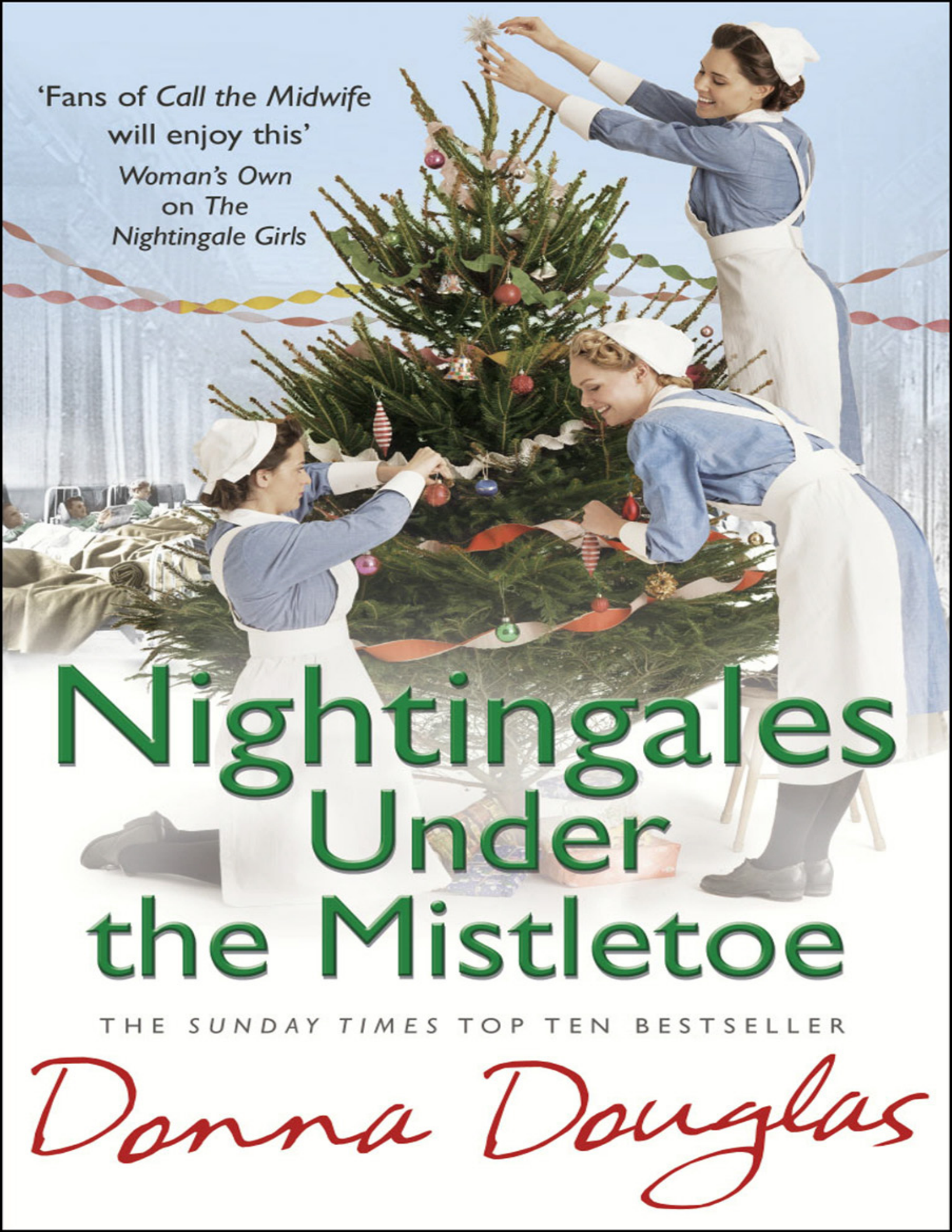




'Fans of *Call the Midwife*
will enjoy this'

Woman's Own
on *The
Nightingale Girls*

Nightingales Under the Mistletoe

THE SUNDAY TIMES TOP TEN BESTSELLER

Donna Douglas

Contents

About the Book

About the Author

Also by Donna Douglas

Title Page

Acknowledgements

Dedication

Chapter One

Chapter Two

Chapter Three

Chapter Four

Chapter Five

Chapter Six

Chapter Seven

Chapter Eight

Chapter Nine

Chapter Ten

Chapter Eleven

Chapter Twelve

Chapter Thirteen

Chapter Fourteen

Chapter Fifteen

Chapter Sixteen

Chapter Seventeen

Chapter Eighteen

Chapter Nineteen

Chapter Twenty

Chapter Twenty-One
Chapter Twenty-Two
Chapter Twenty-Three
Chapter Twenty-Four
Chapter Twenty-Five
Chapter Twenty-Six
Chapter Twenty-Seven
Chapter Twenty-Eight
Chapter Twenty-Nine
Chapter Thirty
Chapter Thirty-One
Chapter Thirty-Two
Chapter Thirty-Three
Chapter Thirty-Four
Chapter Thirty-Five
Chapter Thirty-Six
Chapter Thirty-Seven
Chapter Thirty-Eight
Chapter Thirty-Nine
Chapter Forty
Chapter Forty-One
Chapter Forty-Two
Chapter Forty-Three
Chapter Forty-Four
Chapter Forty-Five
Chapter Forty-Six
Chapter Forty-Seven
Chapter Forty-Eight

Chapter Forty-Nine

Chapter Fifty

Chapter Fifty-One

Chapter Fifty-Two

Chapter Fifty-Three

Chapter Fifty-Four

Copyright

About the Book

Christmas 1941 and the Nightingale nurses are facing their toughest winter yet.

With shortages everywhere, and each news bulletin announcing more defeats and losses, the British people are weary and demoralised and The Nightingale Hospital is suffering too.

Millie is recently widowed and dealing with the demands of her family's estate. It's not long before her old world of the Nightingale begins to beckon, along with a long-lost love . . .

Jess would rather be nursing on the front line but finds herself sent to the country. It isn't long before the East End girl discovers there are battles to be fought on the home front too.

Effie finds herself exiled to a quiet village, but the quiet doesn't last for long as she soon finds excitement in the shape of a smooth-talking GI.

As Christmas approaches, even the shelter of the countryside can't protect the girls from heartache.

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
Nightingales at War

Nightingales Under the Mistletoe

Donna Douglas



arrow books

Acknowledgements

I usually leave them till last in my acknowledgements, but this time I feel my husband and daughter should come first in my list of thanks. Writing *Nightingales Under The Mistletoe* was hard for various reasons (not least me coming up with a new plot two weeks before the deadline!) and even though I was the one at the keyboard, they suffered every word and every page with me. Ken was a true hero, supplying endless cups of tea, listening to my frustration and leaving packets of Fruit Gums hidden around the house to cheer me up. Harriet gave tons of encouragement, read every page with her usual perception, and thankfully didn't once tell me it was rubbish. I love you both, and I don't know how you put up with me in deadline mode, but I do appreciate it ...

And my friends frequently came to my rescue, too. Thank you to Maureen Clark for making sure I actually stepped outside the house occasionally, and for turning up with fabulous cupcakes (is everyone getting the impression I respond best to food-based rewards? If so, you're right). Thank you also to June Smith-Sheppard for sending masses of cyber love, and for still being my friend even when I disappear off the radar for weeks on end. And thank you also to Rachel Diver and Fiona Coleman for allowing me to vent and drink Singapore Slings, and to my author friends Jessica Gilmore and Pamela Hartshorne for allowing me to vent and drink fizzy wine (are you also getting the impression I respond to drink-based rewards? Right again).

Finally, a big thank you to my agent Caroline Sheldon, and to the wonderful team at Arrow, especially my editor Jenny Geras (welcome back!), Kate Raybould, boss lady Selina Walker, Philippa Cotton in publicity and Sarah Ridley in marketing, and all the amazing sales team, especially Aslan Byrne and Chris Turner. Thank you so much for making the Nightingales what they are, and for throwing me a very nice lunchtime party when I didn't expect it!

To Becki Ward

Chapter One

IT WAS A cold, foggy November night when Jess Jago arrived on the last train from London.

She was the only passenger to get off the train at Billinghamurst, a deserted rail halt in the middle of nowhere. Jess dumped her suitcase and gas-mask case on the ground and peered around her, trying to get her bearings. The fog was so dense she could almost feel it, like ghostly damp hands pressing on her face.

She laughed nervously. You're imagining things, girl! It was just a bit of fog, no worse than the gritty, yellowish pea-soupers that regularly enshrouded the East End.

She took a deep breath, annoyed with herself for being so twitchy. Honestly, she'd lived all her life in Bethnal Green, grown up among rogues and thieves and God knows what else, and now she was scared because she was in the countryside, with nothing around her but a few trees – and deathly silence ...

'Are you the new nurse?'

The low, gravelly voice came out of the gloom, making her jump out of her skin.

Jess fumbled in her coat pocket for her torch and aimed the beam into the fog. She swung it slowly left and right, then flinched as it suddenly picked out a grizzled old face under a shapeless hat.

'Turn that thing off, for God's sake,' he growled. 'You'll have the ARP out, thinking we're bloody Germans.' He gave a rattling cough. 'Well, what are you standing there for? I ain't got all night, you know. It's nearly ten and some of us

have beds to go to. Besides, this fog plays hell with my chest.'

Jess heard the faint jingling of a harness, and the clomp of heavy hooves on the iron hard ground. As she lowered the beam of her torch, she saw a cart and a fat grey horse, its head curved wearily downwards.

'Who are you?' she asked.

'Father Christmas, who do you think?' The old man sighed impatiently. 'My name's Sulley - Mr Sulley to you - and I've been sent to fetch you to the Nurses' Home. Now are you coming or not? You're welcome to walk if you want, but it's more than five miles, and I doubt if you'd find your way on a night like this, especially since they took all the signposts away.'

Keeping her torch beam low, Jess carried her suitcase round to the back of the cart and threw it on, then went round to the front and climbed up on to the wooden seat beside the man.

'At last!' Sulley muttered. He cleared his throat noisily, spat at the ground, shook the reins and they shifted forward slowly, the heavy wheels rolling beneath them as they started up the lane. The cold night air smelled of dung and damp earth.

The lurching motion lulled her, and Jess felt her eyelids growing heavier, her head nodding towards her chest. She was bone weary after her journey. The train had been crowded as usual and seemed to inch down the line, stopping every five minutes to allow another troop train to pass.

Jess had found herself crammed into a carriage with a dozen army boys, all in tearing high spirits. She had shared her sandwiches with them, and they'd made her laugh with their jokes and singing. They reminded her of Sam, full of fun, refusing to take life seriously.

But Jess had seen enough sorrow and nursed enough wounded soldiers at the Nightingale to know the kind of fate

that might befall them. Even as she laughed with them, she found herself looking at their bright, smiling faces, wondering how many of them would come home again.

Once again, a picture of Sam came into her mind, and she pushed it away out of habit. She couldn't allow herself to give in to the fear that prowled in the shadows of her mind, waiting to pounce if she once allowed it.

Beside her, Sulley had started talking. 'The village is full of Londoners now,' he grumbled. 'What with you lot from the hospital and all the evacuees, it's worse than hop-picking season. Hardly feels like it's our home any more.'

Jess bristled. 'It's not our choice to come down here,' she said sharply. 'We have to go where we're sent.'

She certainly wouldn't have left London if she'd had any choice in the matter. The Blitz had torn the heart out of both the East End and the Nightingale Hospital, and it felt disloyal to abandon it in its hour of need.

But Matron had been insistent. Most of the patients had been evacuated from London to the Nightingale's temporary hospital in Kent, and more nurses were needed there.

'It may only be for a few months,' she had said. 'But until we can re-open the wards here, you'll be of more use down there. And I'm sure you'll welcome the chance of some country air,' she had added with a small smile. 'A change might do you good.'

She had made it sound as if she was doing Jess a favour. But if she thinks that then she doesn't know me at all, Jess thought. She had been born and brought up in the back streets, with the tang of smog in her lungs from the moment she was born. She was used to the shouts of costermongers and street vendors, the smell of the docks and the glue factory, the rumble of trams and buses. After two years of war, she was even used to the wail of the air-raid sirens, the crump of falling bombs and the reek of cordite and choking dust that followed an attack. She had no time for the country, or the people in it.

An eerie screech came out of the fog. Jess started out of her seat in terror.

‘What the bleeding hell was that?’ she yelled.

Sulley chuckled. ‘It’s only an owl! Bless me, it ain’t going to hurt you.’ He dug in the depths of his pocket for a dog end, clamped it between his teeth and lit it with one hand, the other controlling the fat old horse. Not that she needed much controlling. Jess could have walked faster than the mare’s steady plod.

Once again, the motion lulled her. This time Jess must have drifted off, because the next thing she knew the cart had jerked to a halt.

‘Here we are,’ the old man said. ‘Home Sweet Home.’

Jess peered into the foggy darkness. ‘I can’t see anything.’

‘The Nurses’ Home is through that gate and up the track a way. There was no room for you lot from London at the hospital home, so they had to convert some old farm buildings.’

Jess sniffed. A strong odour of manure hung in the air. ‘It smells like a pigsty!’

‘That’s right.’ Sulley chuckled. ‘I daresay it’s what you Londoners are used to.’ His laughter turned into a wheezing cough, and he spat at the ground.

Jess glared at him. At least I don’t stink like an old goat, she thought. That coat of his reeked of cigarettes and sweat.

She climbed down from the cart and retrieved her suitcase from the back while the old man watched her, drawing on his thin dog end.

‘I’ll be here tomorrow morning first thing to collect you,’ he called after her as she walked away, dragging her case behind her.

Jess turned to face him. ‘You what?’

‘I have to take you and the other nurses down to the hospital. It’s a two-mile walk otherwise.’ He jiggled the reins

and the old horse clopped off into the darkness before Jess could reply.

The Nurses' Home, such as it was, stood at the end of a deeply rutted farm track. It was a long, low building with rough whitewashed brickwork, and a bucket by the front door to catch the drips from the rickety tin roof.

Jess squared her shoulders. Oh, well, in for a penny, she thought, and knocked at the door.

It was opened by a tall, elderly woman in a stark grey dress and linen bonnet. Jess recognised her at once as Miss Carrington, one of the Nightingale Hospital's most fearsome ward sisters. Jess's heart sank to her shoes. As Sister of the Female Chronic ward in London, Gertrude Carrington had regularly reduced students to tears. Jess couldn't imagine what she would be like as a Home Sister, tasked with looking after the nurses' welfare.

She looked down her long nose at Jess. 'You were expected over an hour ago, Nurse Jago,' she greeted her coldly.

And good evening to you, too, Jess thought. 'The train was late, Sister.'

Miss Carrington narrowed her eyes. 'You'd better come in,' she said. 'And take off those shoes. I don't want you trampling filth all through the place.'

Inside the building was just as bad as outside. The air was sharp with cold, and reeked of damp. Jess's breath curled upwards in a feathery plume as she followed the Home Sister down a long, straight passageway with doors leading off to either side.

'As you can see, our surroundings are somewhat - basic,' Miss Carrington said matter-of-factly. 'But there is a war on, so we must make the best of it.' She fixed Jess with her steely gaze. 'May I remind you that even though you are not in London, you are still a nurse of the Nightingale Hospital, and will be expected to adhere to the standards of your training.'

‘Yes, Sister.’

‘The rules in this Home are the same as in London. No male visitors at any time, and lights out at half-past ten. The door is locked at ten o’clock, and you are expected to be in by then unless you have been given a late pass by Matron. Is that understood?’

‘Yes, Sister.’ Jess looked down at her stockinged feet so that Miss Carrington wouldn’t see her smile. She didn’t know a nurse who hadn’t flouted those rules at least once. Most of them managed to lead very lively social lives right under the noses of their superiors. As she walked down the passageway, she was already thinking how easy it would be to slip in through an open window after lights out. She wouldn’t even have to risk her neck shinning up a drainpipe.

Then she remembered. She was stuck in the middle of the country, miles from anywhere. What would be the point of sneaking out when there was no dance hall, or picture house, or anywhere else to go?

Not only that, she had scarcely been out since Sam was called up. It didn’t feel right to go out and enjoy herself.

They reached the end of the passageway, and Miss Carrington flung open the very last door. ‘This will be your room,’ she announced.

It was so small, there was barely enough room for the two narrow iron bedsteads, separated by a chest of drawers. Each bed had a small pile of starched, pressed bed linen sitting squarely on the bare mattress. Over one of the beds, close to the ceiling, was a thin strip of window, shrouded by a heavy blackout curtain. Jess frowned up at it. Perhaps she’d been wrong about sneaking in after lights out. Getting through that tiny gap would be like squeezing through a letterbox.

‘We are expecting another nurse from Ireland next week, but you will have the room to yourself until then,’ Miss Carrington said. ‘The bathroom is down the passageway, the fourth door on the right. There is a nurses’ common room at

the other end of the building, should you wish to use it.' Her lip curled with disapproval. 'However, it is next to my room, and I don't expect to be disturbed. That means no music, no dancing, loud laughter or high jinks.'

'Yes, Sister.'

'The driver will pick up you and the other nurses at half-past six in the morning, and take you up to the hospital,' Miss Carrington continued. 'You should report to Matron's office straight away, and she will assign you to a ward. As you know, we are having to share the hospital building, so you will report to the matron of the infirmary, Miss Jenkins.' She sniffed the air above Jess's head, her nose wrinkling. 'And please make sure you have a bath before you go to bed. I can see I will have to speak to Mr Sulley yet again about transporting manure in that cart of his!' She gave a final roll of her eyes and then left.

Jess listened to the Home Sister's footsteps squeaking back down the passageway, then sat down on the bed. The thin horsehair mattress barely yielded under her weight. She could already feel the springs of the ancient bedstead poking through. She could only imagine what it would be like to sleep on.

She took off her gloves and massaged the life back into her frozen hands. Her fingers throbbed as the blood flowed painfully back into them. It made her think longingly of the accommodation in London. At the height of the Blitz, all the nurses, sisters, doctors and students had taken to sleeping down in the basement. It had been hot, cramped and frightening at times as the bombs rained down on them, but Jess would rather endure that discomfort than this freezing cold room.

Keeping her coat on, she set about making up the bed. The thin blanket and sheets looked as if they would barely keep her warm.

She eyed the empty bed beside her for a moment, then grabbed the blanket from the neatly folded pile and added it

to her own bed. When her new room-mate arrived she would give it up, but until then her need was greater.

She unpacked her belongings. She hadn't brought much with her. She lined up her books and propped the photograph of Sam on the windowsill. She paused for a moment, her fingertip tracing the curve of his handsome face. He looked so serious in his uniform, she barely recognised the cheeky young man who had joked his way into her heart four years ago.

She could imagine how he'd laugh at her now. 'Look at you, making such a fuss,' he'd say. 'Life could be a lot worse, believe me!'

And he'd be right, thought Jess as she lay back on the hard bed, her eyelids already drooping. As Miss Carrington had said, there was a war on and they had to put up with it.

After all, how bad could it be?

Chapter Two

EVEN WITH AN extra blanket and most of her clothes on, it was far too cold for her to sleep that night, so Jess was exhausted the following morning when Mr Sulley arrived in his horse and cart to take her and a dozen other bleary-eyed nurses to the hospital. At half-past six it was still pitch-dark and they huddled together in the back of the cart, their cloaks pulled around them for warmth.

‘At least it’s not raining,’ said the girl next to Jess, a pleasant-faced staff nurse called Alice Freeman. ‘That’s much worse. Especially when Mr Sulley won’t put the cover up.’

‘You mean he leaves you to get wet?’ Jess said in disbelief.

‘Soaked to the skin, sometimes.’ Alice nodded gloomily. ‘We’ve all got colds, and Nurse Owen was sent to the sick bay with pneumonia last week.’

The other nurses joined in with their own horror stories of life away from London, so by the time they arrived at the hospital gates Jess was feeling thoroughly depressed.

She clambered out of the cart after the others and found herself standing outside high walls and an imposing pair of wrought-iron gates. Dawn was starting to break, and against the dull pewter sky she could make out the solid black bulk of a building at the end of a long sweep of drive.

‘That’s the infirmary. Grim, isn’t it?’ Alice whispered beside her. ‘Apparently it used to be a lunatic asylum, until they closed it down and turned it into a hospital. We all reckon it’s haunted.’

It didn’t look very welcoming, that was for sure. Now her eyes were getting used to the gathering light, Jess could

make out a forbidding three-storey building with straight rows of windows that seemed too small for such a large place. They seemed like dozens of blank eyes, staring down at her.

‘I don’t believe in ghosts,’ she said.

‘Probably just as well,’ Alice replied.

They hurried up the drive, and Alice pointed her in the direction of the main building, and Matron’s office.

‘Be warned,’ she said. ‘She’ll probably be awful to you. She’s awful to all the London nurses.’

‘Why?’

‘I don’t know. We think she’s a bit upset that we’ve taken over her hospital.’ Alice rolled her eyes. ‘As if it’s our fault we’re here.’

‘Is she that bad?’

Alice gave her an enigmatic look. ‘She’s nothing like our darling Miss Fox, that’s for sure.’

There was already a sorry-looking line of nurses waiting outside Matron’s office when Jess got there. One carried the evidence of her crime, a broken thermometer in a receiving dish.

As Jess joined the end of the line, the two nurses beside her were whispering between themselves.

‘What did you do?’ she heard one say to the other.

‘Helped myself to the leftovers from a patient’s plate. I couldn’t help it, Sister had cancelled my dinner break and I was starving. Now I’m going to lose half a day’s leave over a wretched potato!’

All too soon it was Jess’s turn to be summoned to Matron’s office. Miss Jenkins sat behind her desk, all dressed in black. She was older than Miss Fox, more solidly built and a great deal grander. Her face was unsmiling beneath her elaborate starched linen headdress as she regarded Jess over the rim of her spectacles.

‘Who are you?’ she demanded.

‘Jago, Matron. I’ve been sent from London.’

‘Another one?’ Miss Jenkins tutted. ‘We’re already quite overrun as it is. Honestly, doesn’t Miss Fox need any nurses? She seems very keen to send you all down here.’

‘I’m sure she just wants to help you, Matron.’

Jess realised it was the wrong thing to say as soon as she saw Miss Jenkins’s pale blue eyes harden.

‘Are you suggesting I need help?’ she snapped. ‘Perhaps you don’t think my nurses are up to the job?’

‘No, I didn’t mean—’ Jess started to say, but Miss Jenkins cut across her.

‘That’s the trouble with you London nurses, you think you know everything. I daresay you’ve come to teach your country cousins a thing or two, have you?’

Jess again tried to protest, but Miss Jenkins was still speaking.

‘Let me tell you something, Jago. I have been running this hospital for thirty years, and I think I know what I’m doing. And I must say, I’m rather sick and tired of outsiders coming down here and telling us our business. As if your London training somehow makes you better than everyone else!’

She stopped abruptly, her cheeks flushed pink. ‘Very well,’ she said, more calmly. ‘Since you’re here, I suppose you should make yourself useful. Report to Sister Allen on Female Medical, I daresay she’ll know what to do with you. Send in the next girl on your way out, please.’

And that was it. Jess was still in a daze as she headed out of the front door and back down the stone steps.

She hadn’t expected Matron to clasp her to her bosom and thank her for coming to the rescue. But it would have been nice to feel she was actually wanted ...

‘Watch out!’

Jess swung round to see a bicycle hurtling towards her. The rider was pedalling furiously, gathering speed, almost as if he wanted to knock her down. Jess barely managed to spring out of his path as he flashed past.

‘Look where you’re going!’ she called out. ‘You could have sent me flying.’

‘You shouldn’t be dawdling, should you?’ the young man shouted back over his shoulder as he barrelled past.

‘And you shouldn’t be riding on the path. You’re a menace!’

But he was already gone, his scarf fluttering behind him like a pennant in the dawn light.

She found the Female Medical ward on the top floor of the main building. Like the wards at the Nightingale in London, it was a vast, high-ceilinged room, smelling of polish and disinfectant. Forty beds faced each other in two rows running along its length. In the middle of the ward stood a long table and the ward sister’s desk.

Sister Allen was as pleased to see her as Miss Jenkins had been.

‘And Matron sent you to me, did she?’ she sighed. She was in her late twenties, sandy-haired and freckled. ‘Well, I suppose she had her reasons. You can start by helping Maynard with the baths. Then do the beds and get the patients ready for the doctor’s round at half-past ten. Do you think you can manage that?’

‘Yes, Sister.’

‘Hmm.’ Sister Allen looked as if she very much doubted it. ‘Well, ask Maynard if you get stuck. Don’t come to me, I’m far too busy.’

Jess found Maynard in the bathroom, warming towels on the radiator. She was a lively, green-eyed blonde of about Jess’s age.

‘Oh, hello,’ she greeted Jess over her shoulder. Maynard was the first person to smile at her since she’d walked through the hospital gates. ‘Where did you spring from?’

‘I’m Nurse Jago. I’ve been sent down from London.’

‘Have you? Poor you.’ The girl looked sympathetic. ‘I’m Nurse Maynard, but you can call me Daisy.’

‘What do you want me to do?’

‘Mrs McCready needs an emollient bath. She’s a diabetic and her skin is itching like mad. Do you think you could prepare the linseed bag for me? You’ll find everything you need in the prep room next door.’

‘I’ll do it now.’ As Jess turned away, she happened to glance at the contents of the bath tub. ‘Is the water supposed to be that colour?’ she asked.

‘Oh, yes, it’s always brown, unless you run the taps for ages and ages,’ Daisy replied cheerfully. ‘I think it’s rust in the pipes, or something.’

‘Shouldn’t Sister get someone to look at it?’

‘Oh, she’s tried. But finding a decent plumber is nigh on impossible since they’ve all been called up. We just have to put up with it.’

Jess eyed the mucky brown water dubiously. It didn’t look at all safe. ‘What about when you want to make a hot drink for the patients?’

‘Sister says it’s all right as long as we boil it properly. And if it tastes foul most of the patients are too ill to complain anyway!’ She gave Jess an apologetic smile. ‘I daresay it’s not what you’re used to in London, is it?’

Jess thought about working in the bombed-out hospital, sweeping fallen masonry from the floors every morning and boiling instruments for hours over spirit stoves when the power went off. Once she’d even assisted with an operation by shining a torch over the surgeon’s shoulder.

‘I dunno about that,’ she said. ‘We had to make do in our own way.’

‘I’d love to go to London,’ Daisy said, unfolding another towel. ‘I suppose you’ll find it all very dull down here. All we get are old ladies with diabetes, heart problems and bronchitis.’

Jess went off to the prep room. It was a tiny space lined with shelves and glass-fronted cupboards containing a variety of preparations in jars and bottles. Two other

cupboards were filled with equipment and dressings. In front of her was a counter with a sink and a stove top.

Jess found a pan in the cupboard, filled it with water and set it on the stove. As she went to pick up the sack of linseed from the floor, a scurrying motion caught her eye.

‘Bloody mouse!’ She went to catch it but it had already disappeared down a hole in the skirting board.

‘I know. They’re everywhere unfortunately,’ sighed Daisy Maynard behind her. ‘But they’re not nearly as bad as the rats.’

‘Rats?’ Jess swung round in horror.

‘Not many,’ Daisy assured her hastily. ‘And we hardly ever see them up here. They’re mainly in the Fever Wards,’ she said, as if that would make Jess feel better.

She examined the nibbled corner of the hessian sack and hoped she’d never see the damage a rat could do.

As she set about weighing out the linseed into a bag and boiling it up, Daisy stood in the doorway and chatted. Jess found out she was twenty-one years old, her parents were dead and she lived with her brothers and sisters. One of her brothers was in the army, and her elder sister was a housemaid at Billingham Manor. They lived in one of the workers’ cottages on the castle estate.

She also found out that Sister Allen was bitter because her naval officer boyfriend had jilted her, and the previous staff nurse on Female Medical had had to leave quickly for ‘family reasons’.

‘And we all know what that means, don’t we?’ Daisy gave her a sidelong look.

‘Do we?’

‘You know!’ Daisy mimed a pregnancy bump on the front of her apron. ‘Although frankly, I’m amazed she managed to get into trouble since there are no men in the village any more. Not a single one. Not one you’d want to be seen with anyway. If you want to find a decent one, you have to go all the way in to Tunbridge Wells, and there’s only one bus a

day there and back.' She sighed again. Jess strained the bag from the boiling water, then held up the pan. 'I'll take this through for you, shall I?' she said, before Daisy could say any more. She'd already made up her mind that Daisy Maynard was a terrible gossip, and Jess had a feeling it wouldn't be long before she herself was being discussed around the hospital.

Eventually, Jess managed to escape Daisy's chatter long enough to get some jobs done. She made and straightened beds, cleaned false teeth, combed hair, sponged faces and applied liberal amounts of methylated spirit to backs and shoulders.

And then it was time for the doctor's round. Jess had pulled down her sleeves and was fastening on her starched cuffs as she joined Daisy and Sister Allen at the doors outside the ward.

'Really, Jago, your appearance is very sloppy,' Sister Allen hissed. 'I don't know what kind of standards you had in London, but it really won't do here. Make sure you're properly presented in future.'

'Yes, Sister.' Jess looked down at herself. She couldn't see anything wrong with her appearance, but she knew better than to contradict a ward sister.

The next moment the doctors came striding up the corridor. There were two housemen, both young men in their twenties, one dark and good-looking, the other gawky and bespectacled with untidy brown hair. Jess instantly recognised the awkward one as the young man who had nearly knocked her down on his bicycle that morning.

If he recognised her he didn't show it. His serious gaze skimmed straight over her towards Sister Allen.

'Dr Drake,' Daisy whispered. Her downturned mouth told Jess all she needed to know. 'And the handsome one is Dr French.'

Dr French was much more friendly. He greeted Sister Allen and Daisy, then turned to Jess.

‘And who have we here?’ he said, his eyes twinkling. His dark hair was swept off his high, noble brow and his upper lip was outlined with a thin moustache, making him look like Errol Flynn.

Jess cleared her throat nervously. ‘Er – Jago, sir.’

‘It’s very nice to meet you, Nurse Jago.’ His charming manners confused her. The last time a doctor had spoken to her directly was when Mr Prentiss, the Nightingale’s Ear, Nose and Throat consultant, had lambasted her for handing him the wrong forceps.

Dr Drake gave an impatient sigh. ‘May we get on?’ he said. ‘We have a great many patients to see.’

‘Yes, yes of course. We all know you’re a very busy man, Dr Drake.’ Dr French pulled a mocking face at the nurses behind his fellow houseman’s back. ‘Lead on, Sister. After you, Dr Drake.’

They couldn’t have been more different, Jess thought. Dr Drake was whip thin and radiated impatience, while Dr French preferred to take his time. He would stop to chat to each patient in turn, holding their hands and offering them cigarettes. The women swooned as if he was a visiting movie star.

All the while, Dr Drake would sigh and fidget at the end of the bed. Jess could see a pulse beating rapidly in his neck.

‘Does Dr French always take so long to do his rounds?’ she asked Daisy.

‘It depends. Sometimes it takes even longer. Except when Dr Drake is doing the rounds, and then it’s over in five minutes. But Dr French is much more patient, which is why everyone adores him. He is divine, isn’t he?’ she sighed.

‘If you like that kind of thing.’ Jess glanced at her watch. It was almost time for lunch, and they weren’t nearly ready. Once again, she desperately missed the city, where people didn’t know each other’s business. Where there were proper routines and things were done with speed and efficiency, and taps didn’t belch out rusty water.

She didn't think she would ever get used to country life.

Chapter Three

‘WHAT DO YOU think you’re doing?’

If the girl hadn’t been so young and pretty, Stan Salter of the RAF Works Squadron might not have given her the time of day. He’d already got it in the ear from the CO for not getting the job done quickly enough. Added to which it was freezing cold and he wanted to finish work before his fingers dropped off.

But he’d always had a weakness for blondes, and this one was a real peach.

He allowed his gaze to travel the length of her body, from her polished riding boots to the fair curls that framed her face. She reminded Stan of a china doll, with those wide blue eyes and perfect Cupid’s bow lips. He’d bet she had a beautiful smile.

But she wasn’t smiling now as she stood a few feet away from him, holding on to her horse’s bridle. The other hand twitched a riding crop against her slim thigh.

Not that Stan was afraid. His RAF overalls gave him a feeling of power, as well as making him attractive to women in a way he never was in civvies. ‘I’m measuring up,’ he told her. ‘What does it look like?’

‘Why?’

He leaned against the tree trunk and took a packet of Craven ‘A’s out of his pocket. Since he’d stopped work anyway, he might as well enjoy himself. ‘It’s got to come down to make way for the airfield.’

‘What airfield?’

‘You ask a lot of questions, don’t you?’ He lit his cigarette, cupping his hand around the end to shield it from the

cutting November wind. 'The one they're building on this land.'

'Since when are they building an airfield?'

'Since the RAF requisitioned that big house over there.' He nodded towards the manor house that could just be seen beyond the trees. 'By this time next month, this whole area is going to be full of aircraft hangars and runways. Reckon you'll have to find somewhere else to ride your horse then, eh?'

'We'll have to see about that, won't we?' The young woman scowled.

'Oh, don't be like that, sweetheart. Look on the bright side. In a few weeks this place will be swarming with RAF boys. You'll enjoy that, won't you?'

The girl frowned. 'I don't think I will,' she said.

'You mean to tell me you wouldn't fancy a pilot for a boyfriend?'

Her horse shied a little. As the young woman went to steady it, Stan caught the flash of gold on her left hand. Typical, he thought. The pretty ones were always taken.

But that didn't mean anything these days. With so many men away fighting, their lonely wives often enjoyed a bit of company.

'You play your cards right and I could get you an invitation to the big house,' he said. 'They're going to be having a high old time up there, I expect. Parties and dances and all sorts. We RAF boys know how to have a good time.'

'Do you indeed?' The girl turned away and swung herself up into the saddle in one nimble movement. 'Well, it's very kind of you, but I don't think I'm going to need any invitations to that house from you.'

'Oh?' Stan took a long drag on his cigarette. 'And what makes you say that?'

'Because it's my house,' the girl said over her shoulder, as she dug her heels into her horse's flanks and galloped off into the trees.