

JENNY HOLMES

When times are hard,
can she help the ones
who need her most?



THE MIDWIVES OF RAGLAN ROAD

About the Book

September, 1936. Newly trained midwife Hazel Price returns to the Yorkshire streets of her childhood, only to find that her modern methods and 'stuck-up' ways bring her into conflict with her family and other formidable residents of Raglan Road.

Determined Hazel battles on, assisting with home deliveries and supporting the local GP. The days are long and hard but Hazel brings knowledge and compassion to the work she loves.

Then tragedy strikes and accusations fly on Raglan Road. Will Hazel's reputation survive? And what of John Moxon, the man she is beginning to fall for – whose side will he take in the war between the old ways and the new?

Contents

Cover

About the Book

Title Page

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

Acknowledgements
About the Author
Also by Jenny Holmes
Copyright

THE MIDWIVES OF RAGLAN ROAD

Jenny Holmes

*This is for Jenny Symons and Shirley
Emptage. Thanks for the endless
measuring out of our lives with coffee
spoons (trace the quote, Jenny!)*

CHAPTER ONE

‘Wakey-wakey!’ A voice in the street roused Hazel Price from a deep sleep. It was followed by an urgent knocking and a cry of, ‘It’s Leonard Hollings here. Come quick – baby’s on its way.’

Hazel jumped out of bed and slipped into the set of clothes laid out on her bedside chair – her underthings followed by a crisp white blouse and dark blue skirt.

Down on the first-floor landing, Hazel’s mother Jinny appeared, keen to make sure that her daughter had heard the call. ‘Get a move on before Leonard wakes the whole street,’ she grumbled.

It was six o’clock in the morning, and Raglan Road was silent except for the raucous caller at number 18. Slipping on her shoes and jacket, Hazel picked up her bag and flung open her attic door to see her bemused father in shirtsleeves, with braces dangling from his waist, standing alongside her mother in their bedroom doorway.

‘Do you want me to go down and tell him you’re on your way?’ Robert’s voice was still thick with sleep.

‘No, ta. I’m all set.’ Rushing downstairs two at a time, Hazel brushed past her mother and father then down again to open the front door just as the scrawny man waiting there raised his fist to knock a second time. His hair was prematurely grey and his figure small and permanently stooped, as if in recognition of the fact that the life he’d been born into was hard and getting harder by the day.

‘About time too,’ Leonard grumbled, backing down the stone steps and wheezing his way up Raglan Road until he reached one of the alleyways leading into Nelson Yard. Following close on his heels, Hazel almost bumped into him

as he paused for breath. 'At this rate Betty will have gone ahead and done the job herself,' he complained.

'Let's hope not.' Hazel gave a shake of her head. She knew every crack of these stone pavements, the worn steps, the rusty iron railings and the lion-head knocker on each front door. Even the dank smell of the alley and beyond that the washing lines strung across the yard, with weeds pushing up between the cobbles, were familiar to her. All the details seemed just as they had always been – except for her, of course. She was the one who had changed.

Leonard fumbled in his jacket pocket for his cigarettes, then thought better of it and shuffled on across the yard that consisted of four rows of inward-facing dwellings, each row made up of eight terraced houses. Even in their heyday, these dwellings had never offered local mill workers more than basic accommodation. Most were owned by absentee landlords who shirked their responsibility to keep the houses in good order so it was no wonder that when roof tiles slipped and fell, they were left in the gutter and when a windowpane was shattered by boys at play, a wooden board was haphazardly nailed to the frame, never to be replaced.

Hazel and Leonard passed a row of dustbins lined up against the wall of an outside privy and then a lean-to shelter that housed a dented pram with a broken hood and a bicycle frame without wheels. Beyond that, tucked away in the corner, was an open door.

'Home sweet home,' Leonard muttered sarcastically, standing aside to let Hazel cross the threshold into a cramped kitchen with a chipped pot sink piled high with dishes. Hazel saw the heel of a stale loaf of bread on a bare table and from under the table two grubby faces stared up at her. They belonged to Leonard and Betty Hollings' half-naked offspring – a boy of three or four and a girl under two – sitting cross-legged, still and silent as little Buddhas amidst the chaos around them.

‘The midwife is here!’ Leonard yelled up the stairs.

‘Take the kiddies to Doreen next door,’ his wife called back before a fresh wave of contractions must have gripped her – the sentence ended in a series of groans.

‘I’ll need hot water,’ Hazel instructed the down-at-heel father. ‘Plenty of it. Plus towels and some sheets of brown paper if you have them.’ She hurried upstairs, following the sounds of a woman in labour into the bedroom where she found her patient prone on the bed. The grate in the small fireplace was empty and the only objects in the room besides the old-fashioned iron bedstead were a washstand with an enamel basin and a rack with a scrap of striped towel hanging over it.

‘Hello, Betty. It seems Leonard called for me in the nick of time,’ Hazel remarked as she put her bag on the washstand then picked up the frayed cloth. ‘I take it this is the only towel you have?’ It was straight down to business and no mistake.

Betty turned her head away and gripped the sides of the thin mattress. She was propped up on two pillows, their covers stained a nasty brown. A torn yellow eiderdown had slipped from the bed onto the bare floorboards.

Once the latest contractions had passed, Betty looked wearily at Hazel. ‘Do me a favour – make sure Len gets off to work, there’s a love.’

Hazel tilted her head to one side. ‘Are you sure? Won’t he want to stay until after the baby’s born?’ Quickly taking everything in, she grew concerned about the lack of hygiene and heat in the room. Still, she’d better lay out her instruments on the washstand – scissors, cord clamps, foetal stethoscope – and not act in any way that would cause alarm.

‘Not Len; he’s not interested in this end of the business,’ Betty told her matter-of-factly. ‘Don’t get me wrong – he’ll be happy enough after baby puts in an appearance. But for

the time being, he's better off putting in his shift at Kingsley's.'

Hazel took out cotton swabs and forceps. Betty was as scrawny as her husband and her hips were narrow so it was best to be prepared. By the look of things, there would be no brown paper available to slide under her to absorb some of the mess. Hazel could manage without this, but not the hot water. Approaching the bed, she put her stethoscope against Betty's swollen abdomen. 'I'm sorry - this will feel cold,' she murmured, counting carefully until she was satisfied that baby's heartbeat was normal. She finished just in time, because Betty drew up her knees sharply and clenched her teeth at the start of yet another contraction. 'I'm afraid we've left it a bit late to give you something for the pain,' Hazel admitted.

'Not to worry. I never had anything for the last two either. They say it slows things down.'

Hazel patted Betty's hand and smiled. How was it that the ability to endure labour pains without chloral hydrate was still seen as a badge of courage in these parts?

'I never went to the infirmary either - not once. You wouldn't catch me in one of those places, not even for a check-up. I stayed at home both times and I've got two healthy kiddies to show for it.'

Though ill-informed, Betty's pride in her own achievement drew a warm smile from Hazel. Then, hearing movement outside the room, she went out to find Doreen, the elderly next-door neighbour, struggling up the narrow stairs with a large pan of steaming water. 'Champion!' she exclaimed, hurrying to relieve the stout woman of her burden. 'We'll need more of this. And towels, too, if you have any to spare.'

Doreen nodded then bustled away while Hazel took the water into the room. The maternity pads that she carried in her bag would have to do the mopping-up job of the more usual brown paper, she decided. 'Would you like Doreen to

send for your mother?' she asked as she prepared Betty for a further examination.

'No ta,' came the resigned reply. 'Mam and Len fell out soon after little Poll was born. Mam's gone to live with my sister over in Welby.'

'Is there anybody else – someone closer to hand?'

'There's no one.' Raising her head from the pillows, Betty attempted to peer beyond the clean sheet that Hazel had draped over her crooked knees. 'How are things looking down there? Please tell me baby's ready to make his entrance.'

'I think so, Betty.' Gentle palpation of the lower abdomen and a rapid vaginal examination had confirmed that the cervix was nicely dilated. 'Now, I want you to turn onto your left side and draw your right leg up towards your chin. That's good. Breathe deeply – in, out, now in again as deep as you can. Try not to push until I tell you to.'

There were more contractions and this time Betty did cry out – so loudly that Doreen came scuttling in from next door.

'Why have you got her on her side, trussed up like a Christmas turkey?' she demanded as she burst into the room. 'What are you trying to do – finish the poor blighter off?'

'This is what's recommended,' Hazel calmly explained. 'We need to go nice and slowly now, Betty, so the head isn't forced out. Steady as we go.'

'Recommended?' Doreen echoed, her face aghast. 'By who?'

'By the Royal College, that's who.'

As Hazel and Doreen debated the pros and cons of the new method, Betty's free hand clutched at the rails of the bedstead. She cried out again and pushed hard, despite Hazel's warning.

'They never did this in my day,' Doreen muttered.

'No, well, this is 1936. And we need more hot water, please.' Casting a firm glance in the old woman's direction

until she backed out of the room, Hazel used her trumpet-shaped pinard stethoscope to listen again to the foetal heartbeat. Still regular, still normal, which meant there were no complications with the cord, thank heavens, and really the only difficulty would be the size of the head compared with the mother's narrow hips. 'Betty, you have to keep your knee up to your chin as high as you can,' she advised. 'More deep breaths - that's good. And now - now you can take short ones. That's right - pant as fast as you like. But don't push yet.'

Hazel saw the dark crown of the baby's head. The contractions were stronger than ever and now she must let Betty push down as hard as she could until the face appeared, bluish in colour, its mouth puckered. 'Push now. That's good, Betty - that's grand.'

Sooner than expected, Hazel saw a shoulder emerge and then part of a tiny torso covered in mucus and blood, then a second shoulder. After another moment or two she was able to clamp the cord in two places and make a clean cut then take the baby by the ankles and hold her upside down until she sucked the first vital breath of air into her lungs.

'It's a little girl,' she said gently as an exhausted Betty rolled onto her back and held out imploring hands.

Quickly Hazel wiped the baby's head and face, swaddled her in a square of soft cotton fabric from her bag, then gave her to Betty.

The mother's job was done, the pain already put behind her, and she was holding perfection in her arms, but Hazel had to work on. She must follow the textbook and see to it that the placenta was delivered whole and that haemorrhaging did not occur.

As Betty cuddled and cooed over her infant, Doreen reappeared with more water and towels, together with further old wives' advice and grumbles about what it cost these days to have a baby, what with doctors' visits and

medicines to stop morning sickness, not to mention the money that Hazel would charge.

‘Believe me, you won’t get much change out of a pound note,’ the garrulous neighbour warned Betty. ‘Not like in the good old days when you knocked on your fire-back with the end of a poker and someone like Rhoda Briggs, God rest her, or Mabel Jackson from down the road came running and you paid her fifteen bob for her trouble. That was all it took back then. Not college girls with certificates like Hazel Price here. Just nice and natural did it – flat on your back and with no one breathing down your neck telling you what to do.’

For a second or two Betty managed to tear her attention away from her newborn baby. She looked at Hazel with the sleeves of her white blouse rolled up waiting patiently at the bottom of the bed, then at Doreen standing hands on hips by the washstand. ‘Pipe down,’ she said sternly to the old woman. ‘Do you think Len and me are wet behind the ears? No – everyone knows Hazel is fresh out of college so my Daisy here is her first since she got herself qualified.’

Listening with half an ear as she dealt with the afterbirth, Hazel allowed herself a smile. She liked the name Daisy, and especially enjoyed the disgruntled frown that had appeared on Doreen’s face.

‘As soon as we heard she was back, Len went straight round to Raglan Road and haggled until she brought the price down to what we can manage,’ Betty announced with a triumphant smile, followed by a sly wink at Hazel. ‘A pound note, my backside! We’re paying her ten shillings and sixpence for my lying-in, not a penny more. So tell Mabel Jackson to stick that in her pipe and smoke it.’

At home in the kitchen later that day, Hazel took off her tan-coloured brogues and rested her feet on a padded footstool. She undid the top button of her blouse then loosened her thick, shoulder-length fair hair from its tortoiseshell comb.

There was no fire in the hearth on this warm September day. A trapped wasp buzzed against the windowpane.

That didn't go too badly, she told herself as she reflected on her first solo delivery. Her London college had set her up nicely with a mixture of theory and hands-on experience, but walking out after a year through those wrought-iron gates into the big wide world didn't quite prepare you for the real thing – the taking charge and being responsible for the life of both mother and baby. There had been a few anxious moments on Nelson Yard and the state of the Hollings' house was far from ideal, but on the whole everything had gone smoothly, thank heavens.

Leaning her head against the antimacassar draped over the back of the chair and looking around the neat, orderly room (everything familiar, everything just so), Hazel felt a glow of satisfaction. True, compared with what Betty Hollings had just been through, her role had been the easy one. All she'd had to do was to follow her training step by step in what had turned out to be a straightforward delivery. The less palatable fact was that Hazel was yet to be paid, but the money was promised for a week's time when Leonard would have put in the overtime.

'Ta very much for everything,' Betty had said in her pragmatic way as she'd pushed her lank hair behind her ears and accepted a cup of tea. Holding her baby close to her chest, the new mother had watched Hazel pack her bag. 'Doreen's happy to look after Keith and Polly for the rest of the day, love. That means I can have time all to myself with Daisy here. It'll be the only chance I get.'

The words echoed in Hazel's ears as she relaxed in the quiet kitchen at the end of a busy day on Raglan Road. Betty had two kiddies under four and now an infant to look after in a house that hadn't seen a good spring clean in Lord knows how long. Not that it was any different from most on Nelson Yard, which was notorious for putting a temporary roof over the heads of families who failed to keep up with

the rent and were regularly moved on to even less salubrious quarters on the far side of the canal. Unlike Leonard, the men in such families were often on the dole, their wives worn down, their children underfed.

I don't envy Betty, Hazel thought, padding to the window in her stockinged feet to waft the wasp out into the open. *She'll be up and about tomorrow morning, I shouldn't wonder, slaving over the cooking, washing and ironing as usual. And Leonard will be no help. He'll leave it all to her.*

But then again Hazel remembered with a sigh of satisfaction the look of joy in Betty's eyes as she'd held her baby for the first time and her lips had touched Daisy's soft cheek. It was a feeling Hazel could only imagine – that bond between mother and newborn child.

The dazed wasp refused to leave. It buzzed back into the room and spiralled to the floor where it settled on the hearthrug. 'Dozy thing,' Hazel murmured as she tried to persuade it to crawl onto a sheet of newspaper.

The sound of mill buzzers in the distance signalled the end of the working day – soon the peace would be broken by the tramp of feet on cobbles, the chatter of voices and the rumble and rattle of trams on nearby Ghyll Road.

Succeeding with the wasp at last, Hazel quickly released it into the open air then closed the window. Then she lit the gas ring under the kettle to make tea for her father. She put two rich tea biscuits on a saucer and two scoops from the tea caddy into the pot. *I can't wait for Dad to get here,* she thought. *He'll be pleased as Punch when I tell him about Betty and the baby.*

The kettle had boiled itself almost dry before Hazel gave up on her father and turned off the gas.

'Where's Dad got to?' she asked her mother without preliminaries when Jinny returned home from a long afternoon spent behind Ken Bishop's fruit and veg stall at Clifton Market.

Jinny sighed as she deposited a big bag of potatoes, onions and carrots at the cellar head. 'Hello, Hazel. Lovely to see you too,' she mocked.

Hazel grinned sheepishly. 'Sorry, Mum. Here, let me take them down for you.' No sooner said than done – the heavy bag was safely stored in the keeping cellar and Hazel was back in the kitchen refilling the kettle before Jinny had removed her coat.

'Where is your dad, anyway? Why isn't he back?' Jinny looked in the mirror over the mantelpiece to pat her hair back into place. She caught sight of Hazel's reflection behind her own – so like her but minus twenty years of wear and tear. Both had small, delicate features, blue eyes and finely arched eyebrows, and both were fair skinned. What's more, they were alike in making the most of their slender figures and wearing clothes and make-up that were up-to-the-minute. 'Two peas in a pod,' people would often say. 'More like sisters than mother and daughter.'

'Maybe he stopped behind for a bit of overtime,' Hazel suggested, holding back the news about Betty's baby until her mother's mood improved.

Jinny tutted. 'There's been no overtime at Oldroyd's mill since January. Nor at Kingsley's or Calvert's, for that matter.'

So much for Leonard Hollings' promise. Hazel was struck by the thought that she might not get her money as soon as expected.

'As a matter of fact, your dad mentioned earlier this week that they're thinking of cutting back hours in the spinning shed.'

Hazel had the good grace to blush and apologize once more. 'I didn't realize. But you know Dad – he doesn't talk to me about his work.'

'Yes, though he'd have come clean if you'd bothered to ask.' Since Hazel's return from college, Jinny had made it her business to bring her daughter back down to earth. 'I don't want her flouncing around all over the place,' she'd

told her own mother Ada and her sister Rose on her last visit to them in Nelson Yard. 'What use is a certificate in midwifery if you stick your nose so high in the air that you don't notice what's going on around you?'

Ada had nodded but kind-hearted Rose had disagreed.

'Don't be too hard on the girl,' she'd advised her sister. 'Hazel's thin skinned. She'll take your criticism to heart and so will Robert. It'll lead to arguments if you're not careful.'

At home on Raglan Road, Hazel now took the latest rebuke from Jinny in subdued silence and retreated to the corner of the kitchen to pour the tea. 'Dad's been overseer at Oldroyd's longer than anyone,' she reasoned. 'His job's safe, surely.'

Jinny's reply came in the form of pursed lips and a sour look, interrupted by the opening of the door and Robert's belated entrance. He was all smiles and he carried a slim, neatly wrapped parcel under his arm.

'I know - before you say it, I'm late and I'm sorry!' He laughed, spilling good humour into the frosty silence. Ten years older than his wife, he was a tall, strong-looking man whose dark hair was streaked with grey and whose clear brown eyes could be read like an open book.

'What are you looking so pleased about?' Jinny challenged, but she softened when Robert slipped his free arm around her waist and kissed her cheek.

'This!' he announced, holding up the parcel before offering it to Hazel. 'I had to drop in at Redman's to collect it after work. That's why I'm late.'

'What is it?' Hazel asked.

'Open it and see.'

Quickly she untied the string and folded back the stiff brown paper. She lifted out her recently awarded midwifery certificate, complete with college coat of arms and her name written out in beautiful copperplate, all encased in a frame that had been specially made at the picture-framer's

on Westgate Road. 'Oh!' she said, her face flushed with unspoken gratitude.

'Stand aside, you two - this gets pride of place, here on the mantelpiece.' Robert took the frame and got Jinny to move a heavy marble clock out of the way.

'This clock was a wedding present from my mother,' Jinny grumbled as she looked in vain for a different place to put it.

'I was telling Sidney Redman all about our Hazel,' Robert went on as he stood back to admire the effect. 'What a clever girl she is and how hard she's worked to qualify. Sidney promised to pass the word around, since he and his missis don't have any more call for the services of a midwife, if you know what I mean.'

A prim glance from Jinny did nothing to dent his garrulous high spirits.

'What?' he said with a grin. 'I'm only stating the obvious. Anyway, I expect there'll be plenty of young couples from Westgate Road knocking on our door before too long, and all up and down Raglan Road and in Nelson Yard ...'

'I delivered Betty Hollings' baby this morning,' Hazel was unable to contain her excitement any longer. Her eyes shone and a dimple appeared in her left cheek - a characteristic that somehow made her seem younger than her twenty-one years. 'Mother and baby are both doing well!'

With a whoop Robert gathered her in his arms and gave her one of his strong hugs that squashed the breath out of her. 'You hear that, Jinny? Hazel doesn't let the grass grow. No, not her. She's only gone and started as she means to go on.'

'I know - I'm not deaf,' Jinny replied stiffly. 'Anyway, Hazel, I hope you made the Hollingses stump up the money before you left ...? No, I can see from your face that you didn't.'

'Next week,' Hazel explained. 'That's when they've promised to pay me.'

Jinny didn't need to go on - her expression said it all.

‘They will!’ Hazel insisted. She felt her cheeks burn. Why did her mother always have to put a dampener on things? Why couldn’t she be pleased with her for once? ‘Leonard swore to me that he’d put in the overtime.’

‘My, my – Thomas Kingsley’s filled his empty order book, has he? He must have if he’s handing out overtime to his loom tuners left, right and centre.’ Taking her apron from the hook and tying it around her waist, Jinny turned her back on Hazel and Robert and took a loaf of bread and a wedge of cheese from the food safe above the sink. ‘Ask anyone around here, the first rule of working for yourself is to make sure you get paid on the dot. Didn’t they teach you that at college?’

Robert stepped in to ease the bad feeling in the room. ‘Leonard will stump up the money, don’t you worry,’ he told Hazel. ‘If not, his name will be mud.’

But Jinny wasn’t so easily deflected as she sliced through the bread with a deft sawing motion. ‘I ran into Mabel Jackson yesterday. She was asking after you, Hazel, then telling me how hard it is to get cash out of folk these days, even for someone like her who’s been at it for years. She’s lost count of the women she’s helped, me included. Back then, when you put in your appearance, we were properly grateful for what Mabel did and she could rely on us to pay up. Not now, though, not when everyone is so hard pressed.’

‘All right, Mum. There’s no need to go on about it.’ Hazel felt like one of those hot air balloons whose steering went awry so that it got snagged on a tree branch and punctured. Whoosh, the air had gone out of her, leaving her deflated.

Of course the money side of being self-employed was a worry, but Hazel had thought through the practical angles and reached the optimistic conclusion that setting up as a midwife was a bit like being a hairdresser – there would always be women having babies and needing her help, just as there were always women who needed a haircut.

‘Set the table for us, there’s a good girl.’ Jinny ignored the fact that Hazel was upset. The cheese was sliced and laid on the bread. The gas was lit. ‘Cheese on toast with a nice slice of cream cake to follow,’ she announced. ‘I called in at Sykes’ bakery for the bread and Marjorie knows how partial you are to a Victoria sponge, Robert. This one came out of the oven lopsided so she let me have it cheap.’

CHAPTER TWO

One of the problems Hazel had come up against after her year away in London and her return to Raglan Road was the unshakeable feeling that she was fourteen years old again, a school leaver about to embark on the rocky road to adulthood.

For that was how her mother treated her – as a naive girl with ideas above her station and a tendency to answer back.

‘I don’t know where you get it from,’ had been Jinny’s incantation throughout Hazel’s teenage years, up to the elbows in sudsy water as she scrubbed away at Robert’s stiff shirt collars. It didn’t matter what the argument was about – a request for privacy from Hazel as she heated her Friday-night bath water in the kitchen copper or a refusal to run an errand because she was getting ready to go out – the charge was always the same. ‘You don’t get it from me, for a start. You never caught me cheeking my elders when I was your age.’

‘I’m not cheeking my elders,’ Hazel would retort before her mother gave her the thin-lipped look that said, *That proves my point exactly!* Then Hazel would retreat to her attic room to sulk and dream of escape.

Her father, too, sometimes behaved as if she was a child, though in a different way – spoiling her as he had from the moment he’d married Jinny and they’d all three moved into the house on Raglan Road. He was Jinny’s second husband – her first, Alec Sharpe, having been killed in the war.

Alec and Jinny had married late in 1913, during the slow build-up of hostilities between Britain and Germany. Hazel had been born in the autumn of the following year, just a week before Alec had gone off to the Front. The eager young

private didn't see in the New Year, but met his bloody end alongside thousands of comrades slaughtered in a muddy Flanders field.

Five years later, Robert Price had cautiously courted and married the beautiful, sad-eyed young widow, stepping into the role of husband and stepfather without a moment's hesitation.

Even-tempered and hard-working, Robert had lavished attention on Hazel and it was he and not her mother who had eventually backed her over leaving home and going to college. The frame for the certificate was a case in point. It showed Robert's unswerving pride in his stepdaughter. He hadn't stopped to consider if it was something she or, more to the point, Jinny would wish to have in prime position on the mantelpiece.

'Hazel deserves a treat,' he would tell his wife in the early days, when Hazel won an essay-writing competition at Lowton Junior School. Then he would take her into town for Saturday-afternoon tea at the Kardomah refreshment rooms and he would boast about her to all and sundry. *Top of her class again - I don't know where she gets it from.*

His words echoed Jinny's refrain, though for different reasons, Hazel thought with a wry smile as she finished her tea then retreated to her attic bedroom. This, she reminded herself, was the day of her first delivery - signifying a new life for baby Daisy Hollings, joy soon followed by extra drudgery for Betty and a professional road opening up for Hazel. *And yet here I am*, she reminded herself, *listening to Mum's grumbles and stuck at home on a Friday night with nowhere to go.*

She hung her work skirt on a hanger and put it away in the wardrobe. Then she rolled up the pair of silk stockings that had been drying over the back of her chair and slid them into her top drawer. After that she went downstairs in jumper and slacks, took cleaning materials out of the shoe box and began to polish her brogues.

‘Not going out tonight, love?’ Her dad glanced up from the newspaper he was reading.

‘Not tonight,’ Hazel replied. She’d already heard the click of the front door as Jinny went out, presumably to drop in on her mother and Rose. ‘I thought I’d have a quiet night in.’

‘That’s a shame. You should be out enjoying yourself, getting back into the swing of things.’

‘Maybe tomorrow.’ She sighed as she noticed her certificate on the mantelpiece, the glass gleaming in the gaslight. She heard the faint, insistent hiss of gas and the intermittent, soft *pop-pop* of the mantel in the alcove that housed Jinny’s treadle sewing machine. Everything was the same as in the old days, Hazel thought again – except for her mood, which was a mixture of mounting irritation and apprehension that she’d seldom felt before.

She brushed polish from her shoes then buffed them until they shone. *What’s wrong with me?* she wondered, punishing the shoes with firm swipes of her yellow duster. *I have plenty to keep me busy. For a start, I’ve promised to call in on Betty tomorrow morning to see how she’s getting on. On Monday I’ve arranged to go to the surgery on Westgate Road to see if there’s any work coming up there. The more people know about me and my new venture, the better.*

‘I’d have done that for you,’ Robert said, folding his newspaper and noticing Hazel at work on her shoes.

‘I don’t mind. I got used to doing it myself while I was away.’ The response sounded sharper than she’d intended and she was relieved when the door opened and her cousin Gladys breezed in without knocking.

‘Put those away this minute and come with me!’ she cried, snatching the shoes from Hazel and pulling her to her feet – a whirlwind of blonde, bubbly energy that sucked in everything in its path. Tonight twenty-two-year-old Gladys was dressed in a red knitted bolero and high-waisted white slacks, with peep-toe sandals that showed her crimson-

painted toenails. 'Hello, Uncle Robert. A little bird tells me Hazel is down in the dumps for no reason so here I am to sort her out!'

'Who says I'm down in the dumps?' Hazel protested feebly.

'Aunty Jinny did. I bumped into her at Nana's house. And look at you – it's true. Anyone would think you'd come back home with your tail between your legs instead of getting top marks in your year. And don't deny it – Uncle Robert's been spouting off about it to the whole family.'

'Dad!' Hazel's sigh of protest matched her glum expression.

Gladys wrinkled her nose in a sign of impatience. 'Come on, Hazel, shake a leg. You've got ten minutes to put your glad rags on. Don't go mad, though: change into your best pair of slacks and a nice, fitted blouse – that kind of thing.'

'Why? Where are we going?'

'To town – where else? To the new jazz club next to Merton and Groves. Don't worry, Uncle Robert, I'll look after her!'

Sitting beside Gladys on the tram into town, Hazel couldn't help feeling like the ugly duckling. Where Gladys sparkled (fingernails painted to match her toenails, silver earrings and locket necklace), Hazel gave off a quieter glow. Her hands and nails were scrubbed clean, she wore hardly any make-up and her fair hair was less bold and brassy. True, she matched Gladys and perhaps outshone her in other details, such as the trimness of her figure and the violet depth of her heavily lashed eyes, but she lacked her cousin's breezy confidence, coming across as more thoughtful and reserved.

As the conductor took their coppers and gave them their tickets, it was Gladys he winked at and it was with her that he acted out the pretence that she had tendered the wrong fare.

‘That’s tuppence you owe me next time you take my tram,’ he kidded, his cap tilted back, a dark forelock curling down. ‘I’ve got a memory like an elephant so I won’t forget.’

‘Cheeky blighter!’ Gladys laughed, springing from her seat as they approached the stop. ‘I know your face – you work with my brother, Dan Drummond. I’ll be sure to tell him how you tried to trick me.’

And at the entrance to the jazz club, Hazel was sure that it was Gladys who attracted the attention of the small gang of smokers hanging around on the pavement, puffing away at their cigarettes.

‘Aye-aye!’ they chanted with a rising intonation that showed their approval.

‘Watch out, lads – things are looking up.’

‘Fall in behind me – I’m first in line.’

‘Behave yourselves!’ Gladys tutted as she and Hazel avoided the scuffle at the door and made their way down some stone steps into a dingy, smoke-filled cellar with a bar and a small stage where musicians were tuning their instruments. ‘Get a move on, Hazel. Dan and Eddie are here already – I asked them to save us a couple of seats.’

So Hazel followed meekly, threading between tables in the crowded room until they found the corner where Gladys’s brothers sat. There was just time to say their hellos and take their seats before the band struck up the first tune – a smooth, fluid combination of clarinet and saxophone backed by the beat of drums and a tinkling waterfall of piano notes that launched the singer into a doleful, gravel-voiced plea for his unfaithful lover to return.

Hazel’s eldest cousin, Dan, leaned in close and nudged her with his elbow. ‘Well, Hazel, what do you reckon to this place?’

‘It’s grand,’ she said with a nod. It was the type of music she’d heard in the cinema, watching suave men in white dinner jackets and dicky bows flirting with screen goddesses like Carole Lombard. The musicians onstage were not in the

same league as that but they were good enough to make you tap your feet and pay attention.

Dan nodded back. 'By the way, congratulations on your college thingumajig. Though it's rather you than me any day of the week with that job.'

Hazel laughed. 'Thanks, Dan. Lucky for you, no woman in her right mind would ask you to bring a baby into this world. Anyway, how's life?'

'The same, ta. Still driving a corporation tram. Still hoping to pick a winner at the dog track.'

She started to tell him about the incident between Gladys and the cheeky conductor then thought better of it. The band had begun a new tune and a few people, Dan and Gladys among them, were standing up to trawl the room for partners to dance with. Soon couples held each other close and shuffled around the confined space as the lovelorn singer sang of fresh woes.

'Dance?' Eddie offered, diffidently holding out his hand to Hazel. Like his brother Dan, he had the handsome charm of the Drummonds – a clean-cut look with regular features and a side parting in his sandy hair. But his face retained an innocent air and lacked the brash sophistication of the others, allowing Hazel to see that he was only inviting her out of politeness.

'No thanks, Eddie. Where's Joan tonight, anyway?'

'She's not keen on jazz so she's stayed in to get her hair done.'

Eddie and Joan were childhood sweethearts. They'd been engaged at eighteen and after seven long years they were still saving hard from his job at the brass foundry and hers behind the counter at Pickard's butcher's until they could afford to be married. 'Steady Eddie' was what Gladys called him, whereas debonair Dan was dubbed the black sheep of the family – still single at twenty-eight and regularly drinking away his week's wages in the Green Cross or chucking his money down the drain at the greyhound track.

‘I’m not too keen on this new type of music either,’ Eddie confessed.

‘No? I like it,’ Hazel said, tapping her fingers on the table. The rhythms were earthy and carried you along, and there was a kind of underworld glamour to it that seemed to ride roughshod over the narrow rules she’d grown up with.

Two songs later, her view was blocked when someone came between her and the stage. ‘Is anyone sitting here?’ a man asked.

In the glare of the footlights, Hazel couldn’t make out the tall figure hovering nearby but she recognized the voice of John Moxon, one of Dan’s newer friends and a recent neighbour on Raglan Road. Guessing that Gladys would stay on the dance floor until the band stopped for a break, she pulled back the vacant chair. ‘No, help yourself.’

John put down his beer and sat next to her. For a moment she was blinded by the glare. ‘You’re not dancing,’ he commented.

‘No. It’s a tight squeeze out there.’

‘You don’t say.’ Letting the conversation drift, he seemed happy to soak up the atmosphere.

Hazel was aware of him relaxing in his seat beside her. John carried himself quietly as if reluctant to draw attention despite having a past that was a little out of the ordinary. For a start, he hadn’t lived in the town all his life. He’d been born in a small village in the north of the county and only came to Raglan Road when he’d married Myra Pennington from the fish and chip shop. They’d moved into a house two doors down from her parents and Myra was currently pregnant with their first child. Secondly – and this was what came to the forefront of Hazel’s mind – John Moxon had played cricket for Yorkshire.

‘He was a wizard with the bat,’ Dan had boasted to everyone soon after he’d got talking with John at the Green Cross. ‘It was a few years back, mind you – before he had his accident. His name came up in the *Yorkshire Post* every

week, scoring a century against Worcestershire, playing in a winning innings against Surrey at Lord's. You wouldn't think to look at him now, but he was a leading light in the cricketing world, was John Moxon.'

Never having had the slightest interest in cricket, the name had meant nothing to Hazel, but now, when she called to mind that her old school friend Myra was soon due to give birth, she deftly took charge of the conversation. 'Say hello to your wife from me,' she began. 'I'm Hazel Price. Myra and I went around together a few years back.'

John nodded, glanced sideways at Hazel then back at the stage.

'You might not remember me, by the way. I've been in London, training as a midwife.'

This time John paid more attention. He leaned over to shake her hand. 'John Moxon. Pleased to meet you.'

'Hazel scored top marks in her class,' Eddie chipped in, giving her a small nudge of encouragement. 'And she only lives a few yards down the road from you at number 18 - nice and handy for Myra when the time comes.'

Hazel squirmed in her seat at the brazenness of their joint approach. But this was what you had to do to get on in life.

'Did she now?' John held Hazel's gaze with his light brown eyes. There was a slight curl to his lips and a timbre to his voice suggesting amusement.

At her expense? Hazel wondered. *Was he laughing at her?*

Just then Dan broke away from his dancing partner and made a beeline towards the table. He clapped John on the back then launched into a loud conversation about the upcoming match at Headingley and Yorkshire's current position in the County Championship table. Before long he was inviting John to the bar for a refill of his pint glass.

'I'll make sure to let Myra know you're back,' John assured Hazel before Dan led him off. 'But don't get your hopes up over the question of a midwife. I think her mother's already made arrangements for that side of things.'

‘Rightio, that’s fair enough.’ Hazel tried to conceal her disappointment by smiling and turning her head towards the stage.

‘Good for you, anyway,’ Eddie told her as the music changed to a faster, more upbeat number. ‘It might not come easily but you have to learn to blow your own trumpet if you want to get ahead.’

‘I know,’ Hazel said with a sigh. Was it the music that had made her pulse race, or embarrassment at being turned down, or the way John Moxon’s eyes had fixed on her? Something had quickened her heartbeat and brought a flush to her cheeks – that much was certain.

Two songs later, when the singer moved away from the microphone and the musicians put down their instruments, a breathless Gladys came back to the table. ‘Fetch Hazel and me a drink, Eddie, there’s a good lad,’ she said as she sank into her seat. ‘Dan’s up there at the bar – he’ll pay if you ask him nicely.’

‘I can’t make out why Eddie lets you boss him around,’ Hazel observed as he went off meekly.

‘Mum trained him well.’ Gladys giggled. ‘Dan was a tearaway from the start. She’d already given up on him when Eddie came along. Lord, I’m hot!’

‘Here.’ Hazel picked up the cardboard drinks list and suggested Gladys use it as a fan.

‘Ta – that’s better.’ Still smiling, Gladys picked out John Moxon standing head and shoulders above Eddie and Dan at the bar. ‘What do you make of our famous cricketer?’ she asked in a voice laden with innuendo.

‘He seemed decent enough,’ Hazel answered defensively.

‘Come on, Hazel – I saw you sweet-talking him and don’t pretend you didn’t.’

The colour rose again in Hazel’s cheeks. ‘I never did! We were discussing Myra, if you must know.’

‘Trust you.’ The disappointed grimace on Gladys’s face was exaggerated. ‘You bump into the best-looking fellow for

miles around – in a jazz club, in a smoke-filled cellar room listening to the best music you'll ever hear – drums and saxophones and words that get under your skin without you realizing it – and all you find to talk about is his pregnant wife!

'Best-looking, maybe,' Hazel agreed, 'but married.'

Gladys laughed then pointed to two new arrivals. 'Look out – here comes trouble.' And with that she turned to ask a stranger at the neighbouring table for a light for her cigarette.

Through the smoke Hazel made out Sylvia, the youngest Drummond sister, on the arm of a man she didn't recognize. Sylvia was seventeen – hardly old enough to be let loose, as Gladys put it. She was the only dark-haired member of the family – a throwback to her grandma Ada in her younger days, according to Jinny and Rose – with a pretty, heart-shaped face, rosebud lips and hair styled into a sharp bob that mimicked the look of Clara Bow. Tonight she was wearing a sleeveless, tightly belted dress made of silky cream material, decorated down the front with a contrasting band of gold trim, together with dainty, high-heeled shoes.

'Who's that chap with her?' Hazel asked Gladys, watching as Sylvia dragged her young man through the crowd towards the stage where she boldly engaged in conversation with the jazz band's singer.

'That's poor Norman,' Gladys replied with mock gravity.

'Why "poor" Norman?' Hazel couldn't help smiling. Sylvia's companion seemed ordinary enough in his blue blazer and fawn slacks, though he looked a little reticent and perhaps no match for vivacious Sylvia.

'His name's Norman Bellamy. He's a warehouse man at Calvert's, apparently. He and Sylvia have only been walking out for a month or two.'

'“Apparently?”' Hazel echoed. 'Does that mean you haven't found out every last thing about him?'