

Chapter fourteen

Miss Van Gilder fastened the silver buckle on her assistant matron's belt and then drew back the heavy curtains on the tall, mullioned windows which overlooked the frost-covered car park of St Angelus. She could tell by the painted pictures of Squirrel Nutkin that the children's wards ran adjacent to the accommodation block. As she looked across, every now and then she would catch a glimpse of a nurse with a baby or a child in her arms, pointing out of the window to passers-by in an attempt to soothe the fretting child.

'Mummy will be here soon,' she could imagine the nurse was probably saying.

No, Mummy would not.

Miss Van Gilder had read only that week that there were moves to allow parents to visit their children when they were in-patients; that there was a school of thought suggesting that separating children from their mothers could do psychological harm. 'What a lot of old rot,' she had exclaimed out loud. She would never allow that to happen. She had been at St Angelus for just a few days and could already tell that rules needed to be tightened there, not relaxed.

The westerly wind that blew across from the Mersey had frozen her to the bone, and the frost had been in permanent attendance from the day she'd arrived. She thought of St Dunstan's and how she had moved from pillar to post ever since, under a cloud. When Sister Haycock had contacted her requesting a name and

address so that St Angelus could ask for a testimonial, she'd been thrown slightly. It had to be St Dunstan's. She would be safe. Matron at St Dunstan's was too arrogant and proud. She would do anything to avoid any criticism being levelled at the running of her hospital. There were moves to force her to retire, but she was resisting. No, the matron at St Dunstan's would not say a word. No one else would catch up with her. Not here, she thought to herself. I am too far north for anyone to know me. Not here.

Matron had been away since she'd arrived, visiting her elderly mother, and today was to be their first formal meeting. Miss Van Gilder had not wasted her time, however, and had made it her business to visit every ward and department in the hospital and to announce, in her own special way, that she had arrived. She had only clashed with one sister, Sister Antrobus, who had quite recently been put in charge of casualty. The air had bristled with resentment the moment the two women met.

'I would like to go through with you your reporting of admissions and how you allocate patients to beds, please,' Miss Van Gilder had said.

'And why would that be?' Sister Antrobus had enquired. 'It is done the same way it has been done in this hospital since 1932.' She had pulled herself up to her full height. The fine, downy hair on the back of her neck prickled with mistrust.

'And that, Sister Antrobus, is exactly why I would like to take a look. I am amazed that Matron has not felt the need to bring the reporting procedure into line with NHS protocols.'

'And what would they be?' asked Sister Antrobus. 'We allocate patients to the wards with empty beds. It isn't brain surgery. In the winter, we are often tight and we can have children on the geriatric wards, but we do what we have to do. Unless of course, in your role as assistant matron, you can magic up some beds.'

'Why were you moved from ward two?' Miss Van Gilder didn't mince her words. Not a muscle moved in her face; her jaw was set, her eyes fixed on her prey.

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Sister Antrobus was speechless. Caught unawares. She had been diminished by her past indiscretion, then forgiven by Matron, but only just. Her lip wobbled, her gaze faltered. She folded her arms firmly across her chest, to protect herself and ward off any further attacks, but it was useless, she was beyond help.

‘Well?’ Miss Van Gilder smelt blood. Her first blow had wounded her opponent. ‘Gynae is a coveted ward. Never in my life have I known a sister walk away from gynae. Not unless she was going mad or sickening for something, or, of course, if she had misbehaved. There used to be a consultant on that ward, I saw his name entered in the book of death certificates. He’s gone too, by all accounts. A consultant and a ward sister, both at the same time. I never heard the like, but you have.’

‘I have no idea what you’re talking about. It was a coincidence.’

‘Too much of a coincidence, if you ask me. I will get to the bottom of it. Nothing escapes me. Now, bed reporting.’