

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



Donna Douglas

**Nightingales
on Call**

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About the Book

1937 sees new challenges for the trainee nurses

Dora and her old enemy Lucy are paired up on the children's ward for the final three months of their training. The two nurses couldn't seem more different, but they may have more in common than they think, as each hides a secret heartache.

... and new faces at the Nightingale

Jess is the feisty eldest daughter of a notorious East End family and determined to prove herself as a ward maid.

And new trainee nurse Effie can't wait to escape her small Irish village, and make her way as a nurse in London. But Effie's sister Katie soon begins to worry that Effie's behaviour is out of control.

Nightingales on call and in crisis: have they got what it takes?

About the Author

Donna Douglas lives in York with her husband and daughter. Besides writing novels, she is also a very well-respected freelance journalist and has written many features for the *Daily Mail*.

Also available by Donna Douglas

The Nightingale Girls
The Nightingale Sisters
The Nightingale Nurses

and as an ebook original

A Child is Born: A Nightingales Christmas Story

Nightingales on Call

Donna Douglas



arrow books

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To Daphne Anderson
with love from Julia (and me)

Chapter One

'YOUR DUTIES WILL begin at five o'clock sharp. You will lay the fires, draw the curtains and make sure the boiler is lit. You will then wake me at precisely half past five with a cup of tea and my breakfast. I like two boiled eggs and buttered toast. Lightly boiled, mind. I can't abide eggs like rubber.'

The Home Sister glared at Jess as if she doubted she could ever be equal to such a task. Jess smiled back, her tongue rammed in her cheek to stop herself answering back. She didn't want to lose this job before she'd managed to get it.

'At six o'clock you must wake the students,' Sister Sutton went on. 'Once they have gone, you will clean the bathrooms, sweep, dust and polish all the halls and stairs, and clean the students' sitting room. The nurses are supposed to keep it tidy, but they tend to be rather careless.' Her nose wrinkled with distaste. 'I will carry out my inspection at midday, so I expect everything to be in order by then.' She stared at Jess, her eyes as tiny and dark as raisins in her doughy face. 'You have been in service, you say?'

Jess nodded. 'Since I was thirteen.' Although none of the houses where she had been employed as a maid of all work were anywhere near as big as the student nurses' home. With its grand entrance, sweeping staircase and long passages, it was like one of the great manor houses she had read about in her favourite Jane Austen novels. Except there were no works of art on the drab, brown-painted walls, and the floors were covered in polished lino and not Turkish rugs. But the ornate plasterwork on the high ceilings still whispered of the house's elegant past.

As the Home Sister continued to list the maid's duties, Jess gazed up at the twisting plaster vine leaves and carved bunches of grapes and wondered how she would ever be able to reach up there with a duster.

'Are you listening to me, girl?' Sister Sutton's sharp voice interrupted her thoughts. 'I hope you're not daydreaming? I have no time for daydreamers.'

'No, Miss. Sorry, Miss.'

'Please address me as Sister.'

'Yes, Miss - I mean, Sister.'

Jess bobbed her head. She wasn't easily intimidated, but Sister Sutton was as imposing as the house she presided over. She wasn't much taller than Jess, but at least three times as wide, her grey uniform stretched over her solid bulk. Wisps of wiry silver hair escaped from beneath her starched white bonnet, tied in a bow amid her quivering chins. A Jack Russell terrier pranced around her feet, yapping up at Jess. The din filled the echoing passageway where they stood, but Sister Sutton seemed oblivious to it.

'It says in your references that you're a hard worker and quick to learn.' The Home Sister looked doubtful as she consulted the letter in her hand.

'I am, Miss - Sister.'

'Your previous employer seemed very satisfied with you. So why did you want to leave?'

'I want a live-in job, Sister.'

'Really?' Sister Sutton's brows rose. 'Most young girls seem to want to live out these days.'

Most young girls don't come from where I do, Jess thought. 'I would prefer to live in,' was all she said.

The terrier scabbled at her leg, its claws digging through her stockings. Jess bent to stroke it but it lunged forward, snapping at her outstretched fingers. She snatched her hand back sharply.

'I wouldn't do that if I were you. Sparky is very fussy about people,' Sister Sutton said.

Jess eyed the dog. He stared straight back at her with hostile black eyes, as if he knew exactly who she was and where she had come from.

The front door opened and two students came in, chattering together. As soon as they spotted Sister Sutton they froze and fell instantly silent. They tried to slink towards the stairs, but the Home Sister wheeled round to confront them.

'You two! Where do you think you're going?' she demanded.

The girls exchanged nervous glances. They weren't much older than Jess, one pretty and blue-eyed with dark curls, the other brown-haired and sharp-featured.

'Please, Sister, it's two o'clock,' the dark-haired girl whispered. She had a lilting Irish accent that was as sweet as her round face.

'I can tell the time perfectly well, thank you very much. Why aren't you on your wards?'

'We've been sent off duty until five, Sister,' the other student explained. Her voice was clear and crisp, each syllable perfectly pronounced, like one of the lady announcers Jess had heard on the wireless.

'I see. Why couldn't you have said that, O'Hara?' Sister Sutton swung her bulk around to face the Irish girl again.

'I - I - sorry, Sister,' she mumbled.

'I should think so, too. And look at the state of you. Crumpled apron, grubby collar - and is that a pin I see sticking out of your cap?' She drew in a sharp breath. 'Tidy yourself up immediately or I shall cancel your half-day off.'

'Yes, Sister.'

Jess stared at the Irish girl as she fumbled with her cap. Jess couldn't see why Sister Sutton was making so much fuss. The girl looked immaculate to her, in her blue-and-white striped dress and spotless apron. But she couldn't imagine how hot that heavy fabric and those woollen stockings must feel on such a warm April afternoon.

Jess caught the brown-haired girl's eye and gave her a sympathetic smile. The girl tossed her head, stuck her turned-up nose in the air and stalked straight past her towards the stairs, the Irish girl hurrying behind with her head down.

Charming, Jess thought. She pulled a face at the girl's retreating back, then quickly stopped when she realised the Home Sister was watching.

'Are you sure you're capable of this kind of work?' she said. 'You don't look as if you could lift a broom.'

Jess knew what Sister Sutton was thinking. At seventeen years old, she was still as slight as a child.

'I'm stronger than I look,' she shot back, squaring her shoulders. 'Just give me a chance, and you'll soon see what I can do.'

Sister Sutton pursed her mouth. 'You're certainly good at speaking up for yourself, I can see that.'

Jess pressed her lips together. Trust her to let her temper get the better of her! And she'd tried to be so careful not to put a foot wrong.

But then Sister Sutton heaved a sigh that shook all her chins and said, 'Very well, you may have a trial. One month and then I shall decide whether you're up to the job or not.'

Jess untwisted her cramped fingers from the folds of her skirt. She had been keeping them crossed since she arrived on the doorstep of the nurses' home. 'Thank you,' she said.

'Thank you, *Sister*,' Sister Sutton corrected her. 'You must refer to me and the other nursing sisters correctly at all times. You must also remember not to speak to anyone unless they speak to you first, and to stand up whenever a sister enters the room. And you must keep your distance from the other girls here. They are student nurses at the Nightingale Hospital, and as such they are your social superiors. They must be treated with due deference.'

Jess thought about the sharp-featured girl, tossing her head so haughtily and walking past Jess as if she didn't

exist. But after four years in service, she was used to being treated like part of the furniture.

And if that was what it took to escape from her home, then she would willingly become invisible.

'Now,' Sister Sutton went on, 'I will show you to your room.' She bustled off down the passageway, a bunch of keys jingling from her belt. Reaching the door at the farthest end of the passage, she took the keys in her hand and held them close to her face, squinting at each in turn until she selected the right one.

'Here we are,' she said, unlocking the door and throwing it open. 'The room's small, but perfectly adequate for your needs.'

Jess stepped inside. Sister Sutton was right, it *was* small. Scarcely bigger than a cupboard, with just enough room for a narrow bed and a chest of drawers. But to Jess, it seemed like a palace. There was even a small shelf above the bed where she could keep her books.

She stepped inside, breathing in the clean smell of furniture polish and fresh linen. Spring sunshine flooded the room, making everything bright and cheerful.

Jess went over to the window and gazed out over the garden. It couldn't be more different from the grim tenement she lived in now. Living here would be like waking up in Victoria Park, surrounded by grass and trees and flowers every day.

'It's beautiful,' she breathed.

Sister Sutton huffed. 'Well, I don't know about that,' she said. 'But as I said, it's perfectly adequate for a maid's needs.'

Jess looked around her again. Whatever the Home Sister might think, to her it was perfect. Almost too perfect. Jess Jago didn't usually get that kind of luck.

Perhaps 1937 was going to be the year everything changed for her, she thought.

Jess delayed going home for as long as possible, turning her steps towards Columbia Road Market instead. In the middle of a Monday afternoon it was a lively mass of people and colourful stalls. The cries of the street vendors mingled with the banter of the stallholders as they plied their wares, everything from second-hand clothes, fruit and veg, pungent cat meat and trays of Indian toffee. The pot mender pushed his clanking bicycle up and down the street, laden down with the tools of his trade. The air was rich with the smell of freshly baked bread and the sharp tang of pickled fish from the Jewish grocers.

Jess lingered at the second-hand bookstall, imagining what she would buy once she had a few spare pennies to her name. The titles all seemed to call to her, each one promising great adventure, the chance to escape from her own life for a while. She could be transported back to the court of King Arthur or into the heat of the Arabian desert, just by turning the pages. Jess wasn't sure she could have endured the last few years without being able to shut herself away in a quiet corner and live in someone else's imagined world.

A copy of *Great Expectations* caught her eye. It had seen better days, its cover stained and worn, the spine tattered. But it had been her mother's favourite, the story of a boy taken from his humble home and raised to wealth by a mysterious benefactor. Jess still remembered the tears running down her mother's cheeks as Sarah Jago had read it out loud to her.

'One day that will happen to you, Jess,' she would whisper. 'One day you'll have the chance to get away from this place. And when that day comes I want you to go and never look back.'

'Only if you come with me,' Jess would always reply. 'I'm not going anywhere without you.'

Her mother would look around at the damp, crumbling walls with her saddest smile on her face. 'It's too late for

me, my love,' she would sigh.

And she was right. That dingy terrace house had been Sarah Jago's prison until the day she died.

The stallholder was leaning against the wall, smoking. He was a young man, no more than twenty years old, his dark hair slicked back off his face with brilliantine.

'The penny romances are over there,' he said carelessly, pointing with his cigarette to a heap of books spread out on a sheet on the pavement.

'I prefer Dickens.'

Out of the corner of her eye Jess caught the young man's look of surprise.

'Oh, yeah? And what have you read?' he asked with a smirk.

Jess paused for a moment, ticking them off on her fingers. '*Oliver Twist, David Copperfield, Nicholas Nickleby . . .*'

He looked impressed. 'Is that a fact?'

'And how much Dickens have you read?' Jess fired back.

The young man grinned. 'I'm more of a *Racing Post* man myself.'

'And you run a bookstall?' She couldn't imagine being surrounded by books all day long and not wanting to read them.

'It's my dad's. I'm just helping out till something else comes along.' He took a long drag on his cigarette. His slicked-back hair emphasised the narrowness of his face. With that and the shiny patches on his suit, Jess got the impression of a young man trying too hard to be someone he wasn't.

He looked down at the pile of dog-eared books. 'Not much call for Dickens round here,' he sighed. 'Dunno why my dad bought them, to be honest. Reckon he must have got a job lot cheap.' He regarded her with interest. 'You know, I would have had you down as more of a romantic.'

Jess knew when she was being flirted with. She kept her eyes fixed on the gold lettering down the spine of the book.

'I haven't got time for all that nonsense.'

'Go on! I thought every young girl liked a bit of love in her life.'

She ignored him. 'So how much do you want for this?' she asked, holding up the book.

'A tanner?' he said hopefully.

Jess laughed. 'You just said you couldn't get rid of them. Besides, it's falling to bits!'

'Yes, but it's what's inside that counts, ain't it?' He winked at her.

Before Jess could reply, an angry voice startled them both.

'Oi, you! Sling your hook.'

Jess glanced around and realised the shout was directed at her. A costermonger from a nearby fruit and veg stall was bearing down on her, red-faced. Jess regarded him calmly.

'You talking to me, Mister?' she asked.

'Yes, I am. We don't want your sort round here.'

'Do you mind? She's a customer,' the young man put in.

'Customer?' The costermonger's mouth curled. 'Don't make me laugh. She's one of them Jago kids, from the hatcheries. They'd nick the teeth out your head if they thought they could get away with it.' He turned on Jess, jabbing his finger inches away from her face. 'I caught one of your lot pinching apples off my stall this morning. Little sod thought I couldn't see him.'

Jess squared up to her accuser. 'I wasn't going to pinch anything,' she said.

'No, 'cos you ain't going to get the chance.' The coster moved to grab her arm, but the young man stepped in.

'Leave her alone,' he said. 'She's got a right to look at the books, same as everyone else.'

The coster let out a snort of laughter. 'Oh, I see. That's the way the wind's blowing, is it? Well, you wouldn't be the first to be taken in by a pretty face. More fool you.' He turned his sneering attention back to Jess. 'She probably can't even

read. She's just waiting till your back's turned so she can nick summat to pawn.'

'And you'd know all about that, wouldn't you?' Jess snapped back. 'I'll bet your missus is down the pop shop often enough.'

Her barb must have hit its mark because the coster's face contorted with rage. 'Cheeky little cow! I'll give you a clip round the ear—'

'You just try it.' Jess didn't flinch. She could see him weighing up his chances. But she knew for all their bluster, there weren't many people in Bethnal Green who would take on the Jagos.

'You ain't worth the bother,' he muttered.

'What was that all about?' the young man asked as the coster stomped back to his stall.

'Ain't got a clue.' Jess tried to hand the book back to him, but he waved it aside.

'Keep it,' he said.

'But I couldn't—'

'I told you, we don't have much call for that sort of thing around here.'

Jess hesitated, aware of the coster watching her from across the street. Other eyes were turned on her too. She could tell what they were thinking. Typical Jagos, always wanting something for nothing.

She made up her mind and pushed the book back into the young man's hands. 'Thanks, but I don't take anything I haven't paid for,' she said firmly.

As she walked away, her head held high, she heard the young man sigh.

'Blimey, I'm going to tell my dad we can't even *give* bloody Dickens away now.'

In spite of her simmering anger, his comment made Jess smile all the way home.

Chapter Two

BLACK MONDAY, THE locals on the hatcheries called the day the rent was due. As she walked by, Jess could already see the line of women outside Solomon's pawnbrokers with their belongings, waiting to see 'Uncle' for a few bob. Her cousin Betty was among them, a bundle under her arm.

Jess crossed the road to her. 'Not Uncle Johnny's suit again?' she laughed.

'It's all we've got left,' Betty sighed. She was eighteen, a year older than Jess, with the same dark colouring. But she was a head taller and had blossomed into a much more womanly shape. Jess always felt like a child next to her. 'Dad won't miss it till the end of the week.'

'Let's hope he doesn't have to go to any funerals before then!'

'Or up before the magistrate,' Betty said. 'That's more likely, knowing my dad.'

Jess grimaced. 'And mine.'

Betty gave her a sympathetic look. 'He'll be out soon enough, ducks.'

Worse luck, Jess thought. She knew she was supposed to feel sad her dad was behind bars, but the truth was she hadn't been sorry when the judge sentenced him to jail for stealing the lead off the roof of a church hall.

She would never have been able to escape if he was still at home, at any rate. He would have given her the buckle end of his belt for even thinking about it.

You haven't got away yet, a small voice inside her head reminded her.

Jess chatted to Betty for a minute or two longer, then said goodbye to her cousin and plunged further into the hatcheries, the place she called home.

The hatcheries sat between Shoreditch and Bethnal Green, and no one with any sense went near it. No one was sure how the dark warren of stinking alleys, narrow back-to-back houses and cobbled yards had got its name. But the locals called it 'Sweaters' Hell' because of all the people toiling in the overcrowded terraces and makeshift workshops, making clothes pegs and boxes, stitching clothes and leather, or curing and drying fish. The corporation had been trying to clear the place for years, but the locals clung fiercely to their closed-in little world. It might have been damp and overcrowded and seething with vermin, but it was also safe from the prying eyes of the outside world. And especially the local constabulary. Not many outsiders ever ventured into the hatcheries.

In the warmth of the afternoon, the stench of dung, fish and sulphur from the nearby match factory hung in the air. Flies buzzed against Jess' face as she picked her way down a narrow alley, the cobbles slippery with rotting rubbish, pushing her way past the washing which sagged on lines strung from side to side like drab, grey flags, already grubby with soot from the factory chimneys.

Women gossiping in their yards sent her wary looks as she passed. It was easy to tell she was a Jago, with her blue-black hair, sharp features and dark eyes. Even in the hatcheries, people gave her family a wide berth.

There was a row going on in their house as usual. Jess could hear a baby howling and women's voices screaming curses at each other, even before she reached the back door.

She stifled a sigh. With four brothers, their wives and ten kids packed together in a tiny house, there was always a fight brewing.

Her twelve-year-old stepbrother Cyril sat on the back step, whittling a stick into a sharp point with his penknife, unmoved by the racket raging behind him.

‘What’s going on in there?’ Jess asked, jerking her head towards the door.

Cyril lifted his skinny shoulders in a shrug. ‘I dunno, do I?’ He carried on striking at the point of the stick with his knife, not meeting her eye. He might not have been blood family, but he was as sly as any Jago with his narrow, foxy face and sinister birthmark like an inky thumbprint on one cheekbone.

‘Better find out for myself then, hadn’t I?’

Jess braced herself and lifted the latch on the back door. The tiny scullery was a mess as usual, with washing up in the sink and a pot of cold stew congealing on the stove. Baby Sal sat howling alone on the stone floor, her screams barely heard above the quarrel going on in the next room. When she saw Jess she stopped crying and held out her fat little arms to be picked up.

‘Mama,’ she mewed. Tears traced pink tracks down her grubby face.

‘We’ll find her, shall we?’ Jess hitched the child on to her hip, grimacing at the acrid dampness that seeped through her nappy. With her free hand, Jess pushed aside the curtain that separated the scullery from the kitchen.

Her stepmother Gladys stood in the middle of the room, all screaming rage as usual, her arms waving and fingers jabbing. Uncle Johnny’s wife Hannah stood toe to toe with her, hands planted on her hips as they spat curses into each other’s face.

‘I told you, you silly mare, I ain’t got it!’ Gladys was screeching. ‘Why would I want your bloody jewellery? I’ve got enough of my own, thank you very much.’

Aunt Hannah snorted. ‘You’re having a laugh, ain’t you? You and that light-fingered son of yours are always helping yourselves!’

'Oh, and your lot are bloody saints, I suppose?'

'We don't nick from our own, that's for sure.'

'No one would nick something like that! Nasty old paste brooch, like something you'd hang off a Christmas tree. I wouldn't be seen dead in it!' Gladys declared with a proud toss of her head.

'Then give it back!'

'I told you I ain't had it, you silly cow!'

'I swear to God, Gladys Jago, if I find out you've had your hands on my property, I'll rip every one of them dyed hairs out of your head!'

As soon as she saw her mother, Baby Sal started howling and wriggling in Jess' arms. Gladys instantly forgot her argument with her sister-in-law and turned on Jess.

'What are you doing home? Why ain't you at work?' she demanded.

'I got a new job.' Jess shifted Baby Sal's writhing weight. 'This one wants changing. She stinks to high heaven.'

'You change her, then.' Gladys gave her a hostile glare. 'I'm busy.'

'Busy helping yourself to other people's stuff!' Aunt Hannah put in. The next moment they were arguing again. Jess dumped Baby Sal on the rug between them and went into the back room, which she shared with the five other girls in the family. A large bed almost filled the room, the faded counterpane thrown haphazardly over an assortment of pillows. Jess automatically straightened it, wondering which of her cousins had left it in such a mess.

At least it wouldn't be her problem for much longer. Soon she would have a room of her own and she could have it as tidy as she liked.

She was plumping up the last of the pillows when Gladys appeared in the doorway. She was done up to the nines as usual. She told everyone she was thirty, but the thick powder settling into the lines on her face told a different story. Her hair was bleached till it looked like the straw in

Dicky Fothergill's donkey yard. She reeked of cigarettes and cheap scent.

Gladys Grimshaw had been a barmaid at the Three Beggars when Stan Jago married her four years earlier, less than two months after Jess' own mother had passed away. And by then she was already three months pregnant.

'What's all this about a new job?' she demanded.

'I've got a job at the hospital. As a maid,' Jess hauled her suitcase from under the bed.

'That's the first I've heard about it.'

'I'm telling you now.'

'Don't you give me any of your cheek! I'm in charge while your dad's locked up. I say what goes in this family.' Gladys's scarlet-painted mouth pursed. 'Anyway, what do you want another job for? You've already got a perfectly good maid's position.'

Her gaze fell on the suitcase and Jess could see the truth slowly dawning in her stepmother's dull eyes. 'You ain't got a live-in job, I hope?'

'That's all they were offering.' Jess shrugged. She opened the drawer and started gathering her belongings together. Thankfully she didn't have much, just a few clothes and her beloved books.

'I knew it! You sly little bitch. Wait until your dad's gone, then sneak off and leave us . . .' Gladys planted herself squarely between Jess and her suitcase. 'You can't go! I ain't allowing it. I need you here at home. How am I supposed to manage the kids on my own?'

'You could start by spending less time at the pub.' Gladys had wasted no time in going back to her old haunts once her husband was locked up. She didn't go short of male company either, by all accounts.

Not that Jess really cared what she did. Life was easier when her stepmother was out with her men friends.

The slap was sharp and sudden, catching her off guard. Jess flinched, angry with herself for not evading it. After four

years, she could usually tell when Gladys was about to strike.

‘Don’t you dare take that tone with me!’ Angry colour clashed with the bright spots of rouge in Gladys’ cheeks. ‘After everything I’ve done for you, too. I’ve taken you on as my own . . . not many women would do that. Treated you as my own flesh and blood, I have.’

In spite of her stinging face, Jess fought to stop herself from laughing out loud. She had never known a moment’s kindness from her stepmother. Jess’ own mother was barely laid to rest before the newly installed Gladys had insisted her stepdaughter should leave school and get a job to start paying her way.

‘Anyway, you ain’t going,’ she said flatly. ‘I’m in charge of this family while your dad’s banged up, and what I say goes.’

‘You can’t stop me,’ Jess said.

‘Can’t I, now? We’ll see about that, won’t we? You’re not twenty-one yet. You can’t just do as you please, whatever you might think. You’ve got to listen to your mother.’

‘You ain’t my mother!’

‘I’m the only mother you’ve got!’ Gladys shot back at her. ‘You can pull a face, miss, but your sainted mother’s dead and gone. And good riddance too by all accounts. You’re just like her, ain’t you? *She* thought she was better than the rest of us too.’

‘She was better than you,’ Jess muttered.

‘What’s that? You answering me back again? What have I told you about talking back to me, you lippy little bitch?’

Gladys lunged at her again, but this time Jess was ready for her and sidestepped out of her reach.

‘Go on, then,’ she taunted. ‘But if you touch me again I’ll tell Aunt Hannah what really happened to her brooch.’

Gladys stood still, her hand raised in mid-air. ‘I dunno what you’re talking about.’

'I found the pawn ticket. In that biscuit tin under the bed where you hide everything.' Jess lifted her chin. 'I wonder what Aunt Hannah would say about that? I don't expect she'd be too pleased. Nor would Uncle Johnny, come to that.'

Gladys paled under her make up. For all her bluster, she knew she had broken the unspoken Jago rule that the family never nicked from their own.

Jess slammed her suitcase lid closed, and fastened the buckle. 'I'll be off then,' she said.

She half expected her stepmother to make a move to stop her, but she shifted aside to let Jess get to the door.

'You needn't think you're coming back,' Gladys called after her. 'I'm warning you, my girl. If you set foot out of this house you're not welcome here again. This is not your home any more!'

Thank God for that, Jess thought as she walked away, her stepmother's curses ringing in her ears.

Chapter Three

'BURN IT,' SAID Sister Parry.

Dora looked at the teddy bear that dangled from the ward sister's outstretched hand, then back at the little girl in the cot. Her howls of despair cut straight through to Dora's heart.

'But, Sister, she's so upset—'

'She'll calm down,' Sister Parry said dismissively, not even glancing in the child's direction. 'They always do, once they realise they're not getting any attention.' She thrust the teddy at Dora. 'Her parents were told the rules. No toys from outside on the ward. Heaven only knows what germs this thing might be carrying.' She shuddered. 'It needs to be destroyed before it infects the other children.'

Dora looked down at the teddy. It had been loved to death, with bald patches, only one eye left and an ear hanging off by a thread. She could imagine the little girl hugging it close to her every night, comforting herself to sleep.

And now she was all alone. Wasn't it bad enough for the poor little mite, being abandoned in a strange place, full of bright lights, unfamiliar smells and stern-looking women in uniform, without having her only comfort taken away from her too?

She glanced back at the child. Barely three years old, she was too young to understand, but her huge, wet eyes were fixed on Dora as if she were her last hope.

'But Sister—'

Sister Parry stiffened. 'Are you arguing with me, Nurse Doyle?'

‘No, Sister,’ Dora said. ‘But she’s so young, and this toy is all she has. Surely it wouldn’t hurt for one night . . .?’

‘Wouldn’t hurt? Wouldn’t *hurt*?’ Sister Parry’s nostrils flared. ‘You are a third-year student, Doyle. Surely by now you must have a basic idea of how disease spreads?’

‘Yes, but—’

‘All it takes is a few germs and the whole ward will be infected. We have some very poorly children here, Nurse Doyle. Are you happy to let them die so that one child can keep her plaything? Or perhaps you know better than I do?’ she said. ‘Perhaps you feel you’re better qualified to run this ward than I am?’

Their eyes met. ‘No, Sister,’ mumbled Dora.

‘I thought not.’ Sister Parry snatched the teddy bear out of her hands and handed it to Lucy Lane who, as ever, was lurking just behind her shoulder, waiting to be useful. ‘Here,’ she said. ‘Perhaps you wouldn’t mind taking this to the stoke hole for me, Nurse Lane. Unless you too wish to question my authority?’

‘Not at all, Sister.’

Dora caught Lucy’s quick smirk as she sauntered off, teddy in hand. She didn’t even glance towards the bed where the screaming child still held out her arms beseechingly. Knowing Lane, she would have put a match to the toy before the poor child’s eyes if she thought it would win her more favour with Sister Parry.

‘I’m glad to see someone understands about following orders.’ Dora cringed under Sister Parry’s scathing look. ‘You should be careful you don’t end up with a black mark on your hospital report,’ she warned. ‘You’re six months away from qualifying, you don’t want to be branded a troublemaker, do you? I can’t imagine any hospital wanting to employ a nurse who argued over every simple instruction.’

‘No, Sister.’ Dora stifled a sigh. She already had too many black marks against her name, and she’d only been on the

ward a few days.

'Now, go and start the dressing round. Unless you want to argue with me about *that*, too?'

Dora went to prepare the dressings trolley, but couldn't shut out the sound of the little girl howling from the other end of the ward. How Sister Parry could ignore it she had no idea. Dora couldn't bear to hear a child crying without wanting to go and comfort them, but Sister seemed deaf to such distress.

And to think Dora had been looking forward to coming to this ward. She had wanted to nurse children ever since she started training. But now she was here, she was finding it a very different place from the one she'd imagined.

She didn't get on with Sister Parry at all. The ward sister looked like a favourite auntie, with her plump, rounded figure and pink cheeks. But inside she was as hard as nails. Dora had known they weren't going to get on from the first day, when she saw Sister order a probationer to tie a child's hands behind his back to stop him scratching his chicken-pox spots. And she had been proved right.

Now she wasn't sure she could face the Children's ward for much longer if it meant continuing to work for Sister Parry.

Dora finished setting up the trolley and pushed it out into the ward. It was a long, high-ceilinged room, with tall windows that flooded the ward with April sunshine. On one side were twenty metal-framed beds, and on the other were the same number of cots for the babies. In the centre of the ward stood a long table, and beside it Sister's desk.

But it was the silence here that struck Dora, and had since that first day. Every bed was occupied, and yet apart from the sobs of the little girl at the end, none of the children made a sound.

She paused, listening. It wasn't right. Even poorly kids should be making a bit of noise.

'All right, Nurse?'

She started as Nick Riley brushed past her, pushing the linen bin in front of him. They had been courting for more than six months, but the sight of his dark curls and tall, powerful frame in his brown porter's coat still made Dora catch her breath.

'Yes, thank you, Mr Riley,' she replied politely, treating him with distant courtesy as she knew she must on the ward. But their eyes locked, telling a very different story. Nick could smile without moving his lips. The warmth in his intense blue gaze made Dora blush.

Even after all these months she could still hardly believe he loved her as much as she loved him.

'Can I see you tonight?' he whispered. 'I need to talk to you.'

Dora glanced around to make sure Sister wasn't watching. If she were caught talking to a man, it would be another black mark against her name.

'I finish at five,' she hissed back.

'Meet you at six? The usual place?'

Before she could reply, Lucy interrupted them.

'Sister said I must help you with the dressings.' There was a sour expression on her sharp-featured face.

'I can manage, thanks.'

'Sister doesn't seem to think you can, otherwise she wouldn't have sent me, would she?' Lucy turned to Nick. 'What are you doing here?'

'Linen collection.'

'Well, you'd better get on with it, hadn't you? I don't know why you're standing around here, wasting time.'

'I'm on my way, Nurse.' He leaned his weight against the trolley, pushing it forward towards the double doors of the ward. Dora watched him go. At the doors, he turned and winked at her.

She started to smile back, but quickly composed herself when she saw Lucy staring at her.

'I hope you weren't flirting with him, Doyle?'