

The Steel Girls

'A lovely,
heart-warming
story'
Nancy Revell

When war breaks out,
friendship will
see them through



Michelle Rawlins

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When war breaks out, friendship will see them through Sheffield, 1939, and the women go to the steelworks to do their bit for the war effort. Housewife Nancy never dreamed she would go to work in the steelworks factory. But when war is declared, husband Bert is called up to serve and she's conscripted to go to Vickers to make parts for Spitfires and bomb castings. For Betty, it's a world away from her previous job as a legal secretary and her ambitions to study law at night school. And war means being separated from her sweetheart William who's called up from the Reserves to join the RAF. Eighteen-year-old Patty is relishing the excitement the war brings. But this shop-girl is going to have to grow up quickly, especially now she's undertaking such back-breaking and dangerous work in the factory. The Steel Girls start off as strangers but quickly forge an unbreakable bond of friendship as these feisty factory sisters vow to keep the foundry fires burning during wartime.

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The
Steel
Girls

Michelle Rawlins



ONE PLACE. MANY STORIES

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To every Woman of Steel, who sacrificed so much to not only ensure those at war had the munitions they needed but paved the way forward for future generations.

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Chapter One

Saturday, 26 August 1939

‘Would you like one?’ Betty asked, opening her bag of chocolate caramels and offering one to her handsome sweetheart, William.

‘I bought them for you,’ he said, smiling, ‘but if you insist.’ He winked, dipping his hand to the brown paper bag. ‘They are rather good.’

The young couple had called at Harrison’s sweetshop on Green Street on their way to the Empire for a quarter of the gooey soft-centred chocolates; they had been a favourite of Betty’s ever since her parents had taken her to the very same theatre house as a little girl. Tonight, of all nights, it was just what she needed. After a busier than normal week at the prestigious legal firm, Dawson & Sons, where she worked hard as a secretary, writing letters to clients and answering questions about their wills, Betty was ready to let her mind wander to a faraway place. Amiable and willing as ever, William hadn’t objected when she’d suggested an evening at the Empire, where she could get lost watching James Stewart in *It’s A Wonderful World*.

As she relaxed into the soft familiar seat, Betty edged as close to William as she possibly could. Just having him by her side was a sure-fire way of ensuring all her worries faded away. She had been looking forward to their date all day, knowing she could relax for a few hours with the one person who made her smile more than anyone else in the world. As the main theatre lights began to fade and the heavy deep-red screen curtains slowly opened, Betty finally started to relax, happy in the knowledge she was about to escape to a fantasy world of romance and comedy.

But, just as it had for months now, the harsh introductory crackling of the Pathé newsreels interrupted the precious moment of tranquillity, terrifying black-and-white images invading the big screen. Stern-faced, menacing-looking soldiers stared straight ahead as they were addressed by Adolf Hitler, who had Poland in his sights. Hoping to deter an attack on Eastern Europe, Great Britain and France had formed a pledge to defend Poland if it was attacked. Instead of indulging in another chocolate caramel, Betty reached for William’s hand, subconsciously squeezing his fingers a little tighter than normal as she stared at the incomprehensible scenes flashing before her eyes.

She understood why the public announcements had to be shown; the essential need to let the country know what was going on in the world and for people to understand once again the nation was facing the biggest risk they’d come up against since the First World War. Normally calm and methodical, Betty took a deep breath and let out an audible sigh as she looked up towards the intermittent flashing scenes. Hitler, with his pencil-thin moustache and dark, deep unreadable eyes, had signed a treaty of alliance with Italy and he was now in talks with Russia. Betty tried to placate the growing fear she felt deep in the pit of her stomach. Every time she saw that godforsaken man march his troops through another city, her heart raced a little faster. She didn’t want to be the voice of doom, but she was convinced Britain was next on the evil Nazi leader’s list. He seemed hell-bent on taking over the world and it seemed obvious to her he wasn’t listening to anyone who tried to reason with his plans.

‘He’s building his empire. Are we next on his hit list?’ Betty whispered to William, her voice ever so slightly faltering as she leant in even closer to the one person who always made her feel safe. Tightly clenching her free fist, Betty’s neatly manicured nails dug sharply into her soft skin, leaving deep U-shaped indents in the palms of her hands. But she didn’t feel a thing, her mind too overtaken by worry. It didn’t take a genius to work out the months ahead could see Britain facing its worst battle since the Great War. As she sat, glued perfectly still to her chair, an icy-cold shiver ran down her spine, overwhelming anxiety soaring through her. Intuitively, sensing Betty’s concerns, William turned to face her. ‘Try not to worry, my love.’ He smiled. ‘Everything will be okay – I promise.’ But, for the first time, William’s kind eyes and well-meaning reassurances couldn’t disperse Betty’s fears.

Despite only being twenty-three, in many ways she was older than her tender years might suggest. In her mind, England didn't seem ready to fight a war, despite the fact that they seemed to be perilously close to being on the edge of one.

William had already hinted at the idea of joining the RAF if war did break out, leaving his job as a trainee manager for an electrical company, and inevitably being separated from Betty. 'I've always wanted to fly,' he'd told her the last time she'd brought up the subject. 'Imagine how amazing it would be to see everything from above, speeding through the clouds.' She'd immediately regretted bringing it up as William was a dreamer who saw everything through rose-tinted glasses. To Betty, though, it sounded like a pipe dream; a naive schoolboy adventure, which hadn't been thought through at all, and the dire consequences didn't bear thinking about.

As the newsreel came to a welcome end, Betty was brought back to the present, snapped out of her daydream. 'Are you okay?' William whispered, genuine concern still etched across his kind face. Betty forced a smile and nodded weakly, but the reality was she simply couldn't face the thought of losing someone else she loved. She and William had been going steady for two years now. He'd been the knight in shining armour she hadn't even realized she'd needed, so hell-bent on being completely independent and determined never to become reliant on anyone – especially after what she'd been through. After losing her mum, Elsie, at the tender age of ten, she had been left with no choice but to grow up fast. She'd helped her sister, Margaret, two years her senior, take care of their little brother, Edward – who, at eight, had been equally bewildered as to why their mother had been so cruelly taken away from them.

At nineteen, two years after securing her job as a secretary at Dawson & Sons Solicitors, Betty Clark had moved out of the neat three-bedroom terraced family home where she had grown up, and taken a small but perfectly adequate room in a smart boarding house in Walkley, the posh end of town, determined to be independent. Of course, she still went home as often as she could on a Sunday and helped her dad and Edward, now a handsome young man, prepare a traditional roast, always willing to get stuck in peeling a bag of tatties and top and tailing a saucepan of carrots.

Every few months, Betty's elder sister, Margaret, arrived from Nottingham with her husband, Derek, and their two-year-old dream of a little girl, June. The couple had moved seventy miles to the Midlands city after Derek was offered a lucrative job working on the railways. It meant the family only got together three or four times a year but, if nothing else, it made the afternoon even more special. After a modest feast of roast chicken and vegetables, followed by a jam sponge pudding with lashings of home-made custard, bought from the nearby bakery, the family usually marvelled at June as she toddled around the front room, showing off her much-loved dolly she'd received for her birthday. Betty missed Margaret; they had been so close growing up and Margaret had taken on the mother role she and Edward had desperately needed.

She recalled how, on one of her sister's visits to the family home, Margaret had looked over at Betty as she played dollies with June. 'I hope that one day you will meet a lovely man like Derek and have a little family of your own,' she'd mused, hopeful her younger sister would find someone special to share her life with.

It seemed fate had played a helping hand when Betty met William at a local church hall dance. Betty's best friend, Florence, had persuaded her she needed a night out to let her hair down after spending evening after evening with her head deep in law textbooks, secretly hoping one day to train as a solicitor. So, after Florence had somehow convinced Betty to don her best pink and cream floral knee-length dress and set her brown hair with sugar and water, they'd headed to St Michael's church hall to enjoy a night of dancing along to Fred Astaire's 'They Can't Take That Away From Me', washed down with a couple of glasses of sweet cloudy lemonade. It was while the girls were taking a break from the dance floor that Florence had spotted a keen and fresh-faced William glancing over at Betty. 'I think that lad has taken a bit of a shine to you,' she'd said with a wink, teasing her naturally shy and far more reserved best friend.

‘Oh, give over,’ Betty had sighed, shaking her head. It was just like Florence to read more into a situation and try to play cupid. ‘I’m serious,’ Florence had protested. ‘If you don’t believe me, look for yourself.’ Against her better judgement, more to prove Florence wrong, Betty had glanced across the dance floor to where her friend had indicated. To her surprise, a handsome young man with slicked-back brown hair, dressed in a crisp white polo shirt and a pair of light-grey flannels, had caught her eye. As quick as she’d looked up, Betty had turned on her heels, colour rushing to her already flushing cheeks. ‘He’s probably eyeing up all the single-looking girls,’ Betty had said, feeling unnaturally flustered. There was something about the young man’s dashing appearance that had made her come over all of a flutter.

‘Aha, so the attraction is obviously mutual,’ Florence had grinned, amused by her friend’s unexpected reaction. Before she had chance to tease Betty any further, a quiet, half-hearted, cough, coming from just behind them, had broken the moment.

As Betty had turned around, she’d come face to face with the handsome stranger.

‘Would you like to dance?’ he’d asked, his voice shaking with nerves.

‘Erm, okay. Yes, I suppose one dance would be fine,’ Betty had replied, and it wasn’t just out of sympathy – there was something about this lad which had caught her off guard, causing her usual prim façade to ever so slightly falter.

As William had led Betty to the wooden dance floor, she’d barely heard the lyrics of ‘September in the Rain’ echo through the hall. Instead, she’d allowed this dish of a young man to gently take her by the arm as they’d swayed to the music.

And there began a romance that had not only taken Betty completely by surprise but also left her a little shocked to say the least – it really was the last thing she had been expecting. After their first date, William had taken the liberty of asking Betty if he could call on her. ‘I think I would like that very much.’ She’d smiled, once again taken aback by her own willingness to let her guard down for the first time in years.

What followed were months of romantic rendezvous. Twice a week, William would appear at the boarding house, where Betty would be waiting, any creases pressed out of her skirts and a smudge of light pink rouge rubbed into her porcelain white cheeks. For so long, Betty had been fiercely independent, looking after others and politely refusing help in return, but even she couldn’t resist being shown some long-awaited attention.

The lovesick pair spent Saturday afternoons strolling around the local park, and every couple of weeks they would join dozens of other cinema-goers at the Empire to catch the latest black-and-white movie. William never objected when the film showing was a romance, nor did he take any offence when he saw her eyes light up when James Stewart appeared on the screen.

As the overhead lights once again filled the theatre, William naturally turned to Betty. ‘Did James Stewart live up to your expectations?’ He grinned his boyish smile, hoping the film had lifted her spirits a little.

Giggling, Betty gently nudged William in the ribs, but the truth was she was still feeling rather unnerved. As William escorted her home to her room at 74 Collinson Street, Betty linked her arm with his tighter than normal.

‘What is it?’ he asked, concerned.

‘Oh, it’s nothing,’ she said, sighing, yet again forcing her lips to create a forced smile.

William might have been naive but he wasn’t daft; his sensitive side was one of the qualities Betty had fallen head over heels for.

‘I know you better than that,’ he said. ‘Come on, a problem shared and all that.’

Betty knew there was no point in pretending, and the truth was she needed to vent her feelings and worries, which were overtaking her every thought. ‘I know they have to show the newsreels; I just wish they wouldn’t. I can’t bear to see what’s happening. I’m frightened of what might come next.’

Spinning Betty round to face him, he took both of her hands in his. 'Now listen up,' he said, 'everything is going to be all right. Our government won't let a war happen and, even if they did, Hitler doesn't stand a chance against the likes of me.'

Betty knew William was only trying to cheer her up – his way of dealing with any upset was to find a way of lightening the mood – but it was his endearing innocence which frightened her the most. Young men like her William saw the idea of war as one big adrenalin-fuelled adventure, a chance to take to the skies and see the world.

'Oh, my love,' Betty sighed, looking into William's kind eyes, 'I just don't want to lose you too. I know joining the RAF feels like the right thing to do, and your bravery is one of the many reasons I love you so much.' Deep down, Betty knew she would struggle to change William's mind, but she couldn't just let him go without a fight. 'Couldn't you just take a job down the pit?' she asked, in a last-ditch attempt to convince William it was a much safer option than fighting the Luftwaffe. She knew William adored his job at Coopers, but she'd rather him take his chances six feet underground than flying across Germany's vast, perilous skies.

'You have so little faith in me.' William teased, wagging his finger from side to side. 'I will be the fastest fighter pilot the world has seen.' She'd known William long enough to give up her argument, reluctantly accepting he wasn't going to take the risk seriously. Why would he? His dad hadn't fought in the war, nor had his uncles – they had all been coal miners. The only problem was that their tales of being stuck in dark and damp mineshafts for hours at a time, nasty black itchy dust collecting in the corner of their eyes, ears and mouths – which, despite a weekly Friday night scrub in a tin bath, never completely disappeared – had put William off a career down the pit for life.

All Betty could do now was hope beyond hope that Neville Chamberlain had what it took to stop Hitler in his tracks and to avoid Britain going to war.

'Please don't worry, my lovely, sweet Bet,' William said, before he gently kissed her goodnight on the doorstep of her boarding house. For once she didn't bring their lingering embrace to a premature end, as she usually would, even if Mrs Wallis – the rather Victorian in nature and incredibly proper and strict landlady – could see them.

Mrs Wallis kept a tight ship, refused her lodgers to enjoy any visitors, except the odd cup of tea in the communal and very formal front room, ensuring propriety was always the priority. It wouldn't surprise Betty if her landlady was hovering just a few paces behind the bright-red front door, ensuring her wards – as she liked to view those who took rooms in her rather grand townhouse – were home and safely tucked under their floral patchwork eiderdowns.

Knowing her rather stern landlady was now likely to be only seconds away from coughing or, even worse, opening the front door and catching her and William in a loving embrace, Betty finally, and reluctantly, released herself from William's warm and naturally protective hold.

'I'll call on you tomorrow,' he said, clinging to Betty's fingers, desperate to freeze time so they would never have to be parted.

But right on cue, heavy footsteps behind the door broke the tender moment as quick as a bolt of thunder. 'Goodnight, my love,' Betty sighed dreamily, giving William one final peck on the cheek.

For a few precious seconds, Betty had temporarily forgotten the foreboding thoughts that had dominated her mind all evening. But as she walked past Mrs Wallis in the corridor, bidding her goodnight and throwing her one of her most innocent smiles, the sense of uncertainty suddenly returned.

After washing her face clean with lukewarm water and lavender-scented soap in the porcelain sink in the corner of her room, Betty changed her pale-blue skirt and cream blouse, on which she could still smell William's musky aftershave, and slipped into her long, white, crisp cotton nightdress.

Climbing into her cold but familiar bed, she tried to close her eyes as she rested her head upon the fluffy pillow – something Mrs Wallis prided herself on. But as soon as she tried to doze off, worry overcame her once more. To Betty, war seemed an obvious outcome to this whole messy situation,

but where would that leave her and William? Would she have to kiss him goodbye if he did follow his heart and join the RAF, telling him she would see him soon, knowing the reality could paint a very different picture?

And what would she do? One thing was for sure: if war was announced, she couldn't do nothing. She couldn't just rest on her laurels and hope it would pass; she would have to do her bit.

Perhaps she'd have to do as the women of Sheffield did in the First World War and rise to the challenge, stepping into the steel toe-capped boots the city men would leave behind. The steel factories had relied on women to keep the foundry fires burning for four long years and Betty was determined she would be one of the first in line to ensure those sent to war, like her William, had the munitions they needed to fight the battle they faced.

Chapter Two

Monday, 28 August 1939

Her arms aching, Nancy wrung the last flannelette sheet through the mangle.

'Thank the lord for that,' she said, sighing to herself, desperate for a cuppa after hours of laboriously scrubbing, washing and cleaning. It was Monday, and like most of the women on Prince Street, she had been giving the house a once-over since the crack of dawn. Even before she had safely delivered her two children, Billy, seven, and five-year-old Linda, at school, Nancy had stripped the beds and beat the front-room rug with a brush over the washing line in the back yard.

She had spent the morning scrubbing the front doorstep with a donkey stone, but despite the fact it left her knuckles red raw, and numb with cold when winter came, it was one of the jobs Nancy didn't mind. Up and down most roads across the city, women could be seen doubled over on their hands and knees, applying as much elbow grease as they did chatter with the neighbours, until their front step was spick and span. No well-respecting housewife would dream of missing the weekly ritual.

'How you getting on, Doris?' Nancy asked her good friend and weary-looking neighbour, as she trundled wearily out of her own front door

'Ah, not so bad.' Doris smiled, her eyes drooping despite it just turning ten thirty. 'Nothing a good brew and eight hours of solid sleep wouldn't sort.'

Nancy didn't need to ask why. She'd heard Doris's youngest crying through the walls in the early hours.

'Georgie?' Nancy asked, and Doris nodded. 'He'll settle soon enough,' Nancy said reassuringly, but if the truth be known, she had no idea if her well-meant words would come true or not. Little George, as he was also known, hadn't slept through a single night since his dad – 'Big George', Doris's husband – had been tragically killed at Vickers, the local steelworks. And by the look of it – neither had Doris. The heavy bags under her eyes grew darker by the day and her frail frame seemed to be visibly shrinking.

'Are you sure you're managing?' Nancy asked kindly. 'Why don't you let me have the kids over for tea and you can catch forty winks.'

'Oh, it's okay, luv,' came the reply. 'They're still all pretty needy.'

Nancy nodded. It had only been three months since Big George had died in the most tragic and unspeakable of manners. His neck scarf had got caught in one of the monstrous lathes; his workmates had tried to shut down the machine but couldn't stop the thick unforgiving belts quick enough. 'Decapitation caused by severe laceration of the neck,' the death certificate had read. No wonder Doris couldn't sleep; Nancy knew her mind must have filled with unbearable harrowing images as soon as she closed her eyes. There couldn't be a crueller way to die and now Doris was left with four children, all under the age of ten, to feed, clothe and care for. How she had time to scrub her doorstep, as well as take in washing, sewing and do the odd cleaning job for the neighbours, was beyond Nancy.

She knew there was no point telling her friend to take it steady. How could she? Doris had bills to pay like everyone else and, with no husband to bring home a wage, she was juggling every ha'penny she had in a desperate bid to keep the tallyman at bay.

Doris didn't need to be told twice that if she didn't meet the rent, the debt collector would appear at the door and wouldn't think twice about taking away any possessions she had to cover the money she owed.

Nancy knew that Doris had already pawned most of the jewellery Big George had bought her over the years, including the intricate locket he'd given her on their wedding day, eleven years earlier – a family heirloom that had been passed down through the generations that had been a wrench to part with – but that she refused to let the gold band on her wedding finger go.

‘Listen. Don’t you be worrying about me,’ Doris said, snapping Nancy out of her daydream. She didn’t know how, but she was determined to find a way through the heart-wrenching predicament she had found herself in. She had no choice – she had four kids who were relying on her.

‘Well, at least come and have that cuppa when we’ve finished cleaning later,’ Nancy said. ‘Bert said he’d be working late and I’ve got some leftover jam pudding from last night – the kids can share it between them after school.’

Doris smiled. ‘Thanks, luv; that will cheer them up.’

It was the very least Nancy could do. She couldn’t imagine what life would be like without Bert to bring home a steady wage from his job as a tram driver – his steadfast love and support was all Nancy had ever known.

The rest of the day passed in the blink of an eye. After her doorstep almost glimmered in the bright sunshine, Nancy black-leaded the range, cleaned the windows with the previous week’s collection of newspapers and a good douse of malt vinegar, before getting through the pile of washing that had mounted up. By the time three o’clock came, she’d done her jobs and was happy to put bucket and cloths away just in time to go and collect Billy and Linda from the school gates, before preparing a few extra carrots and potatoes to go with the leftover slices of beef from the day before’s Sunday roast.

She’s only been back a few minutes when, right on cue, as she boiled a fresh pan of water on the kitchen range, Nancy heard the giggles and chatter of Little George, Alice, Joe and their eldest sister, Katherine, come tumbling through the yard, with their exhausted mum.

‘Perfect timing,’ Nancy said, fetching a jug of creamy milk from the parlour and setting out her two best china cups and saucers. ‘Put your feet up and have a minute,’ she said, with a smile, scooping a generous spoonful of tea leaves from the old tin caddy into her trusty teapot.

‘And look what I’ve got for you lot.’ Nancy showed Doris’s children, cutting the remainder of the jam sponge into squares. There was just enough for each of them, with a slightly smaller piece each for Billy and Linda. ‘Now, tuck in and let your mum have a well-deserved break,’ she said, knowing her neighbour’s children probably hadn’t had a sweet treat in weeks.

Apart from Little George, who clung to his mum like a limpet, the others all happily ran back into the yard with a trail of crumbs following them.

‘Thanks, Nancy, you’re a good friend,’ Doris sighed, grateful for ten minutes to sit down without fending off one request after another from six-year-old Alice, Joe, seven, and Katherine, nine.

‘Don’t be daft,’ Nancy protested, ‘you would do the same for me.’ The two women had been neighbours since she and Bert had moved in the week after they had got married, eight years earlier. Slightly older, and wiser, Doris had immediately taken Nancy under her wing, something the younger woman was grateful for. Nancy’s parents lived forty miles away in their home city of Manchester, not far from her elder sister, Lucy, and her husband, Jack. Nancy desperately missed Lucy; they had been so close growing up and she wished they lived nearer so she could chat to her about everyday life and any worries she had. But when Nancy moved into the neat three-bedroom terrace at 23 Prince Street, Doris had naturally slotted into the protective big sister role.

When Billy, and two years later Linda, had come along, it had been Doris who had held her hand through the painful contractions, mopping her forehead with a cool damp towel, calmly reassuring her and expertly telling Nancy when to push. And once her precious babies entered the world, yet again it was Doris who showed Nancy the ropes, until her mum had arrived to offer a helping hand.

Inevitably a close friendship had formed between the two women and now Nancy knew it was her turn to offer Doris support.

‘Are you sure you’re managing?’ she asked tentatively.

‘I’ve been better,’ came the unsurprising reply, as Doris took a sip of her sugary sweet tea. ‘The bills are mounting up,’ she said, letting out an exhausted sigh. ‘I’m robbing Peter to pay Paul and the kids are pulling me in all directions. It’s not their fault. They are good really, but obviously need

me more than ever. Alice asks at least ten times a day when George is coming home, Georgie isn't sleeping, Joe doesn't understand why he no longer has a daddy and poor Katherine is trying to be brave but every night sobs into her pillow until she has no tears left.'

Nancy took a deep breath and firmly pressed down on her bottom lip, desperately trying to fight the tears that were now stinging the back of her eyes and threatening to burst down her cheek. The thought of the heartache Doris and her children were suffering was unbearable, but the last thing her friend needed was to see her turn into a blubbing mess. Nancy tried to find the right words to ease Doris's pain, something that would give her a tiny glimmer of hope and reassure her things would get better. But each time Nancy went to open her mouth, she found herself completely at a loss as to what to say. The thought of Billy or Linda going through the same indescribable horror stopped Nancy in her tracks – no child should endure that sort of anguish, especially at such a tender age. It was hard enough for an adult to come to terms with such a gaping loss, let alone little ones, who were far too young and innocent to make any sense of how cruel life could be.

'I know I can't bring George back,' Nancy started, 'or take away what you must be feeling right now, but I'll always be here for you.' She gently took hold of Doris's tiny shaking hand. 'If there is anything you need, or anything I can do – whatever if it is, I'll do my best. Maybe I can have the children of an evening if you want to take on a couple of extra cleaning jobs?' Not that Nancy liked the idea of Doris working all the hours God sent but she knew, now more than ever, it had become an evil necessity if she wanted to keep the wolves from the door.

'Thanks, Nancy, luv.' Doris murmured weakly, slowly stroking Little George's back, who had finally nodded off on her chest. 'You're a good friend. I might have to take you up on that if you're really sure.'

Relieved there was some practical way she could finally help her neighbour, who was more like a sister, Nancy smiled. 'Of course, I'll even make an extra jam sponge. That will keep the kids happy.' She hoped Doris would feel a little safer in the knowledge that she could rely on her whenever she needed to. After all, wasn't that what friends were for?

Long after Doris had taken the children home, and she'd tucked Billy and Linda into bed with a kiss and a bedtime story, Nancy couldn't stop thinking about her pal. She had filled the hole Nancy's sister, Lucy, had left behind when she'd moved away and now the thought of her suffering in the most agonizing of manners was just heartbreaking.

As she put the last of the dinner dishes away and settled down for her last cuppa of the day, the kitchen door swung open.

'Oh, hiya luv.' Nancy beamed at the sight of her husband, Bert, instantly jumping up to fetch his dinner from the range. 'Long day?'

'Aye,' he said with a sigh, leaning over to give his wife a peck on the cheek. 'Offering to pull a double shift wasn't my brightest idea. I've lost count of how many times I've driven back and forth to the city centre today.'

Nancy smiled. Bert had always been a hard worker and whenever his manager offered him an extra shift as a tram driver, he never turned it down, grateful for the extra cash he would receive in his wage packet on Friday.

'It all helps pay the bills,' she said, carefully placing Bert's warmed-up beef dinner in front of him. Grabbing a mug for her husband and a cup and saucer for herself, she poured them each a strong brew.

'You look distracted tonight, luv. What is it?' Bert asked in between mouthfuls of mashed potatoes.

Holding her china cup to her mouth, the one small luxury Nancy allowed herself, she told Bert about her chat with Doris. 'I just wish I could make it all better for her. Apart from grieving for George, she's worrying herself sick about paying the bills. The little ones are struggling too. How on earth do you explain to them that Daddy has gone to heaven?'

Bert looked up from his now nearly empty plate. He knew how much his wife thought of Doris. 'I'll be earning an extra bob or two this week with all this overtime. Why don't you nip to the butcher's on Saturday and get an extra big joint and invite them all round for tea?'

Nancy reached across the table and squeezed her husband's arm, feeling reminded as to why she'd married him. 'That's a lovely idea,' she said. 'Thank you.'

'Ah, it's nothing in the grand scheme of things,' Bert replied, swallowing his last forkful of beef. 'It will do her good and I know how much you love seeing all the kids play together.'

He was right. Nancy had always dreamt of having a houseful of children running around, getting up to mischief, but after Linda had come along, she and Bert had agreed two was enough. They had just enough money to live comfortably without worrying where the next meal was coming from and, despite always secretly craving holding another new-born baby for the very first time, Nancy felt lucky she had been blessed with a boy and girl.

'Besides which,' Bert added, 'I think we are all going to have to stick together more than ever soon enough.'

'What do you mean, luv?' Nancy asked, although deep down she, like the rest of the country, had felt a sense of uncertainty for months now. 'Do you really think it will happen?' she added before Bert had a chance to reply.

'Aye, I do,' he answered, almost too quickly for Nancy's liking.

She pulled her arms across her body as a cold shiver ran through her. An impending war had been the elephant in the room in the Edwards' house all summer. Bert rarely spoke about the latest developments across Europe, knowing his wife, an eternal worrier, couldn't bear to think about it. Nancy always avoided any conversation around Hitler and his power-hungry actions, all too aware Bert would be one of the first to offer his services to fight the German's terrifying regime, always wanting to do the right thing. But with the rest of her family so far away, the idea of Bert disappearing as well was one worry too many for Nancy. She would have loved to have been more like Doris, who had endless strength and determination to carry on despite how hard life was and the trauma she had faced.

I couldn't be that strong, Nancy quietly thought to herself. I know I would crumble.

That night, after Bert had taken himself off to bed earlier than usual in preparation for another early start on the trams, Nancy sat alone at the kitchen table, contemplating her thoughts.

In the darkness – pitch black save for the glimmer of a candle, due to the newly installed thick black fabric she and Bert had fitted to every window to act as blackout blinds to comply with the new regulations – Nancy nursed the last dregs of her lukewarm tea, unable to stop her mind from wandering. Poor Doris had already lost her husband and Nancy could see the devastating effect it was having on her; the last thing she now wanted was to say goodbye to Bert as he left to fight in a strange unknown country, hundreds of miles away, not knowing if she, or their precious children, who adored their daddy more than life itself, would ever see him again.

The thought of him never coming back was too much to bear.

How could I ever tell Billy and Linda their daddy had died? Nancy silently worried, scrunching her eyes closed, just the thought of it was too much to even contemplate out loud.

Bert had also been the breadwinner since their children had come along and seeing how much Doris was now struggling left her terrified.

If the unthinkable happened, she really had no idea how on earth she would manage to put food on the table and keep a roof over their heads.

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