

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



The Nightingale Sisters

Donna Douglas

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About the Book

To the student nurses at The Nightingale hospital, the ward sisters are heartless and frightening, with impossibly high standards. But the sisters have troubles of their own...

Violet

The new night sister is not all that she seems. Who is she and what dark secret is she hiding? As the mystery deepens, Sister Wren is determined to find out the truth.

Dora

The student nurse is struggling with her own secret, and with her heartbreak over Nick, the man who got away. A new arrival on the ward brings the chance to put a smile back on her face. But can she really get over Nick so easily?

Millie

Dora's fellow student is also torn between the two men in her life. But then an unexpected friendship with an elderly patient makes her question where her heart – and her future – really lies.

As the nation mourns the death of King George V, it seems as if nothing is ever going to be the same again, especially for the women at the Nightingale.

About the Author

Donna Douglas was born and brought up as a Londoner, but now lives in York with her husband. You can find out more about her and her books from her website - www.donnadouglas.co.uk, or follow her blog - donnadouglasauthor.wordpress.com.

Also by Donna Douglas

The Nightingale Girls

The Nightingale Sisters

Donna Douglas



arrow books

Chapter One

IT WAS A bitterly cold December evening in 1935 when Violet Tanner arrived at the Nightingale Hospital in Bethnal Green.

Fires were lit in every ward, as the biting snow-laden wind howled like a wild beast, flinging fistfuls of sleet at the windows. Babies cried in fear on the Children's ward, and even the patients in Male Orthopaedics, usually so full of jokes and bravado, stared fearfully at the branches swaying close to the glass and agreed they'd never known a night like it.

Outside, nurses on their way to supper clutched their thick navy cloaks around them as they hurried across the courtyard, heads bent, hands clapping on their starched caps as best they could.

Sister Wren saw her first. She usually liked to arrive early to supper, but had stopped to reprimand a student she'd found taking a shortcut down the passageway that was reserved for sisters.

The girl had complained that she couldn't go outside because she'd forgotten her cloak. But Sister Wren was having none of it.

'And whose fault is that? It doesn't give you the right to wander down the sisters' corridors, does it?' she had snapped.

'No, Sister.' The girl, a second year called Benedict, was just the kind Sister Wren most despised, with that perky blonde prettiness which drew medical students like wasps around a jam jar.

'No, indeed. Now go back the way you came and cross the courtyard like all the other nurses.'

Benedict glanced apprehensively at the sleet thrashing against the window, then back at Sister Wren. Her round blue eyes were full of appeal. No doubt if Sister Wren had been a man she would be falling over herself by now, offering to carry her across the wind-swept courtyard.

‘No, Sister,’ she sighed.

Sister Wren watched her walk back down the passageway, head bowed in defeat. She smiled to think what a bedraggled state the girl would be in when she returned from supper. With any luck, her ward sister would be utterly furious.

She turned, saw the woman standing at the far end of the passageway, and hurried towards her.

‘You there!’ she called out bossily. ‘What do you think you’re doing?’

‘I’m looking for Matron’s office.’ Her voice was low and husky, with the slightest trace of a country accent. Sister Wren had to draw close to hear her.

‘And you are?’

‘My name is Violet Tanner. I’m the new Night Sister.’

‘Oh.’ Sister Wren appraised the woman with a glance. In her early-thirties, very tall – although most people towered over Sister Wren, diminutive as she was – and dark. The hair that curled out from under her hat had the blue-black sheen of a magpie’s wing. Sister Wren always jealously noticed hair because hers was so thin and poor, no matter how many miracle permanent waves she had. The woman’s coat looked expensive, but was not the latest fashion. Sister Wren read *Vogue* and knew quality when she saw it, even if she couldn’t afford it herself.

In short, someone worth knowing, she decided.

‘You’ve taken a wrong turning, I’m afraid. I’ll walk with you and show you the way,’ she offered.

‘There’s no need. If you just tell me where to go—’

‘It’s no trouble. I’m going that way myself.’

She was actually heading in the opposite direction, but there was no chance she was going to miss being the first to find out everything about the new Night Sister.

‘My name is Miriam Trott, and I’m Sister on Gynae,’ she introduced herself as they set off. ‘You’ll call me Sister Wren, as that is the name of my ward.’

Violet Tanner nodded, but didn’t make any further reply. In fact, she didn’t offer much conversation as Sister Wren led the way through a warren of passageways back to Matron’s office.

‘It’s rather a maze, isn’t it?’ she tried again. ‘So easy to get lost, with all these buildings stuck together in such a higgledy-piggledy fashion. But you’ll get used to it in time.’ She glanced sidelong at the new sister. ‘Was your last hospital a large place, too?’

‘I was nursing a private patient.’

‘Oh, and where was that?’

‘Suffolk.’ She bit out the word, as if reluctant to allow a single syllable to escape her lips.

‘Really? I have family in Suffolk.’ Sister Wren seized eagerly on the titbit. ‘Where were you?’

‘A small village. Very rural. I doubt you’d know it.’

‘Well, I might—’ Sister Wren took one look at Miss Tanner’s forbidding expression and did not dare go on.

She tried another tack. ‘I suppose you’ll be moving into the sisters’ block, if you haven’t already? Miss Filcher – the old Night Sister, that was – had the room across the hall from mine. Not that she died in that room,’ she added hastily. ‘No, she dropped dead on duty. Can you imagine it? She made sure she gave her report to all the ward sisters first, though. Typical Miss Filcher, always so conscientious.’ She sighed. ‘Anyway, her room is very nice. It’s on the corner, so it’s double aspect. And it looks over the gardens

...

‘I won’t be living in.’

Sister Wren stared at her. ‘Why not?’

'I have made other arrangements.'

'But all the sisters—'

'Ah, I see where I am now. Matron's office is at the end of this corridor, isn't it?' Miss Tanner cut her off bluntly. 'I won't keep you any longer, I'm sure you have a great deal to do.'

'But—'

'Thank you very much for your help, Sister Wren.'

'Wait . . . ,' Sister Wren called after her. But Miss Tanner had already gone.

The fact that Miss Tanner had been so infuriatingly vague didn't stop Sister Wren being desperate to share all the gossip in the dining room.

'I've seen her,' she announced as she arrived, late and breathless, at the sisters' table. Their corner of the dining room was an oasis of order and calm, their long table presided over by maids scuttling to and from the serving hatch. The rest of the vast dining room echoed to the clatter of plates, the scraping of chairs and the chatter of young women's voices.

'There you are, Miriam.' Sister Blake looked up with a smile. 'We were beginning to worry about you. We thought there might be an emergency on your ward.'

'As if that would make her miss her supper,' Sister Holmes muttered under her breath. Sister Wren glared at her as a maid quietly set a plate in front of her.

'If you must know, I was taking our new Night Sister to Matron's office.' She looked around at them all in triumph. It wasn't often she could command attention at the table. They were usually too busy discussing patients or listening to one of Sister Blake's amusing stories.

She waited for them to bombard her with eager questions. But all she got were a couple of interested nods before they went back to discussing the students' new ward allocation.

'Did you hear what I just said? I've met the new Night Sister,' she prompted them.

‘And?’ Sister Hyde said. ‘Did she have two heads?’

Sister Wren sent her a sour look but said nothing. Not even the other sisters spoke up to the Sister in charge of Female Chronics. Sister Hyde was in her sixties, tall, gaunt-framed and utterly fearsome. Sister Wren had been afraid of her since her own days as a student at the Nightingale.

‘I daresay we’ll all meet her soon enough,’ Sister Holmes observed, helping herself to vegetables from the serving dish.

‘Really, ladies, you could show a bit more interest,’ Sister Blake rebuked them mildly. ‘Sister Wren is desperate to share her gossip, and no one is listening to her.’ She turned to Sister Wren, her dark eyes sparkling. ‘You can tell me. I’m utterly agog.’

‘It’s hardly gossip,’ Sister Wren replied sullenly. She could never tell if Sister Blake was making fun of her or not. She always had a smile on her face, as if the whole world was some kind of private joke. ‘I’ve just seen her, that’s all.’

‘And what was she like?’

‘If you must know, I thought there was something rather odd about her.’

‘You were right, Sister Hyde. She does have two heads!’ Sister Blake laughed.

‘There’s something odd about all Night Sisters, if you ask me,’ Sister Parry chimed in from the far end of the table. ‘I’ve never understood what kind of nurse chooses to work a permanent night shift, prowling the corridors when everyone else is asleep.’

‘Not everyone,’ Sister Hyde said. ‘Patients tend to be very restless at night. That’s when they feel most frightened and alone. They need someone to reassure them.’

‘So do the nurses,’ Sister Holmes agreed. ‘It’s a big responsibility for a young student, finding herself in charge of a ward all night. They need someone reliable they can call on if there’s an emergency.’

'I used to be more afraid of the Night Sister than glad to see her when I was a pro,' Sister Blake confessed merrily. 'I was always worried she'd come across us having a midnight tea party with the medical students in the ward kitchen.'

The other sisters laughed, and even Sister Hyde looked slightly amused as she tutted and shook her head.

'It's not just that,' Sister Wren insisted over their laughter. 'There was something peculiar about Miss Tanner. Something . . . mysterious.'

'Dear me, have you been reading those lurid detective magazines of yours again?' Sister Holmes said. 'You really shouldn't, you know. They only give you nightmares.'

Sister Wren felt her cheeks burn as the other sisters laughed. She thought about Miss Tanner's clipped, abrupt manner and those dark eyes that never quite met hers.

'You can laugh,' she said. 'But I'm telling you, there's something about that woman that isn't right.'

Just before midnight, Violet Tanner made another round. The howling of the wild wind seemed more menacing in the darkness of the sleeping hospital, and the swaying tree branches clawed at the windows as if they would smash the glass. With all the noise outside, Violet barely had need of the soft-soled shoes she wore to move soundlessly down the winding corridors.

The cluster of buildings, connected by a warren of passageways and staircases that had been so difficult for her to navigate during the day, was already beginning to seem familiar to her, even in the darkness.

She turned a corner and found herself in an office corridor so long that the end was swallowed in impenetrable blackness. Violet held her torch higher, making the shadows leap and dance around her.

As she passed the first door, a frightened squeal made her jump.

'Who's there?' a voice squeaked. The next minute a woman's face loomed out of the shadows, eyes bulging with terror. She brandished a broom like a weapon.

Violet recognised her as one of the cleaners she had taken on earlier. As Night Sister, her first duty had been to go down to the Porters' Lodge and choose from the women who gathered there every evening, hoping for a night's work cleaning the offices. As it was so foul outside, only a few of the most desperate had come. Violet was glad she hadn't had to turn anyone away.

'Beg your pardon, Sister, I thought you was a ghost.' The woman lowered her broom, her hand moving to press against her fluttering heart. 'I got lost, and I've been wandering around here in the dark. Now I dunno where I am' Her voice trembled. 'And the lights aren't working. I reckon there's been a power cut or summat.'

The woman's eyes were round with fear. 'On a terrible night like this and with everything so dark - well, you imagine all sorts, don't you?'

'Don't worry. You're quite safe here.'

The woman looked at her admiringly. 'I bet you're not frightened of anything, are you, Miss?'

Violet smiled to herself. If only you knew, she thought. 'Here, you'd best have this.' She handed her the torch.

'You're sure you don't need it?' the cleaner called after her as she walked away.

'Quite sure.' Darkness held no fears for Violet Tanner. She felt safer in the shadows.

The bad weather had unsettled many of the patients. On Female Chronics, the harassed young student nurses seemed close to tears as they rushed around, desperately trying to soothe the old ladies, who wailed and sobbed and rattled at the bars of their cots. It was the same on the Children's ward, where frightened babies, woken by the shrieking wind, screamed without stopping.

'Sister Parry says we're to leave them,' the young student told Violet briskly as she approached the nearest cot where a toddler was standing up, red-faced and screaming.

'Sister Parry isn't here, is she? I am.' Violet moved past her. The baby, sensing a sympathetic presence, held out his chubby arms.

'But Sister Parry says they'll get spoilt if we go to them,' the girl insisted. 'She says if we ignore them they'll exhaust themselves and go to sleep.'

'What is your name, Nurse?'

'Hollins, Sister.'

'Well, Hollins, how would you like it if everyone ignored you when you were upset and frightened?'

As the girl struggled, open-mouthed, for an answer, Violet scooped the toddler up into her arms. She could feel the sobs shuddering through him as he buried his face in her neck. His warm skin smelt of baby powder.

'Shhh, sweetheart. It's all right, it's only the silly wind making a noise, that's all.' She swayed gently, rocking him in her arms as she whispered words of comfort. His soft curls tickled her cheek.

Gradually she felt the sobs subside, and his heavy weight against her shoulder told her he was asleep.

'And if he cries again, Hollins, I want you to comfort him,' Violet instructed the student as she lowered him gently back into his cot. 'The same goes for the other babies. And if Sister Parry doesn't like it, she can speak to me,' she added, as the girl opened her mouth to protest.

'Yes, Sister.' Hollins bobbed her head, but her face was pinched.

Two hours later, Violet finished her rounds and went back to the small office assigned to the Night Sister. On her way, she slipped into the kitchen to make herself a cup of tea. According to Matron, Night Sisters were allowed the luxury of a maid to bring them tea and see to their comforts, but Violet didn't want to trouble her. The fewer people who

noticed her, the fewer questions they would ask. Violet didn't like questions.

But she liked the Nightingale. She hadn't been too sure about it at first, but after old Mr Mannion died she didn't have anywhere else to go. And then the advertisement for the Night Sister's job had appeared in the *Nursing Mirror*, and it seemed as if providence was pointing the way for her.

She was probably safer here, anyway. A busy hospital in the East End of London was the last place anyone would think of looking for her.

'Violet Tanner.' She said it out loud, listening as the sounds hung on the air. It was a long time since she'd called herself by that name, and she still hadn't quite got used to it again. But she generally got used to all her names, soon enough.

She stirred her tea. 'Violet Tanner, Night Sister at the Florence Nightingale Teaching Hospital,' she said again.

Yes, she decided. It suited her. For now.

Chapter Two

THERE WAS AN extra place laid for Alf Doyle at the dinner table.

'Sorry, I wasn't thinking. Old habits die hard, eh?' Rose's smile was brittle as she cleared the plate away.

No one else around the table said anything, but Dora knew they were all thinking the same thing; her mum might be putting on a brave face as usual, but she wasn't fooling anyone.

It was New Year's Eve, and round the corner at the Rose and Crown the locals were having their usual knees-up, bidding a noisy farewell to 1935. Dora could hear the sound of laughter and singing drifting down Griffin Street as she and her family gathered around the dinner table.

Any other year they would have been in the thick of it. Nanna Winnie would be in the saloon bar with a bottle of milk stout, done up in her best dress, face heavily powdered and teeth in for the occasion, taking in all the goings on so she could gossip with her cronies later. Dora's mum Rose, flushed from too many port and lemons, would be singing along to the piano as it bashed out all the old favourites.

But not this year. The atmosphere in the kitchen at number twenty-eight Griffin Street was sombre, even though they were doing their best to pretend that everything was normal.

Except Dora's youngest sister Bea, of course. The twelve year old never bothered to hide her feelings from anyone.

'What's this?' She prodded the lump of brown meat on her plate, her freckled nose wrinkling in disgust.

'It's melt,' Dora hissed. As if Bea didn't know. The butcher sold it for threepence, and the locals called it 'poor man's

joint’.

‘But we always have chicken at New Year,’ her sister protested.

‘We had a chicken at Christmas, love. We can’t run to another one.’ Her mother doled a spoonful of mashed potatoes on to a plate. ‘We ain’t made of money, I’m afraid.’

‘We always had chicken when Dad was here,’ Bea said sullenly.

‘Shh!’ Dora, her grandmother and sister Josie hissed together.

‘Yes, well, we had a lot of things when your dad was here,’ Rose said briskly. ‘But he ain’t here now, so we’ve just got to make the best of things, haven’t we?’

She was smiling when she said it, but Dora noticed her mother’s hand trembling as she passed another plate down the table.

It had been three months since Dora’s stepfather Alf Doyle had disappeared. He’d just packed a bag one day and upped and gone without a word to anyone. Even his pals at the railway yard where he’d worked hadn’t seen him since. Her mother and grandmother had gone to the police, but they didn’t bother trying to find him. As far as they were concerned, Alf was just another bloke who’d done a flit from his family.

Dora wasn’t sorry to see him go. For five years she’d suffered abuse at Alf’s hands, living in fear of him creeping into her room at night, silenced by her shame. It was only when she’d found out he’d started abusing her sister Josie that she’d finally found her voice.

Not that it had done much good. The day she’d finally confronted him, Alf had laughed and given her a beating. But then, just as she thought she would never defeat him, he had vanished.

It was a shock to them all, but her mother had taken it hardest. Rose Doyle was a typical East End woman, tough and hard-working, the kind who never complained but rolled

up her sleeves and got on with life, no matter what it handed out to her. She had coped eleven years ago when she'd been left widowed with five children to bring up. She had taken the blow when her daughter Maggie had died at the age of thirteen. But the disappearance of her second husband had broken her spirit, and her heart.

No one spoke while they were eating. The only sound was the crackling voice of Al Bowlly on the wireless singing 'Blue Moon', his plaintive tones deepening their gloom.

Dora stared down miserably at her plate. She had fought to get a rare sleeping-out pass from the hospital so she could spend New Year's Eve with her family. She knew her mother appreciated her being here, but Dora couldn't help thinking guiltily she might have had more fun back at the nurses' home, even under the Home Sister's watchful eye.

Nanna Winnie tried to lighten the mood. 'Why don't we all go down to the pub after tea, cheer ourselves up a bit?' she suggested.

'You go if you like.' Rose shrugged. 'I'm stopping here.'

'But it won't be the same without you, Rosie love. Come on, you could do with a night out. A good old sing-song with your pals would do you the world of good.'

'And listen to all the neighbours talking about me? No thanks.'

'No one's talking about you, love.'

'Oh, come on, Mum! You've heard them all whispering, same as I have.' Rose looked up, anger flaring in her brown eyes. 'Our family's all they talk about these days. Y'know, I heard Lettie Pike's even putting it about that I did Alf in for the insurance. As if we'd be sitting down to ox spleen for our dinner if I'd come into money!'

She laughed, but Dora could see the pain in her face. Rose Doyle was a proud woman, who liked to keep herself to herself. Knowing her family's business was the talk of Bethnal Green must be agony for her.

‘Anyway,’ she said, putting down her knife and fork, ‘I can’t go out. I’ve got some more mending to do.’

‘You can give it a rest for one night, surely?’

‘I like to keep myself busy. And we need the money, don’t forget.’

‘How are you managing for money, Mum?’ Dora asked.

‘Oh, we’re all right. I’ve started taking in laundry, as well as mending, so that brings in a bit more. And now your brother and Lily have moved in upstairs, they’re helping out with the rent. We’ve not got as much room to breathe, but at least it’s not so much for me to clean,’ she added brightly.

‘We all have to share a bedroom,’ Bea grumbled. ‘There’s no room, and we can hear Nanna snoring downstairs.’

‘I do not,’ her grandmother denied heatedly. ‘How can I snore when my lumbago keeps me awake every hour of the night?’

Dora looked across the table at her mother. She was laughing with the others, but Dora could see the strain behind her eyes. The Doyles had been one of the few families in Griffin Street to rent their whole house by themselves, and to have to let out a room was a huge blow to Rose’s pride. But at least it was only Peter and his wife who were living there. Having to live with another family, like the Pikes and the Rileys did next door, would have been much worse.

‘I wish you’d let me leave school and help out,’ Josie piped up. ‘I told you I could get a job at Gold’s Garments—’

‘And I told you you’re not to think about it,’ her mother said. ‘You’re staying on at school and getting your exams so you can be a teacher, and that’s final. I’m proud of both my clever girls -’ she beamed at Dora ‘- and I’m not going to let anything stand in your way. Even if I have to work all day and all night,’ she added firmly.

Dora and Josie looked at each other. ‘Best not to argue with her.’ Dora smiled.

‘Besides,’ Rose went on, ‘Alf will probably be back from his travels soon. Then we’ll be right as rain.’

Silence fell around the table. ‘For Gawd’s sake, girl, do you really reckon he’s coming back?’ Nanna said finally, her patience giving way. ‘All this time without a single word, he could be halfway to bleedin’ China—’

‘He’ll come back,’ Rose interrupted her firmly. ‘My Alf wouldn’t walk out on his own family.’

‘He’s already walked out, love. God knows why, but he’s gone. Now you’re not the first girl whose old man did a bunk, and I daresay you won’t be the last. A man like that’s not worth a spit anyway, after what he did to you—’

‘Don’t talk about him like that!’ Rose snapped. ‘He’s a good man. You don’t know what’s happened to keep him away from us. He could have had an accident. He could be dead in the Thames.’

‘I hope to God he is,’ Nanna grunted, her toothless jaw set in a stubborn line. ‘Because if he turns up on this doorstep after all the trouble he’s caused, I’ll swing for him myself!’

Never one to miss out on any drama, Bea started snivelling. ‘Mum, is that right? Is Dad dead? Has he been murdered?’

‘And you can shut up an’ all!’ Nanna turned on her. ‘People don’t pack their bags if they’re off to get murdered, do they? Blimey, you can see who got the brains in this family, can’t you?’ she muttered.

‘He didn’t pack everything,’ Rose reminded her. ‘He only took a few things with him, so that means he meant to come back.’ She looked around at them all, her smile brittle. ‘Now I’m sure he had his reasons for going away. But he’ll be home soon, and everything will be all right again.’

‘And Moby Dick will swim up the Thames!’ Nanna muttered, as they cleared the plates away.

‘Do you think he’ll come back, Dor?’ Josie asked her later as they did the washing up in the narrow scullery.

'I hope not.' Dora piled the dishes into the chipped stone sink.

'Sometimes I wish he would.'

Dora turned to face her sister in surprise. 'After what he did to us?'

'I just want to see Mum happy again.' Josie's brown eyes were solemn. Unlike Dora, Bea and their elder brother Peter, who were all ginger-haired, freckled and sturdily built like their late father Jack, the fifteen year old had inherited their mother's slim, dark-haired beauty. 'I hate him, Dora, you know I do. But I hate listening to Mum crying every night, when she thinks we're all asleep. And you know she goes out looking for him? Walks the streets for hours, she does, in the middle of the night. Or she'll go and stand at the gates of the railway yard, as if she expects him to turn up for his shift like nothing's happened. It breaks my heart.' She bit her lip. 'And she worries, too, about how we're going to manage. I know she says we'll be all right, but I can see it on her face every time the rent man knocks on the door. She's working herself into the ground.'

'I'll talk to her,' Dora said.

'It won't do any good. She'll just smile and tell you she's managing, as usual. You know what she's like.'

The rest of the evening dragged by. While revellers laughed and sang and fell over cursing in the street outside, Dora did her best to keep her family's spirits up with board games and singing along to the wireless.

Rose sat by the fire, her head down, going through the mending by the weak gaslight. No surgeon could ever stitch as beautifully as she could, Dora thought. Rose could turn a worn shirt cuff or mend a hole in a dress as if it had never been there.

She went over to her. 'I've got something for you, Mum.' She reached into her pocket, pulled out two pound notes and pressed them into her mother's hand. 'It's not much,

but it should at least buy some coal or keep the rent man happy.'

'But this is a month's wages for you. I can't take all your money, love.' Rose tried to give it back to her.

'I'll be earning a bit more now I've finished my first year of training,' said Dora, hearing the desperate brightness in her own voice. 'And it's not like I've got anything to spend it on, what with my board and lodgings all found at the nurses' home.'

'Well, if you're sure . . .?' Rose looked down at the notes in her hand. 'I can't pretend it won't come in handy.' She put down her mending and smiled up at Dora. 'What would I do without a daughter like you?'

'I wish I could do more,' Dora sighed. 'Student nurses don't earn very much, I'm afraid.'

'Yes, but one day you'll be one of them ward sisters, won't you?'

'Give us a chance! I've got to get through two more years' training first. And then, if I get through my exams, I have to be a staff nurse, and then—'

'You'll do it, love. You got this far, didn't you?'

'True.' Though there were those who still thought little Dora Doyle, the working-class girl from the back streets of Bethnal Green, had no place to be training as a nurse alongside all the respectable, middle-class students. Over the past year she'd proved most of them wrong, but it was a constant struggle.

'I'm proud of you, love. I really am. Here, give your mum a cuddle.' As Rose reached up to hug her, Dora felt her mother's bones jutting sharply under her clothes. Was she eating properly? Years ago, before Alf came along, she had known her mother go without to make sure her kids were fed.

When the old clock on the kitchen mantel struck half-past eleven, Dora slung her coat over her shoulders and went out

into the backyard to listen out for the bells of St Paul's ringing in the New Year across the rooftops of East London.

As she threw open the back door, a slice of light from the kitchen picked out a young couple standing in a passionate clinch beside the fence next door. Mortified, Dora quickly tried to retreat, but it was too late.

'All right, Dor? Happy New Year!' Her best friend Ruby Pike greeted her cheerfully as she adjusted the buttons on her blouse. Blonde curls escaped from her elaborately teased hairdo.

'Happy New Year.' She could barely bring herself to look at Ruby's boyfriend Nick Riley. It might have been Dora herself in his arms now if she hadn't been too scared to let him kiss her last year. 'I thought you'd be down the pub, seeing the New Year in?'

'My lot are all there. And Nick's mum, of course.' Ruby rolled her eyes meaningfully. Everyone knew it was a rare day that June Riley wasn't propping up a bar somewhere in Bethnal Green. 'We were supposed to be going up to St Paul's, but Nick won't leave Danny.'

Dora glanced at Nick, who was still trying to rub Ruby's smudged lipstick off his cheek.

'He gets frightened when he's on his own,' he muttered.

'He's sixteen, Nick,' Ruby sighed. 'Same age as my brothers.'

'But he's not like your brothers, is he?'

Ruby pulled an exasperated face, but Dora understood why Nick was so reluctant. He was very protective of his younger brother. A few years earlier, Danny had suffered a terrible accident which had left him brain-damaged. The rumour was that he'd been beaten by their vicious bully of a father, who was so scared of what he'd done that he'd run away afterwards. But like the lives of so many people in Griffin Street, no one ever knew the full story.

'I'll look after him, if you like?' Dora offered. 'We're not doing much, so he might as well come in and sit with us.'

'We couldn't—' Nick started to refuse, but Ruby jumped in eagerly.

'Would you? That'd be smashing, wouldn't it, Nick?' She curled her arm through his and looked up at him appealingly.

'If you're sure?' Nick met Dora's gaze properly for the first time. Even by the dim light spilling from the kitchen, he made her knees weaken. He towered over her, tall and broad-shouldered, his tousled dark hair falling into his eyes.

When had she realised she was in love with him? Dora couldn't decide, but whenever it was, it was too late. He was Ruby's now. And Ruby was never going to give him up.

Not that he'd want her to, Dora was certain. Ruby was everything she wasn't - blonde, buxom, and as glamorous as a Hollywood movie star. Just the type of girl someone like Nick Riley would want on his arm.

He probably broke out in a cold sweat every time he remembered how close he'd come to settling for a homely girl with frizzy ginger hair, Dora thought.

'He'll be fine with us,' she said. 'Anyway, it doesn't look like we've got much choice, does it?' she added wryly, as Ruby darted inside to call Danny before anyone changed their mind.

'You could come with us?' Nick offered.

Dora smiled. She could just imagine Ruby's face if she tagged along. 'What do they say? Three's a crowd.'

Before he could reply Ruby came back out of the house, ushering Danny in front of her. He emerged shyly, his head bent and shoulders hunched. But his worried expression cleared when he saw Dora.

'Y'see? I told you,' Ruby said. 'You should have seen his face when I said you were here. If you ask me, our Danny's got a bit of a soft spot for you, Dor. Ain't that right, Danny boy?'

She flung her arm around his skinny shoulders in a rough hug and ruffled his pale hair, making him squirm and flinch.

'Leave him be. You know he doesn't like anyone touching him,' Nick said gruffly.

'Not like his brother, eh?' Ruby winked at him.

Nick ignored her as he helped Danny through the narrow gap in the fence where the slats had broken and weeds had grown up in their place. It was a gap Dora and Ruby had regularly used over the years as they went between their houses.

'All right, Danny?' Dora greeted him with a smile. He nodded and ducked his head shyly. It was the same every time they met, as if she had to win his confidence all over again.

'Now you're sure you're going to be all right?' Nick asked his brother.

'He'll be fine. Stop fussing like an old woman, or we'll miss all the excitement.' Ruby tugged on his arm, dragging him away.

Dora watched them hurry hand in hand down the alleyway, Ruby's excited laughter still echoing on the frosty night air after they had disappeared. Then she turned to Danny.

'All right, love? Shall we go in and get warm by the fire?'

'I like looking at the stars.' Danny shivered beside her, his pale face turned up towards the inky black night sky. 'Y-Your Josie's been t-teaching me their names.' He pointed his long finger skywards. 'That one there . . . that's the P-plough.'

'Is that right?' Dora peered upwards. 'It looks more like an old pan to me.'

'And that one is c-called Orion,' he went on. 'He's m-meant to be a man with a sword.'

Dora listened patiently as he pointed out more constellations in the sky. She'd often seen Danny perched on top of the coal bunker staring into space. Now she knew what he'd been looking at.

'You remembered all their names, Danny. Good for you,' she said. He gave a lopsided smile, proud of himself.

'D-do you think they have stars like this in Am-America, Dora?' he asked.

'I expect so, Dan. Why, are you going to do some star gazing when you get there?'

Danny nodded. 'N-Nick says he's going to buy me a tel-tel —' His face twisted as he struggled with the word.

'A telescope, you mean? Lucky you. That'll cost a few bob, I bet.'

'Nick s-says he'll have the m-money, once he's World Ch-champion.'

'I'm sure he will.' She wondered if Nick had told Ruby about his secret plan to move to America with Danny once he'd saved up enough cash from his boxing. Like Dora, he dreamt of making a better life for himself. She was sure her friend Ruby would have something to say about it, once she found out.

But perhaps Ruby would approve? Somehow Dora could imagine her being right at home over there, rubbing shoulders with all her favourite Hollywood stars, like Claudette Colbert and Myrna Loy.

Dora sighed up at the sky. And meanwhile she'd probably still be here in Griffin Street, trying to stop her family from falling apart.

The bells of St Paul's suddenly rang out, breaking the stillness of the night air. A roar went up from the locals at the Rose and Crown as they spilled into the street, all trying to outdo each other with a loud and drunken rendition of 'Auld Lang Syne', welcoming in the start of 1936.

'Happy N-New Year, Dora,' Danny said.

Dora turned to smile back at him. 'I hope so, love,' she said.

Chapter Three

ONE HOUR INTO her duty on the first day of the New Year, Lady Amelia Charlotte Benedict, or Millie as she preferred to call herself, was being violently sick in the sluice.

Oh God. She stared down at the gaping hole in the middle of the sink, her fingers clutching the cold stone rim for support. The chilly January air that whistled through the open grating did nothing to cool the sweat that prickled on her skin.

She shouldn't have run away like that. Yes, the stench had been overpowering and the sight that greeted her when she threw off that bedcover had been truly disgusting, but a real nurse would never have done what she had.

The memory of Sister Hyde's startled expression as Millie charged past her up the length of the ward, one hand clamped over her mouth, was enough to send her retching over the sink again.

She heard the sluice door open behind her and groaned in dread, bracing herself to hear Sister Hyde's voice ringing out. Sister needed little excuse to remind Millie of her shortcomings. She could lecture her for half an hour if she swept the ward in the wrong direction, so heaven only knew what she would make of her abandoning a patient to rush off and be sick.

But mercifully it was only Millie's room mate, Helen Tremayne. The pair of them had been assigned to Female Chronics together although Helen was in the year above, and superior to Millie in every other way, too.

'Sister sent me to find out where you'd gone.'

'Is she very angry?' Millie whispered.

'She certainly wasn't smiling when I left her.' As she crouched over the sink Millie saw Helen's stout black shoes, polished to military perfection as usual, come into view beside hers. 'You shouldn't have left Mrs Church, you know. No wonder Sister loses patience with you.'

'I couldn't help it!' Millie looked up at her friend, wincing as the bright lights of the sluice pricked her watering eyes. 'You didn't see the state she was in. It was horrible!'

'That's Messy Bessie for you.'

Bessie Church, or 'Messy Bessie' as the nurses nicknamed her, was a very sad case, an elderly woman who had lost her wits years ago. She was usually a placid old soul, but despite endless pleading - and a few stiff words from Sister - she still couldn't or wouldn't use a bedpan, preferring to let nature take its course and leave the nurses to worry about cleaning it up.

And this morning, much to her dismay, Millie had been given that particular job. She had arrived for duty feeling fragile, so cleaning up an incontinent patient was the last thing she needed.

Just the thought of it made her stomach roil again. She felt her cap sliding off her head as she threw herself over the sluice, and barely managed to rescue it before it ended up down the plug hole.

'You know you've only got yourself to blame,' Helen's voice echoed painfully in her ears. 'You wouldn't be in this state if you hadn't been out all night.'

'Shh! Sister will hear you. I wasn't out all night anyway.'

'What time did you get home?'

'I don't know . . . about two?'

'Actually, it was nearer four.'

'Was it? Oh dear.' Millie bent down and rested her head on the edge of the sink, letting the cool stone soothe her fevered brow. 'I rather lost track of time, I'm afraid.'

She'd lost track of quite a lot, unfortunately. Including how many Martinis she'd had.