

Chapter One



‘No one is dressed like a daffodil’

They were both in bed, almost asleep – Mary clutching a bundle of bedclothes ‘in case I need to turn around’, Hetty pulling the bedclothes from the other side. Then there was me, the youngest, aged six, sleeping in the middle, unable to move, almost strangled by the tight bedcovers.

The lamp outside our window shone through the crack between the flowery curtains and into the tiny bedroom I shared with my sisters: Hetty, aged eleven, and Mary, aged nine. The walls of our bedroom were painted white and the floor was covered with a pink-and-blue linoleum that matched the curtains. Beside the bed was a single, dark wooden wardrobe and on

the other side there was a small dressing table and a tiny chest of drawers.

Although our bedroom was cosy, there was no heating, and in the winter we made sure we always got into bed quickly to keep warm. Climbing out of the bed, on the other hand, proved a bit more of a challenge – as sharing the bed with my sisters meant it was my bad luck to have to sleep in the middle.

Knowing this particular day was going to be special, even before opening my eyes, I carefully crawled to the bottom of the bed and managed to get out without disturbing them. It was still grey outside and there was a gentle breeze.

‘What are you doing up already, Kitty?’ Mum called from the other bedroom. ‘It’s only four o’clock – get back to bed!’ Grudgingly, I returned to the end of the bed, sitting bolt upright, until I heard Mum’s familiar call: ‘Who’s ready for a cup of tea?’ She’d just returned from her early morning cleaning job; Dad was already at work and would return in the early afternoon. Tea? Tea? I wasn’t interested in tea, having been waiting for months for this special outing.

‘Shut up, all of you – I’m trying to sleep!’ Hetty shouted as she turned on her side, pulling all the covers off Mary, who had taken advantage of the space I’d left, and was now sleeping next to her.

‘What are you doing? I’m freezing – I hate you!’ shouted Mary, as she tugged at the bedcovers from the other side, simultaneously prodding Hetty’s back with her elbow.

‘I don’t care and I hate you!’ Hetty replied.

‘If you two don’t stop, you won’t be going out!’ Mum shouted. This was the first argument of the day, but there was nothing unusual about it. Outside the flat and at school, Hetty and Mary were very protective of each other. All three of us had planned to meet up with Hetty’s friends at the tram stop at eight o’clock that morning, but with Hetty and Mary still arguing, the likelihood of this happening was dwindling.

Leaving them to it, I wandered into the kitchen where Mum had prepared a huge plate of thick, hot buttered toast, which she’d placed on top of the green-and-white gingham tablecloth. Even the sight and smell of the toast couldn’t tempt me. I was far too excited.

I could see through the kitchen door that Mary was now dressed and gazing into the dressing table mirror, admiring her curly blonde hair. I was willing her to hurry up, but at the same time admiring her prettiness and wishing my hair was just like hers.

‘How much longer will they be?’ I asked Mum.

‘Try to be patient – otherwise they might not take you,’ she said, patting my head.

‘I don’t want to go and meet up with Hetty’s stuck-up friends anyway!’ shouted Mary from the bedroom.

Hetty had, by this time, also managed to drag herself out of bed and was now ready to leave. Having been awake since four o’clock, I felt that my sisters were deliberately trying to make me wait longer.

‘Hurry up, you two. I’ve got enough work to do without you slowing me down. Now get your coats on and make sure you take care of Kitty,’ Mum called.

Reluctantly, Mary grabbed hold of my arm as we walked to our front door. Mum stopped fussing and gave us each a paper bag containing sandwiches for our lunch. She also handed Hetty a bag of clothes.

‘If you don’t stop jumping about, I’m not taking you,’ said Hetty to me. Being the eldest child in our family, Hetty always had the last say. Mum relied on her quite a lot, and we were never bullied or teased at school when she was around. Not having any idea where we were going that morning, I just felt happy to be going anywhere with my sisters and their friends.

‘Don’t let go of her hand,’ Mum shouted to my sisters. I was wearing one of Mary’s dresses which she’d outgrown, and looking very grown-up. The dress was pale blue, covered in tiny red flowers.

‘Why is Kitty wearing my dress?’ demanded Mary. ‘It’s my favourite.’ Mum told me to ignore her, giving my hand a little squeeze. I gave Mary a curtsy and ran off, grinning.

We walked along the side road, where there was a small shop. This was known to us as the Sweet Shop, although it sold almost everything – groceries and newspapers, as well as sweets.

‘Come on,’ said Hetty. ‘Mum’s given us sixpence to spend. You can have two pennies each.’ I was momentarily mesmerised by the colourful display of

sweets, but my eyes were soon drawn to my favourites – bullseyes and liquorice sticks. ‘Hurry up, we can’t be late!’ barked Hetty.

Little did we know how important this tiny shop would become to our family in the years to come. On the corner of the road was a pub Dad would escape to on a Saturday night for a beer with his friends and neighbours, after a heavy week cleaning the streets of the City of London. Wearing his best suit, he always looked so smart on this, his one night out. This small area was my world, where I was allowed to walk alone or meet up with my friends. These side streets were my playground and felt safe.

Eventually we reached the main road, busy with noisy traffic, including huge red trams leading to unknown places. It felt both exciting and frightening, so I clung onto Hetty’s arm. Now that Mary was certain she was well out of Mum’s view, she let go of my arm and walked on ahead of Hetty and me. We could see two girls waving to us.

‘Look, there’s Joan and Polly!’ cried Hetty, wild with excitement. Polly ran towards me, smiling, and took hold of my hand. She was wearing a floral dress

with a white frill around the bottom and she had a big white ribbon in her hair.

‘You stay with me, Kitty. I’ll take care of you,’ she said, as we trailed behind everyone. Of all my sisters’ friends, Polly was my favourite. She bent down to give me a hug and by the look in my sisters’ eyes, it was clear they were glad to hand over my care to someone else. Polly was an only child and she loved to play mother to me.

We joined the long queue for our tram, which eventually came rattling noisily along the tracks in the road. Hetty held out her arm proudly to stop it and we all scrambled on.

‘Let’s all go upstairs so we’ll get a good view!’ shouted Hetty.

‘Hurry along,’ said the conductor, a tall thin man with a tired face. He had a smart peaked cap and wore an important-looking badge on his jacket. In his hand was a long strip of coloured tickets.

‘Fares please!’ he called out. We each paid our half-penny fare and in exchange were each given a tiny ticket. As we climbed up the stairs, I was still wondering where we were going but really

didn't care too much. The journey was long but as we'd managed to get seats at the front, we just sat entranced by the amazing busyness of London. People were running in all directions, everyone seeming to be in such a hurry, and we passed many tall buildings. Finally, Polly stood up. We all jumped off. She seemed very confident.

'We've a bit of a walk ahead of us,' Polly said as she looked down at me, smiling and squeezing my hand. She always made me feel special. The next thing I noticed was an enormous golden statue, shining in the sun.

'That's Queen Victoria's husband, Albert,' said Hetty, which made me wonder how you could have a husband made of gold.

Mary was still walking on ahead, pretending not to be with us.

Suddenly, what looked like a palace appeared in front of us. It was the Royal Albert Hall. We walked round and round this circular building, while Polly tried to find the right entrance. Sensing we were lost, a woman in a smart uniform asked if she could help us.

‘You children need to go to Entrance D and get changed. You don’t need to buy tickets as you’re going to be part of the show.’ Where was Entrance D? What show was she talking about?

‘Behave yourself and keep close to me,’ Hetty said, as she grabbed my arm and pulled me towards her.

The year was 1936 and we’d come to the Royal Albert Hall to take part in a fancy-dress competition. The venue was full of families, eager for their children to win. We finally found our entrance, which was packed with children, pushing and shoving. Two young women in red-and-gold uniforms were trying unsuccessfully to create some order. Suddenly, a giant of a man appeared. He was wearing a blue suit covered with gold braid, and a peaked cap.

‘Quiet!’ he shouted. ‘You will form a queue or all get out.’ There was silence. An orderly queue was quickly formed, and we made our way to what we were told was the back of the stage and the dressing rooms. Here chaos reigned – with laughing, screaming, enthusiastic children all hoping to win a competition. It was so hot in that dressing room

that I was beginning to wonder if I wanted to stay after all. Too late! Hetty grabbed my arm.

‘Take off your coat. Let’s get you ready,’ she said. Ready for what? I still didn’t know what this was all about, but I was glad to shed some clothes at last. Coats, hats, scarves and socks were strewn everywhere. Everyone was laughing and enjoying the moment and fighting for space.

‘Anyone seen a brown lace-up shoe?’ someone shouted. My shoes remained firmly on my feet.

From the bag Mum had given her, Hetty pulled out a yellow-and-green outfit.

‘What is it? What’s that supposed to be?’

‘It’s a daffodil, stupid. Try to remember if you’re asked,’ said Hetty. Mum had sent me to the Royal Albert Hall with a daffodil costume.

Neither Hetty nor Mary had any clothes to change into, so it looked to me as though it was just Polly and I who were taking to the stage. Polly wore her mother’s hat and shuffled about in high-heeled shoes, but I wasn’t sure what she was supposed to be. Both boys and girls were competing, the boys dressed mainly as animals or monsters. I spotted Alfie Mack,

who lived in our block of flats. He was supposed to be a lion and kept flicking his tail in my face.

‘Leave her alone or I’ll pull your tail off,’ Hetty warned him.

‘Just try!’ retorted Alfie.

None of the boys seemed particularly interested in the competition. They just enjoyed grunting, pretending to be animals. Backstage, everyone was having great fun, trying to guess what we were supposed to be. Before I could object, Hetty had slipped yellow-and-green fabric over my head and with a sharp tug pulled my arms through the holes.

We were then told to line up, march up a few steps and walk across the stage, where we had to parade in front of three women and two men who were taking notes. Someone whispered that these were the judges. To me, they looked very stern and old. All the other girls looked beautiful in their outfits and this made me feel a little uncomfortable.

‘No one is dressed like a daffodil,’ I complained to Hetty.

‘Oh, stop moaning and hold your head high. It’s good that no one else is a flower,’ she replied.

‘Well, I don’t think it’s good. I feel stupid,’ I muttered.

‘You look wonderful,’ Polly said, trying to reassure me. Not wanting to belittle Mum’s efforts, I just gritted my teeth and carried on. We shuffled across the stage and then we all assembled back in the dressing room. We felt more relaxed now. Someone was calling out numbers. It was of no interest to me – I was beginning to enjoy myself.

‘103! Will ticket number 103 please come to the stage?’ There was an urgency in the announcement. ‘Will the child with number 103 come to the stage immediately?’ The voice sounded even more impatient and everyone backstage started panicking and looking for this number. I didn’t know what was going on, and in any case I was far too happy laughing and chatting to my new friends to pay any attention to the announcement. All I knew, from listening to the others, was that we were taking part in a fancy-dress competition for the Girls’ Life Brigade. Although I felt awkward dressed as a daffodil, just being in the Royal Albert Hall and playing a part in this huge extravaganza felt special.

Hetty told me that Mum, with a little bit of help from her, had been working on my costume in every spare minute she could find. The idea had come to her when she saw one lonely daffodil pushing its way up through the soil in a neighbour's flowerpot. Its tall green shoot looked full of promise. The brave little flower had flourished in a world of bricks and concrete. We already had an old green school jumper and green stockings; all Mum had to buy was some yellow crêpe paper. Looking at my costume, I could see the care Mum had taken.

'Move your arms around as if you're in a breeze,' Hetty snapped.

Just as I was beginning to imagine what an impressive daffodil I might be, a hand was on my shoulder and I was pushed back onto the stage by a tall, excited woman with glasses perched on the end of her nose and her hair piled high on her head.

'Here she is!' she screeched, pointing to a large number tied onto my outfit. The number was 103. It was me they were looking for. I'd been chosen as one of the finalists out of hundreds of children, and was now being pushed onto the stage to join eight other finalists, much older than me. Why me? Looking at

the lovely costumes the bigger girls were wearing, I thought there must be some mistake. Hetty had her hands on her cheeks, her mouth wide open.

We had to stand in front of the five judges who were looking us up and down. At that moment, panic set in. I shouldn't even have been at the Royal Albert Hall, being far too young to be a member of the Girls' Life Brigade. I was only there because my two older sisters were members.

The other finalists were all smiling and preening themselves. Some of them were even wearing make-up and their costumes all seemed very sophisticated. There was a princess with a sparkling crown on her head, and a fairy complete with wings, a halo and a wand. Standing at the end of the line, having been pushed on at the last moment, I was half the age and size of the others. I began to feel scared and looked around for Polly, but she was nowhere to be seen.

Then a tall woman, wearing a long red dress and a tiny black hat and with very scarlet lips, began to walk behind us. She was holding a board with the word 'applause' written on it. I didn't see her at first but could hear the audience responding with clapping

and cheering. As she walked behind each child, she held the board up high. The princess received a loud applause and gave a sweet little curtsy in response. As the woman moved along the line towards me, I began to feel alarmed. Becoming aware that she was holding the board up behind me, I looked down to the front of the audience and there, to my utter joy, I saw Dad. He looked so happy and was waving his cap high in the air to catch my attention. I waved back, jumping up and down and blowing him kisses with both hands. The entire audience stood up and there was huge applause. They thought the kisses were for them. This simple act won the hearts of the crowd. Having received the loudest applause, I had won the competition.

Hetty ran towards me and kissed and hugged me. Polly, with her mother's hat on one side of her head and clasping the high-heeled shoes in her hands, also kissed me, but my eyes were only for Dad. He must have taken the day off work just to be there for me, and he would now have to work on his day off, as he certainly couldn't afford to lose a day's pay. I'd won the silver cup for the South London Girls' Life

Brigade. One of the judges tied a wide green-and-gold sash across my chest, but all that mattered to me was that I'd made Dad so happy.