

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

A woman in a nurse's uniform, including a white cap and apron over a light blue long-sleeved top, walks towards the camera on a cobblestone street. In the background, two other nurses in similar uniforms are visible, one looking back over her shoulder. The street is lined with brick buildings and has a few people in period clothing in the distance.

The Nightingale Nurses

Donna Douglas

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Extract from *Nightingales at War*

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About the Book

'Pay attention please, nurses. The next six months will be the most important of your lives.'

It's the final year of training for three young nurses at The Nightingale Hospital . . .

Helen is at a crossroads in her life and begins to reconsider her future in nursing as she battles with her domineering mother over both her love life and her future career.

Dora can't stop loving Nick, who is married to her best friend, Ruby. But Ruby is hiding a dark secret with the potential to destroy Ruby's marriage.

Millie is anxious about her fiancé Sebastian, sent to Spain to cover the Civil War, and things only get worse when she encounters a fortune teller who gives her a sinister warning.

With war looming in Europe, and the East End of London squaring up to the threat of Oswald Mosley's blackshirts, the women of the Nightingale have to face their own challenges, at work and in love.

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 she writes for numerous women's magazines and national newspapers.

Also available by Donna Douglas

The Nightingale Girls
The Nightingale Sisters

The Nightingale Nurses

Donna Douglas



arrow books

Acknowledgements

The Nightingale Nurses would not exist without the help and support of a lot of people. First, I'd like to thank my agent Caroline Sheldon for encouraging me to take on the project in the first place, and my new editor Jenny Geras for taking me on and becoming a part of the Nightingale world. I'd also like to thank the whole Random House team, especially Katherine Murphy for keeping the production on track, Andrew Sauerwine and his great sales team for getting the book into the shops, and Amelia Harvell and Sarah Page for making sure people heard about it.

I'd also like to thank the Archives department of the Royal College of Nursing for their tireless help in tracking down facts, the Wellcome Library and the Bethnal Green Local History Archives. Not to mention all the brilliant nurses who have shared their stories (most of which are too shocking to include!) and the lovely readers who have taken the Nightingales to their hearts.

Last, but not least, I would like to thank my long-suffering husband Ken, who has put up with more hysteria than any man should ever have to suffer, not to mention coming home every evening to find me wearing the Pyjamas of Doom as deadline approached. And my daughter Harriet, who read each chapter as I wrote it, cheered and booed and cried in all the right places, and whose comments and enthusiasm kept me going. Sorry those sad bits made your make-up run on the bus . . .

To Ken, Harriet and Lewis

Chapter One

'PAY ATTENTION PLEASE, Nurses. The next six months will be the most important of your lives.'

The classroom instantly fell silent. Florence Parker the Sister Tutor stood on her dais and surveyed the rows of third-year students over her pebble glasses. She looked like a sweet old lady with her comfortably plump figure and white hair drawn back under her starched cap. But no student ever made that mistake twice.

'You have almost completed your three years of training. But you mustn't get carried away with your success,' she warned, her Scottish accent ringing around the walls, which were lined with diagrams of the human anatomy. 'There is still much ahead of you. In October you will take your State Examinations. Once you have passed those - if, indeed, you pass them -' she eyed them severely '- you will qualify and be able to call yourself State Registered Nurses.'

Sister Parker allowed a brief ripple of excitement to run through the young women assembled before her on wooden benches before going on. 'After that, you may choose to continue your training in another field, such as midwifery or district nursing. Or you may be invited by Matron to become a staff nurse here at the Nightingale. But I must remind you, this is a very great honour, and only the very best will be selected.' Her gaze picked out Amy Hollins on the back row, twirling a strand of blonde hair around her finger as she gazed out of the window. 'Those who are not invited will, of course, be free to apply to other hospitals.'

Not that anyone would want that. The Florence Nightingale Teaching Hospital might be in a humble area of

London's East End, but it had an excellent reputation. Every student wanted the chance to call herself a Nightingale Nurse.

'And then, of course, there is the Nightingale Medal itself, which is given to the most outstanding student in each year.' Sister Parker gave a nod towards the far wall of the classroom, filled with photographs of previous winners. 'That is something for you all to aspire to.'

She looked straight at Helen Tremayne as she said it. Helen sat in the front row of the class as usual, slightly apart from the other girls, tall and ramrod-straight, not a hair on her dark head out of place. If she didn't win the Nightingale Medal, Sister Parker would eat her cap.

'And now, girls, I have your ward allocations for the next three months.' She went to her desk and pulled out a sheaf of papers. 'As this is such an auspicious occasion, I thought I would hand them out rather than putting them up on the noticeboard in the dining room.'

She started to move along the rows of benches, selecting papers and placing them down in front of each girl. As she did, she heard the whispered prayers from the other side of the classroom.

'Please God, don't send me to Female Chronics. I don't think I could stand three months of Sister Hyde!'

'I hope I get Male Orthopaedics. I've heard it's an absolute riot.'

'As long as they don't send me down to the Fever ward,' someone else sighed.

'What about you, Hollins?' one of the girls asked.

'I want Theatre,' Amy Hollins declared firmly.

Then you'd better buck your ideas up, Florence Parker thought as she placed the paper down in front of her. Hollins stared back, her blue eyes insolent in her doll-like face. The blonde curls that peeped from under the edges of her cap tested the limits of the hospital's strict dress rules. Perhaps if she put as much energy into her studies as she did into

her social life, she might have the makings of a good nurse. But the reports that came back from the wards made the Sister Tutor despair.

She made her way back to the front of the class and placed Helen Tremayne's paper down in front of her. She didn't make a grab for it like the other girls did but sat perfectly still, eyeing it warily as if it might bite her.

'Female Medical!' said Amy Hollins, screwing up her paper, her voice full of disgust. 'That's so unfair. Everyone knows old Everett is as mad as a bat.'

'If you're unhappy with your allocation, I'm sure Matron would be pleased to discuss the matter with you.' Sister Parker glared across the classroom at her. Amy blushed, her expression still mutinous.

The Sister Tutor turned back to Helen, who had finally steeled herself to turn over her paper.

'I hope you at least are satisfied with your allocation, Tremayne?' she said, peering at Helen over her spectacles.

'Yes. Thank you, Sister.'

'Your mother told me you were very keen to work in surgery. She mentioned you might like to be a Theatre nurse when you qualify?'

Helen looked up at her, and Florence Parker caught a flash of dismay in her large brown eyes before her gaze dropped again. This was news to her, Sister Parker could tell. Poor Tremayne, always under her mother's thumb.

'I'm not sure I'd be good enough, Sister.' Her voice barely rose above a husky whisper.

'Och, I'm sure you'll have no trouble. You are an excellent student, Nurse Tremayne. I daresay we'll be seeing your picture up on that wall of Nightingale Medal winners, before too long.'

'I daresay Mummy will see to that, too.' Sister Parker picked up Amy Hollins' spiteful whisper from the back row. 'It must be nice, having a mother on the Board of Trustees!'

Helen must have heard it too. She ducked her head, the tips of her ears burning bright red under her smooth dark hair.

Sister Parker remembered her last meeting with Constance Tremayne, when she had marched into the classroom and demanded that Helen be allocated to Theatre. After more than forty years as a nurse, Florence Parker did not scare easily. But Mrs Tremayne had made her feel like a terrified probationer again, being hauled in front of Matron.

She glanced back at Helen, picking at her bitten nails. Whatever Hollins might think, Florence Parker couldn't imagine it was very nice to have Mrs Tremayne for a mother.

Helen heard the squeals of laughter drifting down the stairs when she returned to the nurses' home with her room mate Millie Benedict after their duty finished that night. It was past nine o'clock and most of the nurses were preparing for lights out at ten, unless they were lucky enough to have a late pass or brave enough to risk sneaking in through the windows.

'Listen to that,' Millie said, as they took off their cloaks in the gloomy, brown painted hallway, taking care not to let their feet squeak too much on the faded lino. 'It sounds as if someone's having a party.'

'Hollins,' Helen replied. 'I heard her planning it during supper.'

'I'm surprised Sister Sutton hasn't heard them, all that noise they're making.' Millie glanced towards the Home Sister's door. 'That's typical, isn't it? Hollins and her gang can get away with having a party, but if I so much as drop a hairpin on the floor Sutton's banging on the door, threatening to send me to Matron.'

Millie pulled an expression of disgust. She was every bit as blonde and pretty as Amy Hollins, but with none of Amy's hard edges.

‘Perhaps she’s asleep?’ Helen said.

‘Sister Sutton never sleeps. She prowls the corridor all night with that wretched little dog of hers, waiting to catch us poor nurses in the act of enjoying ourselves.’

They climbed the stairs, taking care to miss the creaking step halfway up that always brought Sister Sutton out of her lair. The dark polished wood was uneven under their feet, worn down by the footsteps of generations of weary young girls just like them.

As they reached the second landing, they heard another muffled shriek coming from the other end of the long passageway. Millie turned to Helen. ‘Will you be joining the party later, as they’re your set?’

Helen shook her head. ‘I have to study.’

‘I’m sure it won’t hurt to give revision a miss for one night?’

‘Not with the State Finals six months away.’

‘The others don’t seem to care too much about that.’

‘Perhaps they’re more confident of passing than I am?’

Millie laughed. ‘Hardly! Everyone knows you’re one of the best students at the Nightingale. You should go, Tremayne. You know what they say about all work and no play . . .’

‘I told you, I don’t want to!’

Helen started up the steep, narrow flight of stairs that led to their attic room before Millie could argue any more. She didn’t want to tell Millie that she hadn’t been invited to join the party, or how humiliated she had felt, sitting at the other end of the dining table while the others made their plans. She knew she should be used to it after three years. But it still hurt, even though she tried not to show it.

When a set of students joined the Nightingale for training, they tended to stick together as a group. But right from the start, Helen had been set apart. The other girls were wary of her because she worked hard, and because her mother was on the Board of Trustees. They quickly decided Helen was too much of a swot and a teacher’s pet to be included in

their plans. Helen sometimes wished she could explain that she only worked hard to please her mother. But she wasn't sure anyone would listen.

As if she could read her thoughts, Millie said, 'Perhaps if you made more effort to join in, they might feel differently about you.'

'To be honest, I don't really care how they feel,' Helen replied. 'I'm here to work, not to make friends.' She parroted the stern instruction her mother had given her the one and only time Helen had tried to explain how lonely and left out she felt.

Millie stopped, halfway up the stairs. 'We're friends, aren't we?'

Helen turned to smile back at her. 'That's different.'

It was impossible not to love Millie - or Lady Amelia Benedict, to give her her full title. She was simply the sweetest girl Helen had ever met. She even looked sunny, with her bouncy blonde curls and wide smile. There were no airs and graces to her at all, even though she was the daughter of an earl and had been brought up in a castle in Kent.

Millie and their other room mate Dora Doyle were in the year below and had come into Helen's lonely life like a breath of fresh air nearly two years earlier. They had refused to be put off by Helen's shy reserve. It was thanks to their friendship that she had learned not to mind so much when the other girls in her set were spiteful to her.

Her friends had also given her the confidence not to run away when she met the love of her life, Charlie Dawson. Between them and Charlie, Helen was the happiest she had ever been. Even though her mother's shadow still fell over everything she did.

'I should think so, too!' Millie beamed, then added, 'And you really mustn't mind about Amy Hollins. She's an awful cat. I can't say I'm looking forward to spending the next three months with her on Female Medical!'

Their room was at the top of the house, long and sparsely furnished with three beds tucked into the sloping eaves. A dormer window cast a square patch of silvery moonlight on to the polished wooden floor.

Millie shivered. 'Why does it always seem so cold up here, even in April?' She reached for the light switch, flicked it - then let out a cry of dismay.

There was a girl sprawled on the middle bed, fully dressed, her stout black shoes poking through the bars of the iron bedstead. Her left arm dangled off one side, still clutching the limp remains of a cap. A wild mop of red curls fanned out over the pillow, hiding her face.

At the sound of Millie's cry her head jerked up, revealing a freckled face bleary with sleep.

'What the - oh, it's only you.' Irritable green eyes peered out from under the ginger hair. 'I thought there was a fire.'

She sat up slowly, stretching her limbs. 'I must have nodded off. What time is it?'

'Nearly half-past nine.'

'Really?' Dora Doyle snatched up her watch from the bedside table and held it close to her face, squinting at it. 'Blimey, I've been asleep for two hours.'

'Had a hard day?' Helen said sympathetically, easing off her own shoes. Her feet throbbed in protest.

'You could say that.' Dora rubbed her eyes. 'Sister had us cleaning the ward from top to bottom all day. I've been up and down, cleaning windows and turning mattresses and damp dusting. I ache all over. I'm glad tomorrow's my day off. I'd probably be too stiff to get out of bed otherwise.'

'I know how you feel. They always seem to work us harder on our last day, don't they?' Millie rifled in her chest of drawers and pulled out a lighter and a packet of cigarettes. She took one, then offered the packet to Dora.

'I hope you're going to open a window?' Helen warned, unpinning her cap. 'You know Sister Sutton can smell smoke a mile off.'

‘Yes, yes, don’t fuss so, Tremayne. We’re not going to get you in trouble.’ Millie reached up and unlatched the window, pushing it open. Then she sat down and lit Dora’s cigarette for her.

‘So where are they sending you next?’ she asked.

Dora took a long draw on her cigarette. ‘Casualty,’ she replied. ‘How about you?’

‘Female Medical. Although I’m not sure what Sister Everett will make of me.’

‘She’ll be fine,’ Helen said. She pulled off her starched collar and examined the raw mark on her skin where the starched fabric had chafed. ‘She can be slightly eccentric, but don’t let that fool you. She’s as sharp as a tack when it comes to the patients. Knows all their notes off by heart and expects her nurses to do the same.’

Millie chewed her lip worriedly. ‘I wish I were going to Casualty with you, Doyle. I’ve heard it’s so much fun down there.’

‘If you don’t mind severed limbs and people dropping dead at your feet!’ Dora sent a stream of cigarette smoke up through the open window into the chilly night sky, then twisted round to look at Helen. ‘Where are they sending you, Tremayne?’

‘Theatre.’

‘Oh, how exciting!’ Millie joined in. ‘I’d love to be a Theatre nurse.’

Dora cackled with laughter. ‘You? In Theatre?’

Millie frowned. ‘What’s so amusing about that?’

‘No one would ever send you to Theatre. You’re far too accident-prone.’ Trust Dora to spell it out, Helen thought as she pulled off her apron and stuffed it into her laundry bag. Typical Doyle, always blunt and to the point.

‘No, I’m not.’ Millie looked so injured, Helen couldn’t help smiling. She glanced at Dora. She was fighting to keep her face straight too.

'Let's see . . .' Dora pretended to consider. 'Remember that time you cleaned everyone's false teeth in the same bowl and then couldn't remember which set was which? And what about the time you gave a patient a delousing treatment and accidentally bleached their hair?'

'And don't forget nearly drowning Sister Hyde with a soap enema,' Helen put in.

'All right, all right. You've made your point,' Millie sighed.

She looked so dejected, Helen's heart went out to her. 'You more than make up for it in other ways,' she said soothingly.

'Like what?'

'Well . . . you're very kind, and compassionate. And you have a way of talking to people that makes them feel better. Everyone adores you.'

Millie had a way of winning people over. Even grumpy Sister Hyde on Female Chronics had been a little tearful when Nurse Benedict left her ward.

Another muffled squawk of laughter came up through the floorboards, followed by a crash.

Millie shook her head. 'They're asking for trouble down there.'

'What are they celebrating, anyway?' Dora asked.

'Bevan's got engaged.' Helen wriggled into her flannel nightgown. 'Her junior doctor popped the question two days ago.'

'At this rate there won't be any of us left after we qualify.' Millie looked down at her bare left hand. She wasn't allowed to wear the engagement ring her journalist boyfriend Sebastian had given her before he left for an assignment in Berlin. 'It's so silly, really. You'd think they'd let us carry on working after we get married, wouldn't you?'

'I don't know what Sister Sutton would say about having husbands in the nurses' home!' Helen smiled.

'You're not moving Seb in here,' Dora warned. 'It's bad enough with the three of us.'

‘Can you imagine?’ Millie laughed. ‘No, I’m sure they could make some arrangements, though. It seems such a waste, to spend three years training and then have to leave.’

‘I don’t think Bevan is too worried about that.’ Helen picked up her hairbrush. ‘From what I could make out, she can’t wait to say goodbye to the Nightingale and all its rules and regulations.’

‘Well, I don’t want to leave,’ Millie said. ‘I’d like to stay on after I get married, if they’ll let me. But I don’t suppose I’ll get the chance. Once I’m married, that’s it.’

‘You could always put off the wedding?’ Helen suggested.

Millie shook her head. ‘I’ve already kept poor Seb waiting long enough. And I suspect my grandmother would have an absolute fit if I told her we were postponing the wedding. She’s desperate for me to marry and produce a suitable heir to inherit the estate before anything happens to my father.’

She was so matter-of-fact about it, Helen could only marvel at her. Millie had a huge weight resting on her shoulders. The future of her family depended on her producing a son. She had been groomed by her grandmother for a suitable marriage almost from the moment she was born. Millie had made a brave bid for independence by training as a nurse. But they all knew her freedom would have to end one day.

‘How about you?’ she asked. ‘When are you and Charlie planning to get married?’

Helen pulled a blanket around her shoulders to keep out the chilly April air that blew in through the open window. ‘I’m not sure. I’d have to talk to my mother . . .’

‘You’re over twenty-one, surely you can do as you please?’

‘Even so, my mother would expect to be consulted.’

‘I don’t see why she would object. Charlie is adorable, and anyone can see the two of you are head over heels in love.’

Helen glanced up into Millie’s candid blue eyes. If only life was as simple, she thought.

'Can we stop talking about weddings for five minutes?' Dora interrupted them sharply.

Millie turned to her, startled. 'What's wrong with you?'

'Nothing. I'm just sick of hearing about people getting married.' Dora took off her shoes and climbed on to her bed, leaned out of the window and stubbed her cigarette on the ledge, then tossed the stub into the night air.

Before Millie could reply, Sister Sutton's voice rang out from the passageway below them.

'Lights out at ten o'clock, Nurses.'

Millie and Helen left Dora changing into her nightclothes and joined the line of girls shivering in the passageway outside the bathroom.

'You don't have to stand here with me, you know,' Millie reminded Helen, pulling her dressing gown more tightly around her. 'You're a senior. You could go to the front of the queue.'

As if to prove her point, Amy Hollins, Brenda Bevan and a few of the others from her set drifted down the passageway from Hollins' room and elbowed their way straight into the bathroom, laughing at the glaring faces of the junior students who had to move back to let them in.

'I might as well stay here.'

'Suit yourself. But you know they'll take all the hot water before we get there, don't you?'

'I'm sure there'll be some left for us.' Helen smiled.

Millie sent her a narrow look. 'You know, you're not nearly bullying enough,' she said. 'I bet you don't make pros do all the dirty jobs on the ward, either.'

'I don't like ordering other people around.'

'In that case, you'll never be a ward sister!' Millie nodded towards Amy Hollins. 'Perhaps you should take a few lessons from her?'

'I don't know about that!'

Millie paused for a moment, then changed the subject. 'Doyle was rather cross earlier, don't you think?' she

commented. 'What do you suppose is the matter with her?'

'I don't know. Her friend is getting married tomorrow, and Doyle's a bridesmaid. Perhaps that has something to do with it.'

'So she is,' Millie remembered. 'But I still don't see why that should make her so irritable. If anything, she should be happy about it.'

'I suppose so. But you never really know what she's thinking, do you?'

Helen had been intimidated by Dora at first, the way those green eyes looked out so challengingly at the world, as if she would take on anyone who came near her. She had come to understand that was just Dora's way, that she was a typical East End girl, down to earth and fiercely proud. But she kept her feelings locked away under a tough exterior.

'Perhaps she's just upset because she has a ghastly dress?' Millie suggested.

'You could be right,' Helen agreed. Whatever was on Dora's mind, Helen doubted they would ever find out about it.

Chapter Two

RAIN WEPT OVER the back streets of Bethnal Green on the day Dora Doyle's best friend Ruby Pike married Nick Riley.

'Talk about April showers!' Ruby grimaced, clearing a patch on the steamy kitchen window to look down over the back yard. Even though it was the middle of the afternoon it was as dark as twilight outside. 'It's coming down in stair rods.'

'Come over here and keep still. I'll never get this seam straight if you keep running off,' Dora mumbled through a mouth full of pins as she knelt at her friend's feet.

It was chaos in the Pikes' crowded kitchen. Ruby's father Len jostled at the sink with her brothers Dennis and Frank, all trying to shave in front of the tiny scrap of mirror. Her mum Lettie was cleaning shoes at the kitchen table, a pinnie fastened over her best dress.

Meanwhile, Dora was on her hands and knees, doing a last-minute repair to the bride's hem.

It was the last place she wanted to be. But Ruby was her best friend, they'd grown up next door to each other in the narrow, cramped tenements of Griffin Street, and Dora had made a promise that she would be bridesmaid.

'I dunno why you're bothering. I'll look like a drowned rat by the time I get to the church anyway.' Ruby sighed. 'My Nick will probably run a mile when he sees me.'

'If he turns up!' Dennis suggested cheekily.

'He might do a runner,' Frank agreed. He and Dennis looked at each other, then both broke into song: "'There was I, waiting at the church" - ow!' they chorused, as their father fetched them both a slap round the ear.

'He'd better bleeding turn up or I'll have him, I don't care how big he is. He's had his fun, now he's got to pay for it!' Len Pike grumbled.

'You, go up against Nick Riley? I'd like to see you try!' his wife sneered. 'He'd make mincemeat of you!'

Len Pike huffed and blew out his cheeks, but they all knew Lettie was right. No one in their right mind would ever take on Nick Riley. Even by the tough standards of the East End, Nick had a reputation.

'He'd better bloody turn up, that's all I'm saying,' Len mumbled. 'He's got you into this mess, my girl, he'll have to get you out!'

'That's enough!' Lettie scolded him. 'You don't have to tell the whole world our business!'

'I've got news for you. The whole world already knows!' Len Pike scraped at his chin and flicked the bristly soap towards the plug hole. 'There's only one reason a girl gets married this quick, and that's because there's a baby on the way. What I want to know is, why you have to make such a show of it?' he said, picking up the teatowel to mop his face. 'Why couldn't you just go off and do it quiet in a register office, like any decent girl would?'

'I don't do anything quiet, Dad. You should know that!'

Ruby winked at Dora. Everyone said Ruby Pike had more front than Southend, and she was proving it today. Even in her demure wedding dress, she looked like one of the film stars she followed so avidly in *Picturegoer*. The bias-cut silver morocaine clung lovingly to her generous curves. She'd styled her hair like Jean Harlow, the platinum-blond waves curling softly around her pretty face.

No wonder Nick hadn't been able to resist her. There weren't many red-blooded men in Bethnal Green who could.

'Why shouldn't my Ruby have a white wedding if she wants one?' Lettie defended her. 'This is her big day and I won't have anyone spoiling it for her.' She smiled fondly at her daughter. 'Baby or not, she and Nick would have got

wed sooner or later. You only have to look at him to see he's besotted with her.'

The needle caught the end of Dora's finger, making her yelp.

'Careful!' Ruby frowned down at her. 'I don't want you getting blood on my dress.'

'Sorry.' Dora sucked her finger. As she did, she glanced up and found herself meeting Lettie's hard dark stare. Even her wedding finery and the unfamiliar slash of red lipstick she wore didn't soften her thin, bitter face. There was a warning look in her eyes that made Dora uneasy.

The back door crashed downstairs, in the Rileys' part of the house.

'I expect that'll be my Nick, on his way to church,' Ruby said with a smile.

Dennis went to the window and looked out. 'I can see June Riley, wearing a daft titfer covered in feathers.'

'Let's have a look.' Lettie peered over her son's shoulder down into the yard. 'Look at the state of her. She can hardly walk in a straight line. Fancy being half cut this time of the morning, and for her own son's wedding,' she tutted.

'Where's Nick? Isn't he with her?' Dora heard the tremor in Ruby's voice.

'I expect he's already gone,' Lettie soothed.

'I didn't hear him leave.' Ruby's plump mouth pursed. 'I'm going downstairs to look for him.'

She started for the door, but Lettie stopped her. 'You can't! It's unlucky for him to see his bride before the wedding.'

Ruby hesitated, then turned to Dora. 'You go,' she said.

'Me? But I haven't finished sewing . . .'

'That doesn't matter. I want you to go downstairs and see if Nick's gone.'

'But—'

'Please, Dora. Be a mate? I don't want to get to church and find out he's left me standing at the altar!'

Dora saw her friend's nervous smile, stretched almost to breaking point. 'All right,' she agreed, standing up and brushing down her dress. 'But I'm telling you now, you haven't got anything to worry about.'

Downstairs, all was in darkness. Dora knocked on the Rileys' kitchen door and held her breath, counting to ten.

One . . . two . . . She stared at the peeling paintwork.

Five . . . six . . . She took a step backwards, already retreating towards the stairs.

Nine . . . ten. No reply. She had turned to hurry away when the door flew open and Nick stood there.

Seeing him almost stopped Dora's heart in her chest.

No one could call Nick Riley handsome, with his flattened boxer's nose and brooding expression. But there was something compelling about the intense blue eyes that scowled out from under a mane of dark gypsy curls.

She looked away quickly, dragging her gaze from his unbuttoned shirt. 'Sorry,' she muttered. 'Ruby just sent me down. She wasn't sure if you'd already gone . . .'

'I was just leaving.'

'Right. I'll tell her . . .'

 Dora started to turn away, but Nick called her back.

'Wait. I need your help.'

She looked around, dry-mouthed with panic, looking for a way to escape. 'I'm needed upstairs . . .'

'Please.' Nick's voice was husky. 'It's Danny,' he said.

The Rileys' kitchen was a cold, unwelcoming place, stinking of damp and rancid fat. The walls were furred with black patches of mould. The houses in Griffin Street weren't palaces, but most of the women Dora knew tried hard to keep them clean and tidy. Except for June Riley. She had always been more interested in her next drink or her latest man than in looking after her two sons.

Dora averted her eyes from the dirty dishes littering the table and went over to where Nick's younger brother Danny sat huddled in a corner of the room, his knees pulled up to

his chin, face buried against them. He was half dressed in shiny suit trousers and a grubby vest, his feet bare.

'I was helping him to get dressed when he suddenly decided he wasn't going to come,' Nick said. 'Now I can't get him to budge. He won't even tell me what's wrong.' His gaze was fixed on his brother. 'He's always trusted you, Dora,' he said gruffly. 'I thought you could talk to him.'

She glanced at Nick's profile then at Danny, shivering in the corner. 'I'll try,' she said.

'Thanks.' Nick went over and crouched down beside his brother. 'Danny?' He put a hand on his shoulder, but Danny flinched away. Dora saw the look of pain flash across Nick's face. 'Dan, Dora's come to have a word with you. You like Dora, don't you?'

Danny didn't move. Nick straightened up and turned to Dora, his face beseeching.

'Look after him,' he whispered. 'And if anyone's hurt him, or said anything . . .'

'Just go and finish getting ready,' she said.

As the door closed behind him, Dora went over to where Danny was crouched and sat down beside him, carefully rearranging her pink dress around her so it didn't pick up too much dust from the floor.

'Now then, Danny ducks, what's all this about you not wanting to go to your brother's wedding?' she coaxed softly. 'We can't have that, can we? You're his best man. He's relying on you.'

Danny lifted his head slowly to look at her with red-rimmed, watery eyes. He was as pale as his brother was dark, with thin, gangling limbs that made him seem all disjointed angles.

'Th-they said I sh-shouldn't go.' He sniffed back his tears. 'Th-they s-said I - I'd I-let everyone down.'

'Who said that?' But even as she said it, Dora already knew the answer.

'F-Frank and D-Dennis.' Danny wiped his nose with his wrist. He was nearly eighteen years old, but still had the innocent, vulnerable mind of a child. Easy prey for cruel thugs like the Pike boys. 'They s-said Nick sh-shouldn't h-have me as his b-best man because everyone will l-laugh at m-me.'

'No one's going to laugh at you, sweetheart.' Dora smoothed his fair hair back off his face. Not while your brother's there, at any rate, she thought. Nick would string Frank and Dennis up if he knew they'd been tormenting Danny. 'You don't want to take any notice of that pair. They're just bullies, that's all.'

'I'm f-frightened of them,' Danny mumbled. 'And I'm f-frightened of R-Ruby too. She just laughs when they s-say things to me.'

'Does she now?'

Danny nodded. 'I h-heard her telling her m-mum she didn't know why Nick had p-picked me to b-be his best man.'

Dora fought to keep her temper. It was no less than she'd expected from Dennis and Frank, but she was disappointed in her friend.

Danny couldn't help being the way he was. He'd been left brain-damaged by a terrible accident when he was a child, although there were many in Griffin Street who suspected that it was his violent father Reg who'd caused the injury, shortly before he abandoned his family.

Most of the neighbours treated Danny with kindness and understanding, if only because they were afraid of his older brother. Dora hadn't expected Ruby to be so cruel. After all, she and Danny were going to be family.

'Well, I'll tell you why, shall I? Nick picked you because you're his brother and there's no one else in the whole wide world he'd want to stand beside him at his wedding. And I'll tell you something else, too. If you aren't there he's going to be very upset and disappointed. And you don't want that,

do you?' Danny shook his head. 'So why don't I help you finish getting ready? We'll find you a nice shirt and tie to wear, and comb your hair and make you look like a proper gent. How about that?'

Dora stood up and put out her hand to help him to his feet. Danny hung back, still reluctant.

'Wh-what if I I-let him down?'

'You won't, love. And don't forget, I'll be there with you. I can help you if you get stuck with anything.'

He regarded her with wary eyes. 'You pr-promise?'

'Course I do.' Dora offered her hand again. 'Now let's get a move on, or we'll all miss the wedding!'

She was helping him to put on his tie when Nick returned.

'Everything all right?' he asked, his eyes fixed on Danny.

'I think so.' Dora straightened the knot and turned Danny around to face his brother. 'What do you reckon? Will we do?'

The warmth in Nick's smile as he looked at his brother was like the sun coming out from behind a cloud.

'Very nice,' he said in a choked voice.

It was a moment before she realised he'd shifted his gaze to her, and another moment before she could react.

'Well, I'd best be getting back. Ruby will think I've deserted her!' She hurried for the door. Nick followed her.

'Did he say what was wrong?'

Dora glanced past his shoulder at Danny, admiring himself in the kitchen mirror. 'It was just nerves, that's all.'

'Are you sure that's it?' Nick's eyes narrowed. 'I meant what I said. If I thought anyone had been having a go at him —'

Dora thought about Ruby. 'He'll be all right,' she said. 'Weddings just bring out the worst in people, that's all.'

'Tell me something I don't know.' Nick looked grim.

Dora stepped into the hall, but his voice stopped her in her tracks. 'You look lovely.'

She felt herself blushing to the roots of her red hair. 'Pink isn't really my colour,' she batted away the compliment. 'But Ruby likes it, so—'

'What Ruby wants, Ruby gets,' Nick said.

Dora smiled wistfully. 'It seems that way, doesn't it?'

She stared at the staircase in front of her, that led back up to the Pikes' part of the house. She knew she should walk away, but her treacherous legs wouldn't carry her.

'I'm sorry,' Nick said.

'So am I.'

She managed the few steps to the foot of the stairs. 'I don't want to marry her,' Nick blurted out.

Dora turned to face him. She wanted to shout at him, to tell him he was being selfish, but he looked so wretched she couldn't bring herself to do it. Besides, she felt that if she let herself go even for a moment and allowed herself to show any emotion, she would be lost.

'You should have thought about that before you got her pregnant, shouldn't you?'

'Don't you think I know that? I made a mistake. If I could turn back the clock—'

'You can't,' Dora cut him off coldly. 'It's too late now.'

'It doesn't have to be.' He took a few steps towards her. 'If you just say the word, I'll walk away.'

She looked over her shoulder at him, knowing the look of desolation in his eyes mirrored her own expression. For a moment, it almost seemed possible that they could do it, that they could snatch their happiness and run with it. All she had to do was say the word . . .

But then she remembered Ruby's face, radiant with optimism as she put on her wedding gown.

'You have to do the right thing by Ruby,' she said. 'We both do.'

His broad shoulders slumped. 'I know,' he sighed.

'You wouldn't do it anyway,' said Dora. 'I know you, Nick Riley. You would never walk away from her, not while she's