

Part 1

September 1916

Chapter 1

Violet Gill was walking home with a bag full of spoiled fruit and vegetables that she'd got cheaply from the market. She'd just turned a corner when she saw some lads snatch a loaf from an old lady, who was hobbling painfully along. They'd started running towards Vi before they noticed her and tried to swerve, but she didn't hesitate for a minute. Dropping her shopping bag, she flung herself sideways at the lad carrying the booty, shoving him so hard he bounced off the wall and let go of the loaf.

She grabbed him by the neck of his ragged shirt and gave him a couple of good clouts about the ears. "Don't you *dare* steal anything again, Frank Pilling, or I'll hand you over to Constable Tucker! And you can be sure I'll tell your mam about this."

His two companions in crime stopped further along the street to watch.

"I'll be telling your mams too!" she shouted at them, still holding the young thief by his shirt front. "I know who you are. Brave, aren't you, to steal an old woman's food!" She gave her captive another thump for good measure and then let go of him. She knew how short of food the lad's family was, but it was no excuse.

He half-raised one hand to hit her back and for a minute all hung in the balance.

“Don’t—you—dare!” she said softly, and although she wasn’t much taller than him, something in her tone made him shrink away. With a yell he ran off down the street towards his companions. Only when the trio had disappeared round the corner did Vi turn to the lads’ victim, who was leaning against the wall looking pale and shocked, and put one arm round her.

“You all right, love? See, I’ve got your loaf back. It’s a bit dusty, though.”

“Thank you.” The old woman patted her chest. “Eh, it give me a right old shock, that did. Made my heart pound. Be all right—in a minute.”

Vi waited patiently for her to pull herself together, then gave her back the loaf and watched her walk slowly and painfully away. The town hall clock struck the hour just then and she clicked her tongue in annoyance at the delay before picking up her own bag and retrieving one or two apples which had fallen out. Hurrying up the street, she turned the corner into the Backhill Terraces, twenty or so narrow streets clustered round the town’s two big cotton mills on a slope that led up to the moors. It was here, in the poorest area of Drayforth, that her family’s corner shop was situated.

She always enjoyed her outings to the markets, where the stallholders knew she’d pay them for bruised or overripe pieces and saved them for her. She paused at the door, sighing. She didn’t enjoy being shut up in the shop all day. But what choice did she have? What choice had she ever had from the minute she finished her schooling? Her father left most of the running of the shop to her mother and herself, and her mother had been ill for a few years, though she’d been a lot better in the past year, thank goodness.

Vi had been needed while her mother was ill. Without her the shop would have failed.

The two ladies who had stopped to watch this incident from further down the street

began walking again.

“Well done, young woman!” Lady Bingham said softly. “Who is she? Do you know, Freda?”

“I think she works in one of the corner shops. I’ve seen her when I’ve been visiting the slums.”

“Can you find out more about her?”

“I suppose so. Why?”

Daphne Bingham grinned, an urchin’s grin for all she was in her mid-sixties. “I’m looking for more young women to join my Aides. The government finds my little group so helpful in the war effort that it’s asking me to find more of them, and is even giving me some money towards the costs. I certainly couldn’t afford to support a bigger group myself.”

“Surely you don’t want women of *that class* in your group?”

“Snobbery won’t win the war, Freda. There are plucky women in all classes, and that’s the only sort I want working for me.”

Her companion sniffed. “Well, rather you than me. Some of those women from the Backhill Terraces have no moral fibre. The things I’ve seen in my charity work!” She frowned. “I’d have thought you’d want younger aides, though. That one must be well over thirty.”

Daphne stopped trying to reason with a woman who had always been a snob and a stick-in-the-mud, and wasn’t likely to change now, war or no war. The trouble was, she needed the money her companion was raising to help buy the necessary cars and motorbikes for those women from her group who were acting as couriers to various offshoots of the War Office. It was so good to be able to contribute to the war effort. It gave a meaning to her life she hadn’t had for a long time. She’d do anything she could to

keep her Aides going, even be nice to Freda Gilson.

As they were parting company on the main street, she reminded Freda of her promise. "If you can find out about that young woman for me, I'll be very grateful. I have to get back to London soon."

"You're still coming to lunch tomorrow, though? The Lady Volunteers are looking forward to meeting you and hearing what you be with the money we've raised."

"Of course I am. That money is being put to very good use, I promise you. You've done really well." She'd never liked Freda, who was the daughter of a now-dead friend, but war made for strange bedfellows.

Vi arrived home to find a queue in the shop and her mother telling one impatient customer she'd have to wait. Her father was nowhere to be seen. Grimly, wondering what his excuse would be this time, Vi carried her purchases through to the back room, tied on a pinafore and began serving.

When she went to the till for some change, she was surprised at how few coins there were and looked across at her mother, who flicked her a quick glance then avoided her eyes.

During a lull between customers she asked bluntly, "Has Dad been at the till again?"

Her mother hesitated then nodded.

"Why didn't you stop him?"

"I tried to. He pushed me away."

"Oh, Mum!" Vi bit off further protests. Her father was a big man and her mother, like herself, was barely five foot tall. "How much did he take?"

"About ten shillings."

"Then I'm not providing him with any food at teatime for the rest of the week."

“He’ll only take ours.”

“Just let him try. We’ll eat when he’s not there.” Lips pressed together grimly, Vi went to sort out a few greengroceries for themselves from the stuff she’d brought home then set up a small box holding the rest on top of a packing case just outside the door. The less provident women would buy these pieces one or two at a time and she’d make a small profit on what she’d paid for them at market. Every penny helped.

And she wouldn’t allow her father to steal any more of her hard-earned money for his drinking.

When the teatime rush had passed, Vi left the shop in her mother’s capable hands again and went to seek out her brother. She wasn’t particularly close to Eric, well, no one was. He kept his thoughts to himself, always had done. He took after their father in looks, but was much cleverer. Though he no longer lived at home, Eric thought the world of their mother. Vi hoped he’d help them in this constant battle to stop their father drinking away the profits she and her mother worked so hard for.

She found her brother standing by the bar in the Drover’s Rest pub. She didn’t like going inside, but needs must. “Could I speak to you outside for a minute, Eric? Me and Mum need your help.”

He set his glass of beer down on the bar and looked at the landlord. “Keep an eye on that, Den.”

The landlord nodded and placed the half-empty glass on the back shelf.

Outside Eric cocked one eyebrow at her, waiting.

“Dad’s been at the till again. If he goes on like this, the shop will fail because we won’t be able to pay our suppliers. Could you persuade him to leave the shop money alone? Mum was that upset today.”

Eric nodded. “Dad’s a stupid sod. Can’t think beyond the next drink. You were right

to come to me. I'm not having our mum upset. I'll pop round tomorrow after tea and have a word with him."

"Thanks."

He nodded and went back into the pub without even a goodbye.

He was like that, their Eric was. Didn't waste his time on chat or politeness, just went straight for whatever he wanted. He worked for Mr Kirby, helping Sully, who was in charge of collecting rents and looking after the many houses Mr Kirby owned. Eric must be earning decent money because he had good lodgings and never seemed short of a bob or two.

If anyone could stop Dad ruining them, it was Eric.

The next evening Vi waited impatiently for her brother, beginning to grow anxious when time passed with no sign of him. He turned up eventually at nine-thirty, waited for the last customer to leave and locked the door behind the woman.

"We don't close for another half hour, love," his mother said.

"You do tonight. I've got something to say to Dad." He studied her face. "You're looking tired, Mum, working too hard."

"We can't lock the door yet. Your father's not back from the pub."

"I'll go and fetch him. Where's he drinking these days?"

"He usually goes to The Drover's Rest."

"Not since I started drinking there, he doesn't." He patted her arm. "Don't worry. I'll soon hunt him down. And don't open the shop again. You look tired. If those silly bitches can't remember to buy their food earlier, let them go without."

May went into the back room and Vi followed Eric to the shop door. "Thanks."

He shrugged. "I'm not letting him do that to her."

Ten minutes later there was shouting in the street and someone hammered at the door. When Vi opened it, one of the men who worked with Eric shoved their father through and Eric followed him inside.

“Lock up again,” he said curtly as he guided the drunken man through into the back room and pushed him down on a chair.

When Vi went to join them, she found Eric going through his father's pockets and dropping the coins he found on the table.

“Only four and twopence. No, here's another penny.” He slammed his father against the chair back. “Damned well stay where you are, you!”

Arnie subsided, scowling at his son.

Eric smacked one hand down on the table so hard everyone jumped. “This is the last time you take money out of the till, Dad. The very last time.”

Arnie was not valiant still. “It's my shop, my money.”

“It's Mum and Vi who work in the shop, so I reckon it's their money. You're a lazy sod an' you hardly lift a finger. I don't know how Mum's put up with you all these years.”

“I do my share.”

“You've never done your share.” Eric leaned forward and poked his father in the chest. “I meant what I said.” He waited a moment and added in a softer voice that was nonetheless chilling, “If you do pinch any more money from the shop, I'll see you get the beating of your life.”

Arnie shrank away. Eric had a weak heart, so he didn't get into fights himself, but if he said he'd arrange a beating, he'd do it. He never made threats he couldn't carry out. Arnie glared at his wife and daughter.

“Even if Mum doesn't tell me, I'll find out,” Eric gathered up the money and looked at his mother. “How much did he take?”

"About ten shillings."

"Here." He added five shillings out of his own pocket and put all the money into her hand, clasping her fingers round it. Hesitating a moment, he gave her a quick, almost furtive kiss on the cheek and left without another word.

"You went and told him," Arnie threw at his daughter.

Vi stared back defiantly. "I certainly did. An' I'll do it again if I have to. We need that money. Takings are down because of war shortages."

He spat into the fire and heaved himself to his feet. "I'm going to bed. It's a fine look-out when a daughter's as ungrateful as you. It's me as provides the roof over your head and don't you forget it. Children! Bite the hand that feeds them, they do . . ."

When he'd gone up the stairs, still grumbling, Vi looked at her mother. "He's getting worse."

"Yes. I don't know what's got into him lately."

"You go up to bed, Mum. I'll check the shop and bring the takings in."

It was another half-hour before Vi got to bed, because she liked to leave things tidy. She rubbed her aching forehead and climbed the stairs to the bedroom she now had for her own. It seemed a long time since she'd shared it with her older sister. Beryl had been married for the past eighteen years to a nice fellow who did what Beryl told him and seemed happy with that state of affairs.

Vi sometimes wished she'd found a fellow to marry, because she'd have liked a family of her own. But what would have happened to her mother if she'd left the shop? Her mother had had several years of ill health, though she was much better these days.

Anyway, no one had asked her to marry them, had they? A couple of lads had asked her to walk out with them when she was much younger, but she hadn't been fussed whether she did or not because they weren't up to much. Her mother said she read too

many magazines and books, real men weren't like the heroes in those stories, nor was real life. But if it came to a choice between staying a spinster and marrying someone like her father, Vi would rather stay single any day.

They were dead now, those two lads, poor things. Both killed in the first year of the war. A lot of the fellows she'd grown up with were losing their lives in this dreadful fighting and all she could do was serve in the shop. She'd have liked to make a contribution, join the VADs or something, but her mother had needed her. And anyway, the sight of blood turned her queasy, so she didn't really want to nurse anyone.

But the years of her life were passing so swiftly it shocked her sometimes. What had become of yesterday's lively girl? She was thirty-five, had done nothing, gone nowhere. She was far too old to marry now, though she didn't feel old. Why, her hair wasn't even going grey yet. She had nice hair, her best feature her mother always said, but who was there to notice that now? All the men her age were either away fighting or long married with several children.

The following day Daphne Bingham was driven to Freda Gilson's house for lunch, her last engagement locally before she returned to London. She pinned a smile to her face as the group of women fluttered and fussed over her because of her title. Silly things! She'd come from a much poorer home than theirs. But they weren't too silly to raise money.

During a lull in the conversation she turned to Freda. "Did you find out about that young woman?"

A sour expression crossed her companion's face. "Not so young. She's thirty-five."

"And . . . ?"

"Her family runs a corner shop, a mean little place. She and her mother do most of the work and it isn't thriving because the father is a drunkard. So you see, she's really

not suitable to join your Aides.”

Daphne held back a protest and pulled out her little notebook. “What’s her name?”

“Violet Gill, but they call her Vi. I abominate nicknames, don’t you?”

“And the address of the shop?”

“Corner of Reservoir Road and Platts Lane.”

“Thank you.” Daphne put the little silver propelling pencil into its holder and slipped the notebook back into her handbag. She endured another half-hour of inane chit-chat, thanked the ladies again for their wonderful contribution to the war effort and took her leave.

“I need to visit someone in the Backhill Terraces,” she told her elderly chauffeur.

After stopping to make enquiries, they pulled up outside the shop and Daphne studied it with a grimace. It looked very run-down, though of course paint was in short supply because of the war. But the window was clean and had a neat little display of tins of food in it.

That young woman had stayed in her mind for the past twenty-four hours. Daphne’s instinct about people rarely let her down. “Wait for me here.”

She got out of the car and stopped at the entrance to the shop, watching for a moment or two as Vi served an awkward customer, jollyng her along. Then they both turned round and gaped at the sight of Daphne, who knew she looked like a creature from another world in her elegant clothes, so moved forward, smiling.

The customer stepped hastily back and Vi looked at the newcomer enquiringly.

“Do finish serving this lady first,” Daphne said. “Then I wonder if you could shut the shop for a few minutes. I’d like to talk to you.”

“I’ll come back later,” the customer said and scuttled out with another nervous glance at the newcomer.

Vi followed her to the door, locked it and hung up a sign saying, "Back in ten minutes". Then she turned to her visitor and waited.

"Is there somewhere we could sit down for a minute or two? What I'd like to talk to you about is rather important, to do with the war effort."

"Come through into the back." She led the way and introduced her mother, who was sitting at the table, weighing quarter pounds of sugar on the kitchen scales and pouring it into triangular blue paper bags.

Daphne held out her hand. "Pleased to meet you, Mrs Gill. I'm Daphne Bingham."

"Pleased to meet you too, Mrs Bingham."

"It's Lady Bingham, actually, but I don't like to stand on ceremony."

Vi pulled out a chair for their visitor then sat down herself. "How can we help you, your ladyship?"

Daphne explained about her Aides. "I saw you in the street yesterday, dealing with those louts and retrieving the old lady's loaf. I knew at once that you were the sort of woman I want in my group. Would you like to come to London and work for me, help win the war? I pay a pound a week all found, and I provide the uniform."

It was the mother who spoke. "Eh, that sounds wonderful. You should do it, our Vi."

"How can I, Mum? I'm needed in the shop."

May frowned in thought, "I think I could manage now. I'm a lot better and this is a good chance for you, love. It'd mean a lot to me to give you a better chance than this place. You deserve it."

Vi stretched out one hand to her and they smiled at one another. Lady Bingham was moved by their obvious closeness, wishing yet again that she'd been blessed with children.

"I reckon Tess Donovan would jump at the chance to help in the shop, Vi. She did all

right before when you were helping our Beryl after she miscarried. With her husband away in France, Tess is desperate for money. She's a good worker." May waited and when her daughter didn't speak, added, "And now that our Eric's keeping an eye on your father, I'll be all right. Eric won't be going anywhere after failing his medical."

Daphne nodded approval. "Well spoken, Mrs Gill. It *is* a good chance for your daughter to see a bit of life and help win the war."

May turned to her. "You'll—look after her properly? She's never been away from Lancashire before. I wouldn't want her to be lonely or unhappy."

"She'll live in my house and as there will soon be twenty other Aides, she definitely won't be lonely."

They both turned to Vi, who was looking stunned.

"Well?" Daphne asked gently. "Do you want to come with me?"

Vi opened and shut her mouth then swallowed hard and looked at her mother. "Are you sure?"

"Yes. I'll miss you, but it'll make me that happy to see you get a chance like this." She reached out for her daughter's hand again. "Do it, love. Don't let this opportunity slip by."

Vi turned a face glowing with excitement towards Daphne. "Then I accept, Lady Bingham. And thank you."

Daphne stood up. "Can you be ready to leave tomorrow?"

Vi gasped then nodded.

"I'll pick you up tomorrow morning about eight o'clock, then. I'm driving down to London and you'll probably find it easiest to come with me." She turned to May Gill. "Thank you so much for letting me have your daughter. I can guess what this will cost you."

The two older women shook hands.

Vi stood there like someone frozen to the spot till her mother nudged her, then she moved forward to show their visitor out.

After her ladyship's car had driven away, they made no attempt to open the shop. Going back inside they locked the door, then looked at one another.

With a sob, Vi flung her arms round her mother. "I don't know how I'll ever thank you for this."

"It's your big chance. I couldn't bear you to turn it down," May held her daughter at arm's length and studied her face for a moment as if memorising it, then gave her a little push. "Now, there's a lot to do. You'd better go and fetch Tess to help out. Her mother will look after the little lasses and the son's in school. Then you'll have to do some washing and bring down that old trunk of mine from the attic. It's still sturdy enough, even if it is scratched. And—"

Someone hammered at the shop door and May moved towards it. "I'll serve in the shop and if there's a rush, they'll just have to wait their turn. It'll take you all your time to get ready."

For once, Vi let someone else tell her what to do. Bemused, still not believing this could be happening to her, she left the shop and hurried along the street to her friend's.

Tess opened the door and smiled at Vi. "You don't usually come calling at this time of day, love. I hope nothing's wrong."

"Something's come up—it's good news, though—and we need your help."

Tess held the door open and Vi walked in. Her friend's little daughter was playing on the rag rug and a baby was crawling nearby. The whole place was immaculately clean, if

sparsely furnished.

Vi didn't waste any time but explained what had happened, ending, "I can only do it if we get someone to help Mam in the shop. Do you want the job?"

Tess gaped at her for a minute. "You're going to London?"

"Yes." She gestured to the children. "Can your mother look after them for you?"

Her friend beamed. "Yes! We could do with the money an' I like working in the shop."

"You couldn't start today, could you?"

Tess gave her a cracking hug. "Give me half an hour to get my mam."

Vi walked out, feeling as if the world had turned upside down. After a moment's hesitation, she went to find Eric and share the news with him. He was just as important as Tess in her new plans.

He stared at her, lips pursed, then nodded slowly. "It'll be a good thing for you, that. An' I'll keep an eye on Dad for you, don't worry."

"Thanks."

He nodded and walked away.

She smiled as she watched him go. You'd think words cost money, he was so sparing with them. But it didn't matter. He'd look after their mother and keep their father in check.

She hurried off to call on her sister Beryl and let her know what was happening. Not that Beryl would be much use to Mam, because she and their father didn't get on and she refused to have anything to do with him. But still, it was only right to let her know. Vi didn't see her sister very often because the shop kept her busy till all hours but they'd always been fond of one another.

Joy flooded through her and she stood for a moment beaming at nothing, still unable to believe her luck. She was going to see the world she'd only read about before.