sorry, missus!' A boy stuck his head around the corner and gave them a cheeky grin. 'That was meant for my mate!'

'Little perishers.' Nellie shook her head, smiling indulgently. 'My lot used to be just the same. As soon as it snowed they'd be out in it, getting up to all sorts.'

'William and I were too,' Helen recalled. 'He once decided to save himself the trouble of making a real snowman by covering me in snow instead. I had to stand still for so long, I couldn't feel my feet. I nearly had frostbite by the time Mother realised what he was doing.'

'That's big brothers for you,' Nellie chuckled. 'Charlie and his cousins were just the same with our Ivy.'

She fell silent again. Helen tucked her arm under Nellie's and they walked on, passing the end of Columbia Road Market. As it was a Saturday morning, the narrow street was already bustling with people. The stallholders, wrapped up in layers of coats, scarves, hats, mufflers and gloves, stamped their feet and blew on their hands to keep out the cold as they plied their trade. A couple waved at Nellie as she and Helen passed by the end of the road. The Dawsons

had been running a fruit and veg stall on the market for more than twenty-five years, and everyone knew them.

‘Pity my poor Ivy on the stall this morning!’ Nellie grinned. ‘She won’t be happy, getting up at the crack of dawn to set up in this weather.’

‘Do you want to go down and say hello?’ Helen asked.

‘And listen to her complain? Not likely!’ Nellie rolled her eyes. ‘Ta very much, love, but I’d rather have a nice natter with you. You can tell me what’s going on at that hospital of yours.’

‘Well, it’s funny you should ask . . .’ As they walked, Helen told Nellie about starting her new job as acting Casualty Sister the following week.

‘Sister, eh? Blimey, girl, you kept that quiet.’ Nellie looked impressed. ‘That’s a step up for you, ain’t it?’

‘I suppose so.’

Nellie sent her a sideways look. ‘You don’t sound too sure about it, I must say.’

‘I am,’ Helen said. ‘It’s just – oh, I don’t know.’ She paused, searching for the right words to explain the worries that had kept her awake for the past week. ‘I’m not sure if I’m up to the job. I’ve only been qualified as a nurse for two years. It’s early to be promoted.’

‘They must think a lot of you, then.’

Helen was silent. She suspected it had more to do with her mother’s interference. Helen could almost see it in Matron’s face when she’d told her about the job.

Nellie squeezed her hand. ‘Come on, spit it out. You’ve got something on your mind, I can tell.’

Helen smiled ruefully. How strange that she could talk to Nellie more easily than she could to her own mother. Constance Tremayne would only dismiss her fears and tell her she was being silly.

‘I’m worried I don’t have the first idea about running a ward, let alone a department as busy as Casualty,’ she said.

'And the staff nurse under me is years senior to me. I don't know what she'll think of that.'

'Then you'll just have to show 'em what you're made of, won't you?' Nellie said. 'Besides, that Matron of yours wouldn't have given you the job if she didn't reckon you could manage it.'

'I suppose not,' Helen agreed reluctantly. 'But I didn't want to move from Theatre. I liked working there.'

Nellie shuddered. 'Rather you than me, love. I don't think I could watch people being cut about all day long!'

'You forget they're people,' Helen said. 'They're just cases to be treated.'

That was what she liked about it. In Theatre, the patients were brought in, put to sleep, treated and then taken away again. It wasn't like working on the ward. Helen never had to get to know them, or listen to their stories, or worry that they might not pull through. They were just names on a list, to be forgotten about as soon as the operation was over.

They skirted the tall, wrought-iron gates of Victoria Park. Beyond the gates it looked like a wintry wonderland, the dark, skeletal trees laced with snow.

'I suppose you'll be working over Christmas, if you're in charge?' Nellie said.

'I hadn't really thought about it,' Helen replied. 'I'll be in charge of the duty rosters. But it doesn't seem fair to give myself time off when the other nurses might have families they want to visit.'

'Don't you want to visit yours?'

Helen was silent for a moment. 'Well, my father will be busy in church most of the day, and I expect William will be on call at the hospital as usual, so there'll only be me and Mother . . .'

She let her voice trail off.

'You could always spend Christmas with us?' Nellie suggested. 'We're only round the corner, and you know we'd love to have you. The kids are always asking when you're coming to visit.'

'That's very kind of you, but I wouldn't want to impose.'

'You wouldn't be imposing,' Nellie said. 'You're family, remember?' She put her hand over Helen's. 'Charlie would have wanted us to look after you.'

Helen smiled. She had been welcomed so easily into his rough and ready family, it made her feel ashamed to remember how badly her own mother had treated him. Constance Tremayne had never got over the fact that her daughter had married a costermonger's son.

'He wouldn't have wanted you to be a stranger,' Nellie said, then added, 'he wouldn't have wanted you to be unhappy either.'

There was something about the way she said it that made Helen turn to look at her.

'I am happy,' she said.

'Are you?'

'Of course. As happy as I can be,' she added in a low voice.

The truth was, she wasn't sure what happiness was any more. After two long years, the first sharp pain of Charlie's loss had subsided to a dull ache. She still yearned for him, but these days she could wake up in the morning and not dread the thought of dragging herself through her next waking hours. Only very occasionally did it catch her out. Like when she dreamed of him so vividly that she woke up believing he was still there with her. Then the fresh pain of loss would make her catch her breath.

But was the absence of pain the same as happiness? Helen wasn't sure. For the past two years it was as if the world had been shrouded in a fine grey mist. Through it, she could see the rest of the world, laughing and loving and going about its business, while she stood apart, detached from everything going on around her.

Nellie was silent for a moment. Then she said, 'Have you thought about courting again?'

Helen whipped round to look at her, shocked. 'What? No!'

‘Why not? You can’t be alone for ever, can you? How old are you? Twenty-four? You’re still a young woman—’

‘I don’t want anyone else,’ Helen cut her off firmly.

‘You might say that now, but sooner or later someone’s going to come along and catch your eye. And I know my Charlie wouldn’t want you to spend the rest of your life alone. He’d want you to be happy.’

‘I don’t want anyone else,’ Helen repeated, more firmly.

‘Whatever you say, love. I just wanted you to know that if you did want to start courting again, it would be all right with me.’

Helen was silent, lost in her thoughts. Until Nellie mentioned it, it hadn’t even occurred to her that she might fall in love again. Not just out of respect for Charlie, but because she genuinely couldn’t imagine any other man stirring her heart the way he had.

The silence stretched between them, and Helen was relieved when they reached the hospital gates.

‘Well, I’ll be seeing you, love.’ Nellie planted a warm kiss on her frozen cheek. ‘Good luck with the new job tomorrow. And you won’t forget what I said, will you? We’d love to see you at Christmas.’

‘I’ll try,’ Helen said. Although deep down she knew she wouldn’t. Even after two years, it hurt too much to go to Charlie’s home, knowing he wouldn’t be there.