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Courage *for the* Flying Nightingales

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For my family:

Mum

Duncan, Jana & Emma

Chris, Katka & Elena

Chapter One

March 1942

An air of excitement greeted Ruby Morris when she trudged into her sleeping hut. Her two best friends were huddled around the stove, one red and one brown head close together, so engrossed in their conversation that they didn't appear to have noticed her arrival.

'I'm going for it,' Holly Hardwick, her friend and fellow nursing orderly was saying. A lock of red hair fell over her eyes and she pushed it aside. 'What about you?'

Meg Fairweather's eyes shone. 'Try and stop me. This will make everyone back home sit up and take notice.'

Ruby closed the door behind her, and the slam made Meg glance up. 'Ruby! Come and listen to this.'

Ruby ignored them. She was so tired after her long shift at RAF Leecliff's hospital that she could do no more than grunt a greeting. She flung herself upon her bed and closed her eyes. A ten-minute nap. That was all she asked. Then she would somehow summon up enough energy to ask what had happened.

Her mattress dipped with a creak of springs as someone sat by her feet. She groaned and opened her eyes to see Holly grinning down at her. She scowled. 'Leave me alone.'

Holly gave a sympathetic tilt of the head. 'Bad day?' But her blue eyes were dancing, and Ruby could see she was bursting to share her news.

'The worst.' Ruby dragged herself to a sitting position, resigning herself to the fact that Holly wouldn't let her rest. 'Half of the ground crew seems to have picked up a vomiting bug. I've been mopping floors and washing out basins nonstop.' She narrowed her eyes at her two friends. 'You two picked a good day to have off. What have you been up to?'

'Oh, just a trip into Bristol. But that's not important. You'll never guess what we've heard!' Holly bounced on the bed.

Ruby groaned. 'Will you let me sleep once you've told me?'

Holly beckoned Meg forward. 'You tell her, Meg. You're the one Squadron Officer Fleming collared after breakfast.'

Meg perched on the next bed. 'The RAF is starting up an Air Ambulance Service and they're asking for volunteer nursing orderlies.'

'Fleming said Meg would be perfect for them,' Holly added.

'Probably trying to get rid of me.' Meg gave a self-deprecating smile.

'Rubbish!' Ruby hated it when Meg talked herself down. 'You're the best nursing orderly we've got.' She glanced at Holly. 'It does sound exciting. Are you volunteering too?' She felt a twinge of dismay at the prospect of her two best friends leaving. They had been together ever since their training, and she'd been overjoyed when they had been posted to the same RAF station on the outskirts of Bristol.

'Of course!' Holly said. 'I put your name down too.'

Ruby sat bolt upright, all her weariness gone in an instant. 'Then you can cross it out! I'm not doing it.' Panic clawed at her innards.

But when she saw how upset Holly looked, she regretted her outburst. 'We have to volunteer together,' Holly protested. 'We're friends. We stick together.'

Coming from anyone else, Ruby wouldn't have taken it so seriously, but she knew how important their little circle of friends was to Holly. They had only been together a week when Holly had told Ruby and Meg that she was an orphan. She had been brought up by an aunt and uncle who had made no secret of their reluctance to bring up another child just when their two sons had left home. Although she hadn't gone into much detail, Ruby had got the impression that Holly's childhood had been very lonely and she had been only too happy to join the WAAF the moment she was old enough. Ruby bit her lip, hating to upset Holly, knowing how hard it would be on her to break up the group, but how could she explain that the very thought terrified her?

'I'm sorry,' she said finally, 'I don't think I can.'

'Why not?' Meg was regarding her with a furrowed brow. 'Are you scared of flying?'

'Something like that.' It was easier than admitting the truth.

Holly sprang to her feet. 'Okay. I'll tell Fleming that we're not volunteering after all. I'm really sorry I didn't ask you first. I just thought you'd be as excited as Meg and me.'

'Thanks.' Then Holly's words sank in. 'Wait. You're taking all our names off the list? But I thought this was something you really wanted to do.'

'Only if we're all together.'

This wasn't an attempt at manipulation, Ruby was certain. She knew her friend too well and knew Holly would never stoop so low. 'You should do it. I can see how much this means to you. Don't let me hold you back.'

'It does mean a lot, but my friends mean more,' Holly replied. 'I'd much rather us all stay together than go our separate ways.'

This was too much for Ruby to bear. 'What do you know about the job?' she asked. 'Where would we be based?'

Meg answered for her. 'We don't know an awful lot at the moment.' She glanced at Holly. 'Volunteering is no guarantee of getting the job, because we have to go through an interview first. Then there would be training at RAF Starsden.'

Ruby perked up. Starsden was on the northwestern outskirts of London and not far from her parents, who lived in High Wycombe. And really, she couldn't bear to disappoint her friends, who both looked eager to pursue this new opportunity. 'Maybe it wouldn't be too bad after all,' she said. She drew breath to ask about the interview but was enveloped in a cloud of violet scent as Holly pulled her into an enthusiastic hug.

'Thank you!' Holly pulled her to her feet and they were capering around the hut in an impromptu polka. 'You won't regret it, I promise. And we'll do all we can to help you get over your fear, won't we, Meg?'

Meg was pulled into the celebrations. 'It's really a very safe form of transport,' she said. 'And we won't be flying into action. I'm sure you'll get used to it.'

'Absolutely,' Holly told her. 'The important thing is, we'll be together.'

But Ruby wondered how they would react if she told them she wasn't scared of flying but of the responsibility. Working in a hospital was easy. It might be messy and unpleasant at times but at no point did she make any decisions to do with a patient's care. She just did what she

was told. She had given up nursing because she was terrified of making a mistake that could end up killing a patient.

In the days running up to the interview, Ruby persuaded herself all would be well, even if she was selected. The RAF was recruiting WAAFs as nursing orderlies, which was the role she was already doing, and she had never been expected to do anything more demanding than take a temperature or change a dressing. For the most part, she acted as an assistant to the nursing staff and worked under their supervision. She was never in sole charge of a patient and surely it would be the same in the Air Ambulance Service – there had to be a trained nurse or doctor on the crew.

Therefore, she was feeling much more confident when Squadron Leader Norton arrived from RAF Starsden four days later to conduct the interviews.

Ruby joined Holly, Meg and the other candidates in the break room while they waited to be called into Squadron Officer Fleming's office for their turn. Holly was too agitated to sit and paced in front of her friends until Ruby felt dizzy watching her. 'I couldn't bear it if we got split up,' she said. 'I never thought to ask if we'd all be sent to the same base. Wouldn't it be awful if we were all accepted but still weren't posted together?'

Meg caught her arm and pulled her towards a seat. 'Sit down. You're giving me a crick in the neck. It'll be fine. This is just an interview, remember. We can pull out if we decide it's not for us.'

The sight of her friend's nerves made Ruby forget all her own misgivings as she did her best to soothe Holly's anxieties. 'I'm sure there will be a chance to ask questions, so we can find out if we're likely to be separated. Let's agree to do the best we can and compare notes afterwards. If you're not happy we can withdraw our applications.'

Some of the colour returned to Holly's cheeks, and she nodded. However, before she could reply the door opened and Fleming appeared in the doorway. 'Leading Aircraftwoman Fairweather,' she called.

Meg grimaced and rose, straightening her uniform. 'See you in the NAAFI,' she muttered, then followed Fleming from the room.

Ruby had to watch Holly and two other WAAFs be called into their interviews before her summons came. She rose, silently reciting her own advice to the others: *do your best and find out as much as you can about the Air Ambulance Service*. An unwelcome thought intruded: wouldn't it be awful if she was the only one to fail the interview? Their close-knit group would have to split up and it would be all her fault. She clasped her hands behind her back to disguise their trembling and followed the squadron officer into her office.

'Take a seat, Morris.' Fleming indicated a chair in front of the desk.

Ruby sat and found herself facing a man in RAF uniform who must be Squadron Leader Norton. He was a nondescript sandy-haired man who appeared to be in his late thirties or early forties. His most notable feature was a moustache that completely concealed his upper lip.

After Fleming had made the introductions, Norton gave Ruby a pleasant smile and began. 'You won't know much about the new service so let me explain a few things before I start the interview proper.' He leaned forward, regarding her with serious eyes. 'The first thing I need to make clear is that while all care will be taken, we cannot guarantee your safety. Although we will only be flying around the British Isles, there is always a chance of enemy attack. Are you prepared to accept the risks associated with this job?'

Having had her head full of her own and Holly's worries, this was something that hadn't occurred to her. How would her friends have reacted? She immediately knew that neither would have been put off. Meg had an adventurous streak and Holly had clearly been swept away by the thrill of doing something different. As for herself, she could honestly look Norton in the eye and say, 'I understand, sir. As far as I'm concerned, I've had to take care of patients during air raids and I know I can do my duty even when I'm in danger.'

Norton smiled. 'Good. Now, tell me about your background.' He glanced at the open file on the desk in front of him. 'I see you started nursing training but left despite excellent reports. Why was that?'

She settled on the excuse she had given at the time. 'My mother was taken ill partway through my second year and I left to take care of her. When she recovered I wanted to do something for the war effort straight away so I joined the WAAF.' This was true as far as it went. What she didn't say was that her mother had protested that she didn't need Ruby's help. It was Ruby who had grasped at the chance to leave a profession that, frankly, terrified her.

'Very commendable, I'm sure, and nursing's loss is our gain.'

She smiled and thanked him as she was expected, wondering what Norton would think if he knew the agonies she had suffered when the WAAF had made her a nursing orderly. She had hoped for a clerical role or something where lives didn't depend on her actions but as soon as they discovered her nursing experience, her fate had been sealed. It was only after she had discovered that she wasn't required to do things like draw up dosages that she had started to relax and enjoy her work. The prospect of being a nurse and responsible for administering potentially

lethal drugs had filled her with dread. As an orderly she could take care of her patients without the overwhelming sense of responsibility.

Norton asked a few more questions about her work and skills which she had no problem answering. From his expression she could tell he was impressed and she relaxed, feeling that she wasn't letting Holly down. Finally, he asked if she had any questions.

'Will we get full training before we start?' she asked.

'Of course. You already have the skills we're looking for but we will make sure you are fully proficient with the challenges of working in an aircraft before you get sent out for real.'

'And where would we be based?'

'At RAF Starsden. That's where all the air ambulances are operating from, at least for now.'

So it looked as though the successful applicants would all be posted together. That would keep Holly happy. And herself, if she was honest. Her friends meant a great deal to her and she didn't like the idea of being split up either.

All in all she felt more positive about the job when she went to the NAAFI canteen to meet her friends.

'How did it go?' Holly asked before she had even sat down.

'All right, I think. How about you two?'

Holly and Meg both agreed that they also thought they had made a good impression. 'And we'd still be posted together,' Holly said happily. 'I do hope we all get in. It sounds marvellous.'

Three days later, Ruby sat with Meg in their sleeping hut, involved in a 'domestic evening' with all their off-duty hut mates. The floor had been swept, all surfaces dusted and

polished and now the women were gathered around the stove, polishing their uniform buttons or darning.

Holly burst in like a whirlwind. 'It's up!' she cried. 'The list is up.'

'The air ambulance list?' Meg had turned a shade paler. When Holly nodded, she asked, 'Did we make it?'

'I don't know. I couldn't bear to look. The ward sister told me when I went off duty.'

All the girls who had applied immediately sprang up and pulled on jackets and scarves. All except Ruby. Suddenly she felt sick. Whether she was included or not, she was going to feel awful, either for letting down her friends, whom she was sure would be on the list, or from fear of the new job if she was accepted.

'Come on!' Holly pulled her to her feet, and she followed everyone outside on leaden feet. It was a mild evening for March, but Ruby shivered with nerves all the way to the hospital and the common room where they had been told the list of accepted candidates would be posted.

No sooner were they in the room than Holly made a dive for the board. Ruby lagged behind. Her vision tunnelled until all she could see was Holly, her head moving as she looked for the right list. Then she froze. A chill settled in the pit of Ruby's stomach. In that moment she knew that she feared letting down her friends more than she feared the job because she was sure Holly wouldn't be standing so still if all three had been accepted.

Then Holly spun round, her face ablaze with joy. She met Ruby's gaze. 'We got in!' she cried. 'All three of us!'