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**Opening Extract from...**

# After the War is Over

Written by Maureen Lee

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# *After the War is Over*

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# *Chapter 1*

Bootle, Liverpool
*December 1945*

*'After the war is over, After the fighting's through, Now that the lights are shining, What shall we do . . . ?'*

Maggie stopped singing and grinned at her friends, eyebrows raised in a question. She looked incredibly pretty, with her black curls, no longer hidden beneath an army cap, tumbling on to her shoulders. She tossed her head to shake the tiniest curls off her forehead and out of her unusual violet eyes. 'What *shall* we do?' she asked. 'Now that the war is over and we've been demobbed?'

'I'm only going to stay at home till the new year,' Nell said. 'Then I'll be off to live in London. I'll find a job, a nice room somewhere, and live happily ever after like they do in stories.' Nell was very tall, very clumsy and almost plain, but she had the kindest and most innocent eyes in the world, like soft brown velvet.

'It's only fairy stories that end happily,' the third member of the group remarked darkly.

'Iris Grant, you old misery-guts!' Maggie snorted. 'Nothing could be further from the truth! 'Tis my experience that stories always end happily.'

'You haven't lived long enough to know otherwise,' Iris sniffed. She was going on for thirty, whereas Maggie and Nell were only twenty-one and had been friends at school. They had joined the army together three years before. Iris had joined up much earlier, just after the war had started. She had nothing

in common with the girls other than the fact that they all came from Bootle. Not only that, she was a sergeant and they were privates; sergeants weren't encouraged to mix with other ranks, so she always wore civvies on the rare occasions they went to the pictures together. As the years passed, she'd grown fond of the girls. She noticed that other passengers in the carriage were listening with amusement to their conversation.

They were on the electric train, the final leg of their journey home from an army camp not far from Plymouth in Devon. It had taken two days to get from Plymouth to Liverpool. In London they'd slept overnight in the ladies' waiting room on Euston station. Maggie had remarked that it would probably be the last time they would sleep on a wooden bench and find it fun. There were women there from the other services who'd been demobbed like them, and they had sung songs, danced a bit, laughed a lot, cried occasionally, and slept hardly at all.

'I feel sad,' Maggie announced, grinning from ear to ear.

'You don't look it,' Iris and Nell said together.

'Maybe not, but I still feel it. In another two stops it'll be Marsh Lane station, and we'll get off and nothing will ever be the same. The war's finished, we're no longer soldiers, we'll never wear our army uniforms again.' She looked briefly sober for a change. 'I already feel dead peculiar not wearing a cap.'

'You can always wear a different sort of hat,' Nell said sensibly.

'Oh Nell.' Maggie hugged her friend effusively. 'You are such a lovely human being. How will I ever get used to waking up and not find you snoring your head off in the next bed?'

Nell looked embarrassed. 'I'll miss you too,' she conceded. 'And I don't snore.' Privately she wondered if she would manage to exist in London without Maggie. In Bootle they lived in the next street to each other. Ever since she could

remember, they had waved to each other out of their back bedroom windows every night before they went to bed and first thing each morning.

The train was drawing into Marsh Lane station.

'Good luck, girls,' a man said as they were about to get off.

'Good luck to yourself.' Maggie patted him on the head and he looked pleased.

One thing she wouldn't miss, Iris thought, was Maggie's outgoingness, her forever patting people and kissing them, hugging them for no reason at all, telling everyone very loudly how much she loved them. Tears sprang to her eyes when she realised that despite this she would miss Maggie terribly, as well as Nell's lovely nature, her patience, her inability to say a bad word about anyone.

They stood in a little huddle underneath the railway bridge in Marsh Lane, shoulders touching, suitcases at their feet. It was a dreary afternoon, almost dark yet it was only two o'clock. Being Wednesday, half-day closing, there weren't many people about. A mist hung in the air and they could feel the moisture on their faces. It smelt of smoke and coal.

'I had my first kiss in the army,' Maggie said. 'Went to my first dance.'

Nell blushed. 'So did I.'

'And I had my first shower,' Maggie went on. 'Used a telephone and a typewriter for the first time, rode a motorbike – only as a passenger,' she added, not wanting to make herself sound more experienced than she actually was.

'I cooked meals every day for over a hundred people.' Nell spoke. 'I peeled thousands and thousands of potatoes, baked hundreds and hundreds of pies. The thing I made best of all was Swiss roll.'

'I loved your Swiss roll,' Iris remarked. She was married and had kissed and danced and baked before she'd joined the army, where she'd become a driver and had chauffeured important people to their important destinations. She'd been happy in

the forces, happier than she'd been in a long time. She was glad the war was over, but would miss being happy.

Maggie grabbed her and kissed her on the cheek. Nell kissed her more gently on the other cheek.

'Let's meet on Saturday morning for a cup of tea in Jenny's Café on Strand Road,' Maggie suggested.

They agreed to meet at half past ten. Iris pulled away, not wanting them to see she was crying, and went home.

'She was close to tears, poor Iris,' Nell said. She and Maggie linked arms as they walked towards the streets where both had been born.

'You'd think she'd be thrilled to bits seeing her husband again. That's a lovely posh house they've got in Rimrose Road.' Maggie pulled the collar of her coat over her ears. 'Is it as cold here as it was in Plymouth? Or colder?'

Nell sniffed and announced it colder. 'The temperature of the Irish Sea is lower than the English Channel.'

'How on earth do you know that?' Maggie asked.

'I've no idea. I must have read it somewhere.'

They turned into Amber Street, where Nell lived. Further down there was an ugly gap where two houses had been hit by a bomb during the Blitz. 'Once we go inside, our lives in the army really will be at an end.' Maggie stopped by a lamp post they'd turned into a swing with a piece of rope when they were little. She unhooked her arm from Nell's and stood in the middle of the street, her hands on her hips, her lovely eyes scanning the line of small terraced houses on each side. Some properties still had blackout curtains at the windows; one had the Union Jack painted on the front door; decorations were up in some ready for Christmas – the first war-free one for six years. 'No one will ever call me Private O'Neill again, we'll never wake up to the sound of a bugle, go to a dance in uniform. Everything's going to be completely different.'

'We'll soon get used to it,' Nell said comfortably, not at all sure that it was true.

Maggie danced back on to the pavement and grabbed her friend's arm. 'Of course we will. And we'll have memories, won't we? Really gear memories of the wonderful times we had. And sad memories too.' Her violet eyes narrowed. 'All those lovely young lads that died. I promised to marry quite a few, only so they could tell their mates they had a girlfriend back in Blighty.'

Nell blushed again. 'One proposed to me. His name was Jim Harvey, and he was a lance corporal.' It had happened so quickly, and there hadn't been time to fall in love before he was killed in Italy, the victim of a sniper's bullet.

The girls walked another few feet and stopped outside the Desmonds' house.

'Home!' Maggie said. She pushed Nell towards the front door. 'Home at last. Shall we meet tonight? Come round our house whatever time you like. Me mam will be dead pleased to see you. Ta-ra, Nell.'

Maggie disappeared around the corner, leaving Nell feeling desperately lost and alone. She swallowed, took a deep breath, and pulled the key on a piece of string through the letter box. The first thing she noticed was that the hall had been redecorated. The shoulder-high Anaglypta paper had been freshly varnished and the wall above distempered dark green. A new picture hung there of a bowl of fruit that looked too perfect to be real. The parlour door was open and Nell peeped inside. The room was empty, and it too had been freshly painted the same dead miserable colours as the hall. The furniture was smart and well-polished, the cushions and curtains looked expensive and there was a new rug in front of the brown-tiled fireplace. Nell threw back her shoulders and went into the living room. Compared to the parlour, this room was neglected and shabby. The curtains were threadbare and the linoleum, which had been there for as long as she

could remember, was full of holes that could be lethal if you didn't look where you were going. A sparse fire burned in the grate.

'Mam?' she said. Her mother was asleep in the easy chair beneath the window, thin and pale and helpless. She opened her eyes, then her arms, when she saw her daughter.

'Nellie, luv. Come here!' she cried.

Nell knelt and allowed her mother to embrace her. Eight years ago, Nell's father, Alfred Desmond, had quite openly taken up with another woman, who owned a hairdresser's in Strand Road and lived in the flat above; Rita Brannigan, red-haired, green-eyed, with a voluptuous body, was frequently compared to her namesake, the film star Rita Hayworth. Alfred only spent his evenings and Sunday afternoons with Rita, preferring to live the rest of his time in his own house, where he was better fed and better looked after altogether.

Overnight, Mabel, Alfred's wife, had become an invalid. She was no longer well enough to do the housework, too weak to do the shopping – and too ashamed, what with everyone knowing about Alfred's whore and laughing at his poor wife, sometimes to her face. She'd hardly moved out of the chair since, except to go to bed or use the lavatory at the bottom of the yard.

The Desmonds had five children, four girls and a boy, Kenny, who was the baby of the family. Nell was the next to youngest. One by one the older girls had taken their mother's place: Gladys first, then Ena, followed by Theresa when her older sisters had married and left home.

'I've missed you, luv,' her mother sobbed now. 'Really missed you.' She paused to wipe her tears on the pinny that she used as both a handkerchief and a towel. 'And our Theresa asks every day when we can expect you home, 'cos she wants to move in with her friend Joan Roberts from Chaucer Street. Well, now you're back, and she can move out. It's your turn

to look after us now. You'll never go away again, will you, Nellie?'

'No, Mam,' Nell said weakly, while inside a voice screamed, *You shouldn't have come home, daft girl. You must have known something like this would happen.* The dream of living in London that she'd been nursing for almost a year had been shattered within minutes of being back.

She supposed she had known in a way; after all, it *was* her turn, like Mam had said, so how could she possibly not have come home? Theresa had served her time and was due her independence. But Nell was the youngest girl – who would take over when the time came for *her* to move on?

The front door opened and her dad came in, pausing to hang his overcoat and hat in the hall – Nell knew it was him by the way he stamped his boots on the doormat, making the house shake.

Alfred Desmond was a fine figure of a man, almost six feet tall, broad-chested, with the beginnings of a beer belly. He wore a pinstriped suit, a blue shirt and a red and blue striped tie. There was a red handkerchief in his breast pocket and he smelt strongly of a mixture of beer, tobacco and cheap cologne. His eyes were the same brown as Nell's, but there was no warmth in them, and his whiskers stretched almost as far as his ears, stiff and bristly.

Alfred looked what he was – a crook. He could get anything for anybody – at a price: petrol coupons, clothes coupons, food coupons, cigarettes and tobacco, alcohol, lipstick and dead posh scent. Name it, and from somewhere or other Alfred could get his hands on it. The reason why the hall and parlour were so well decorated compared to the rest of the house was because it was there that he did his business, saw his customers and took their orders.

He looked Nell up and down. 'So you're home. See y'haven't got any smaller while you were in the army,' he sneered.

'There isn't an ounce of fat on her, Alfred. She's tall like you, that's all. You can hardly expect her to have shrunk.'

'Shurrup, Mabel.' He gave his wife's feet an idle kick, then clapped his big hand on Nell's shoulder. 'Make us a cup of tea, there's a luv.'

The hand stayed where it was, getting tighter and tighter. Nell gritted her teeth, determined not to let him know how much it hurt. But in the end it became so painful that she had to shrug the hand away, and her father laughed.

'It's due on the first of May,' Sheila O'Neill said modestly. 'I didn't tell you, I thought I'd make it a surprise.'

Maggie laughed. 'Well it's a surprise all right. I didn't think people you and me dad's age got up to that sort of thing.' Ryan, her brother, was twenty-three. After Maggie had been born, Mam and Dad had gone for nearly twenty years assuming they weren't meant to have more children, so it was a pleasant shock when, at forty-one, her mother found herself expecting again and Bridget had come along. Now here she was, two years later, having a fourth child.

'Are you all right, though, Mam?' Maggie frowned. 'You're a bit old to be in the club.'

'Dr Reynolds said I'm as healthy as a horse,' Sheila boasted. She looked it, with her rosy cheeks and glorious smile. She was an older version of her daughter, just rather more careworn and already with a few grey hairs. 'Anyroad, I always wanted a little playmate for our Bridie.'

Bridie, a pretty little doll of a child, was sitting on Maggie's knee. She had arrived after her big sister had joined the army, so the two hardly knew each other, but there was a big photograph of Maggie in her uniform on the mantelpiece and Sheila had reminded Bridie of her sister every day.

A cat strolled into the room, a massive tabby with an arrogant bearing. On seeing Maggie, it leapt on to the back of her chair and began to play with her curly hair.

'Tinker!' Maggie gasped. 'You horrible cat. You gave us a fright.' She shook her head and the cat slithered down and rested itself precariously on the arm of the chair. 'What time will me dad be in?' she asked. She tickled Tinker under his chin and he began to purr. She felt very much at home with the cat beside her and her little sister on her knee.

Mam looked at the clock. 'Any minute now. The morning shift finishes at two o'clock, but it takes a while getting home on the bus.'

Maggie's dad worked in a marine engineering factory that had turned to manufacturing munitions during the war. It had recently gone back to producing ship's parts. Her brother had started in the same factory as an apprentice. It meant both men had been regarded as essential workers and avoided being called up to fight, much to her father's relief and Ryan's frustration, as he'd badly wanted to join the navy.

'I'll make some tea.' Sheila struggled to her feet. 'Stay there!' she commanded when Maggie made to lift Bridie off her knee so she could help. 'I've got five months to go yet. Your father would have me permanently stuck in bed if he had his way, and your Auntie Kath brought in to look after Bridie. I told him I'd go stark raving mad, stuck in the same house as our Kath while she lectured me on women's rights and why we should get rid of the monarchy.'

Maggie sighed blissfully. It was the gear to be home again. She'd badly missed her family during her stint in the army, though the heavy bombing of Liverpool was over by the time she'd joined up in 1942, so at least she didn't have that to worry about. Knowing they were safe had meant she could take advantage of the glorious freedom and at the same time put up with the tight discipline of army life.

She looked around the warm room. Her mother had a way of making pretty things out of bits of this and that. There was a crocheted runner on the sideboard on which stood two jars covered with seashells painted in pastel colours, a vase filled

with paper flowers, and an old wooden clock that had been painted white and decorated with flower transfers. The Christmas decorations were home-made too – Maggie and Ryan had made the tree fifteen years ago, out of green crêpe paper.

This was going to be a really smashing Christmas without the clouds of war hanging over them. There was so much to celebrate. Maggie thought about the last three Christmases, spent on the base in Plymouth. There'd been a magic to them, an air of frantic merriment, a feeling of sadness too. She was wondering if she would miss those things when the back door opened and her dad came into the kitchen.

'Our Maggie's home,' Mam said.

'Is she now! Where's my big girl?' roared Paddy O'Neill in his strong Irish accent. He appeared in the doorway, big and handsome, full of smiles. 'Welcome home, darlin'! Welcome home.'

Nell remembered, a long time later, that she'd been invited to Maggie's house in the evening. She really liked Mrs O'Neill, who always made a fuss of her. Her own mother had gone to bed, her father to the pub, Kenny to play billiards, and Theresa had gone to the pictures with Joan Roberts and two French sailors.

She wasn't used to quiet after the noisy life on the base. She put on her coat and walked around to Coral Street. For nearly six years a blackout had been in force, with everyone obliged to close their curtains so that not even a chink of light showed. Now, like a sign of belated defiance, curtains were being left wide open with lives exposed for all to see.

The O'Neills were in the parlour. Maggie and her brother Ryan – Nell had had a crush on Ryan for as long as she could remember – were jiving in the middle of the room. Mr and Mrs O'Neill were seated on the settee with their arms around each other, the little girl, Bridie, squashed between them nursing Tinker, the cat. And Auntie Kath, who oozed politics

from every pore, had just come into the room with a tray of tea.

There was no place for Nell in that happy scene. No one would want to see her long face. She turned and went back to her own silent house, wondering if it was always going to be like this now that she was home.

The men had gone to the pub more than an hour ago: Tom, Iris's husband, his brother Frank, and their father, Cyril. Their wives were sitting in front of the first-floor window of Iris and Tom's house overlooking Bootle docks, admiring the view. Iris was aware of her own reflection; out of uniform, she looked small, pale and insignificant. She had natural blonde hair and a quiet face – people didn't properly notice her until they'd met her two or three times, when they suddenly realised how attractive she was.

As it had gone ten and the pubs had closed, the husbands, all doctors, were expected home any minute.

'I don't know why alcohol tastes better when they're standing knee deep in sawdust, rather than sitting at a table drinking from a crystal glass,' Constance, who was married to Frank, had said earlier. 'It must be something to do with their caveman instincts.'

'Did cavemen have pubs?' Adele Grant queried idly.

'Oh, you know what I mean,' Constance snapped.

Adele, Iris and Constance's mother-in-law, plump and motherly, was one of Iris's favourite people. She had no close family herself, and Tom's mother had proved a perfect substitute for her own, who had died not long after she was born. Her father had gone to meet his maker a short time afterwards, and Iris had been raised by a rather distant aunt and uncle until she had left home at eighteen. She had only seen them about half a dozen times since.

It was Adele who'd had the idea of making a special dinner to welcome her daughter-in-law home. She must have been

saving her meat coupons for several weeks in order to buy the tender sirloin steak, and Lord knows how much the two bottles of ten-year-old French wine had cost – or where it had come from. Despite the war having ended, rationing was still very much in force.

'It's been an exceptionally pleasant homecoming,' Iris said. She had expected to spend it alone with Tom. 'And this is a wonderful sight: the lights and the glowing water.' She nodded at the window. Perhaps it was the full moon that made the water shimmer the way it did. During the day, the view was nothing to write home about: cranes, a ship or two with goods being loaded on or off. But at night, with lights burning on the ships, the docks and the street itself, it was quite enchanting. 'I still can't get used to there not being a blackout,' she said.

'I can't understand why it took so long for you to be demobbed.' Constance always managed to sound a touch bad-tempered, suspicious almost, as if Iris had been getting up to no good in Plymouth since the war had ended, which to a large extent was true, though Constance had no way of knowing.

'The camp couldn't be closed down overnight,' Iris said patiently. Constance might be bad-tempered, but she had a good heart. 'There was still work to be done, meetings to be held, furniture and equipment to be transported to other camps, put in storage or sent somewhere to be sold. I got my Heavy Goods Vehicle licence,' she said proudly, 'and drove lorries all over the country.'

'Did you really, darling?' Adele remarked, impressed. 'How clever.' She patted Iris's knee. 'I'm ever so glad you managed to be home for Christmas. Don't think of trying to get food together for a meal on Christmas Day – you and Tom must come to us.'

'And to us on Boxing Day,' Constance put in. 'Beth and Eric are really looking forward to seeing you. They badly

wanted to come tonight, but I told them it was only for grown-ups.'

'Thank you both. And I'm really looking forward to seeing my niece and nephew again.'

Downstairs, the front door opened and the husbands came in singing the Eton Boating Song. All had gone to exclusive schools, but not as exclusive as Eton.

Adele laughed. 'They sound a bit the worse for wear. Three inebriated doctors! They should be ashamed of themselves.'

The visitors had gone. 'Were they all right?' Tom asked anxiously. 'I hope Constance didn't get you down. She can be awfully abrupt.'

Iris was pushing the armchairs back into their proper places. Instinctively she closed the curtains. 'She was fine, if a bit blunt. Not that I mind. Your mother was lovely, but then she always is.' She sank into one of the chairs with a sigh.

Tom gave the fire a poke and came and sat in the next chair. 'I wish I could have gone in the forces too and we could have both come home together.' A broken leg as a child had left him with a slight limp and he'd been rejected by all three services. He was a very ordinary, dependable-looking man, with straight brown hair and a whimsical smile. He wore horn-rimmed glasses. His patients loved him, but Iris wasn't sure if she still did. 'It seems a bit strange not to have seen my own wife for the whole of last year,' he said stiffly. The smile had disappeared.

'We hardly ever got passes for longer than forty-eight hours,' Iris informed him. 'It wasn't possible to get from Plymouth to Liverpool and back again in such a short time.'

'I wouldn't have minded not seeing you had I been in the forces too.'

'That wasn't possible, was it?'

He shook his head. 'I wish I wasn't hopeless in so many ways.' His shoulders sagged.

'You're not hopeless in any way that I know.'

'I couldn't give you a baby.'

'You gave me a baby. It's probably my own fault I can't have another.' Iris closed her eyes, seeing her baby, Charlie, six months old, smiling at her, cooing, falling asleep in her arms. She imagined his bulk pressed against her, his mouth tugging at her breast, and remembered the morning she found him cold in his cot, his face as white as a ghost, lifeless and stiff. Her little boy was dead and she would never get over it for as long as she lived. If it hadn't been for Charlie, she wouldn't have joined the army, but she'd needed to get away. Once there, she'd told no one that she'd once had a child.

Now, perhaps because she was home, in the house where it had happened, it seemed terribly real. 'Is his cot still here?' she asked Tom.

'No, I hope you don't mind, but Mother took it away some time ago. Even if we had another baby, I wouldn't want him or her to sleep in it. We put the toys and baby clothes in the loft, just in case you wanted them kept.'

'I don't think I do any more. I'd sooner they were given to another baby.'

'I'll ask Mother to see to it.'

'It's all right, Tom. I'll do it myself.' He'd also lost a son, and it shouldn't all be left to him.

'Shall I put more coal on the fire, or will we be going to bed soon?' He was probably unaware of the longing on his face.

Iris would have preferred to stay up, but Tom would be hurt. She stretched her arms. 'I'd sooner go to bed,' she lied.

'It's time we started trying for another baby.' He stood and pulled her to her feet.

Iris nodded, but didn't speak. Tom would never know, but she had been trying desperately for another baby since she'd joined the army six years ago, losing track of the number of men that she had slept with. What she would have told Tom had she fallen pregnant, she had no idea. She would cross that

bridge when she came to it, she had told herself. As things had turned out, there was no need to tell Tom anything.

On Saturday, Iris was already in Jenny's Café when Maggie burst through the door, creating a terrible draught. She wore a bright red coat and a fur tippet around her neck. The café was full – Iris had acquired the last table. Her camel coat was draped over the back of her chair. Her rather severe matching hat sported a speckled feather.

The chatter in the café was deafening. Everyone was in a good mood for this very special Christmas. A strip of white material hung in the steamy window with 'Happy Yuletide' cut from red crepe paper stuck to it. The wireless was playing Christmas carols sung by a children's choir.

'Is that fox?' Iris enquired of the tippet as Maggie more or less threw herself on to a chair.

'No, me dad swears it's rat. I got it off me Auntie Kath. Mam sprinkled it with talcum powder and gave it a good shake in the yard. It's lovely and warm.' She created an even bigger draught by removing her coat and flinging it backwards over the chair, laying the fur on her knee. 'Eh, you'll never guess,' she said breathlessly. 'Me mam's only expecting another baby. It's due in May. She doesn't care whether it's a boy or a girl.'

'You must give her my congratulations,' Iris said, keeping the envy out of her voice. 'Where's Nell? I thought you two lived right by each other.'

'I called for her, but she was busy and promised to be along in a minute. Oh, and don't ask her about going to London, poor thing. She's had to give up on the idea and look after her mam and the house instead.'

'But that's not fair!' Iris was outraged. She knew how much Nell had wanted to go to London. She had grown very fond of both girls, but Nell was such a vulnerable young woman, easily hurt. In her unquestioning willingness to help, she was often

taken for a fool. Iris had always felt the need to protect her. She could imagine how easy it would have been to persuade the girl that her duty lay in Liverpool, not London.

A waitress came, and Iris ordered a pot of tea for three and three scones. 'Do you have butter?' she enquired.

'I'm sorry, madam, but we only have margarine.'

'Then can we have jam as well, please. It'll disguise the taste,' she said to Maggie when the waitress had gone. 'I can't stand margarine.'

'Even before it was rationed, we only had butter on Sundays,' Maggie told her. She smiled. 'We're not dead posh like you.'

Iris rolled her eyes. 'That was very tactless of me. I'm sorry.'

'It's all right,' Maggie said generously.

'But it really is about time we were able to get butter again. The war's been over for more than seven months, yet rationing is as tight as it's ever been. Same with so many other things. I couldn't buy a lipstick anywhere in town yesterday. Not one of the big shops had any in stock, nor did they have cologne for my husband, apart from in Woolies, where it costs sixpence a bottle and can't be any good. Oh, look, here's Nell now.'

In contrast to her friend, Nell almost crept into the café. Her eyes were downcast when she joined them at the table. 'Hello, Iris,' she whispered.

'Hello, love.' Iris seized her hand and squeezed it. 'How are you?'

'All right.' She raised her eyes and they looked terribly sad.

'I've been thinking, why don't both of you come round one day before Christmas for afternoon tea?' She had already bought them presents: boxes of handkerchiefs embroidered with a flower in the corner – there'd only been three boxes left in Owen Owen's and she'd bought the third for Constance. 'Have you found a job yet, Maggie?'

'No. I thought I'd start looking for work in the new year. It was me dad's idea. He said I deserved a bit of a holiday first.'

'My husband said more or less the same. I'm not going back to being his receptionist until January. My mother-in-law has been doing it in my place and she doesn't mind sticking it out for another week or so. And you, Nell love?' she asked. 'What are you up to?' The girl looked as if she'd died a little since Iris had last seen her.

'I've put off going to London for a while and I'm helping at home instead. In fact, that's where I should be, home, like. I told me dad I wouldn't long. And I've got shopping to do, we're out of bread.' She jumped up and almost ran out of the café.

Iris gasped. 'But she hasn't touched her tea or scone!'

'I'll pop in and see her later,' Maggie promised. 'I'll make sure we come to your house, and she's coming to ours on Christmas Day when we're having a party. Me mam's sister'll be there and some of me dad's friends from work. And our Ryan's bringing his new girlfriend. I've invited Nell. If she doesn't come, I'll go to their house and drag her there.'

It was then that Iris made up her mind that she had to do something about Nell.

Iris couldn't stand Tom's brother, Frank. The two men couldn't have been more different, in either body or brain. Tall and sharply thin, Frank had dark, piercing eyes and an eternally bitter expression on his long face. Iris wouldn't have wanted him for her doctor. After dinner on Christmas Day, he denounced the planned introduction of a National Health Service in the strongest possible terms. The adults remained at the table and the children, Beth and Eric, had gone into the parlour to listen to the wireless and examine their presents, mainly books.

'I shall never join,' Frank insisted forcefully, 'even if it means I'm the only doctor left in England who's not part of