

# Family of Women

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# Part One

*1926–36*

## Chapter One

Violet was eleven when the first of the babies came.

A scrawny, cringing stranger appeared at their door and they had to peer out past Mom to see, she was such a big woman. She and her sister Rosina, who was eight, stood by the range, listening to the whispers.

'My sister . . . Might be able to manage when she's better . . . A few shillings, that's all we've got . . . They sent me to you . . .'

On the freezing air through the door came the smoke and stink of the metal-bashing factories and the sweet sawdust from the timber yard.

Violet's mother, Bessie was a strapping matron of thirty-four. She stood with her hands on her hips in her white, starched apron, her face hard as granite, lording it over this poor woman. Bessie was gaffer of the yard here, and she knew it. Everyone looked to Bessie Wiles, but by God you didn't want to cross her. She'd take her time to answer if she wanted.

'I might be able to,' she said at last.

After a few questions – the sick mother of the child lived round in Summer Lane – she said, 'All right. Give it 'ere,' and held out her arms.

The visitor said 'Thank you' twice over in a groveling voice and Violet knew her mother had never seen the woman before and wondered why she had come here.

It was only when Mom turned that they saw the baby, a pale, odd-looking thing. Its head seemed too big, and was topped with a fuzz of gingery hair.

Rosina ran straight up and peered at it. 'A babby! Whose is it?'

Violet held back, wary of Bessie's beefy, slapping hands and bullying tongue, and the cat o' nine tails she kept fixed to her belt. Violet was a frail girl, coltishly thin, with pale, almost luminous skin, straggly blonde hair and sad, grey eyes.

She saw a new glow in her mother's eyes.

'It's a little wench. Miserable scrap she is – look at the size of her! The mom's been taken bad so we're looking after. There're worse ways of earning a few bob. Don't go poking her, Rosina, you'll wake her.'

Marigold came downstairs then and joined in staring at the red-haired baby. Charlie was out playing with his pals. Marigold and Charlie were twins, two years older than Violet, but Marigold wasn't quite 'all there', was what Mom said. 'She'll never amount to much.' She said that too, as if Marigold was a stone with no feeling. Violet saw some flicker of hungry emotion in Marigold's dark eyes and she clung on at her mother's side. Marigold couldn't seem to get enough of the baby.

'You going to give 'er your titty, Mom?'

Marigold had been old enough to see her mother feed Rosina, and Mrs Cameron next door was seldom without a child hanging off her little pimple breasts.

Bessie gave a harsh laugh, her big body quivering. 'Ooh no, I'm past all that, bab, more's the pity!' Violet had once heard her saying to Mrs Cameron and Mrs Davis out in the yard that after Rosina she'd had it 'all taken away'. She said it in a low, mournful voice, with a big sigh from the depths of her. Mrs Davis said that

she wished *she* could bleeding well have it all taken away too, that all these babbies would be the death of her, but Bessie looked at her with tears in her eyes. It was the only time Violet had seen Mom overcome like that.

'Ooh no, Clara – my Jack – God rest him – always liked me with a big belly on me and a babby in my arms. Nothing like it.'

'You daint lose any of yours though, Bess,' Mrs Davis said. 'Bring 'em into the world and watch 'em fade away – that's when it does for you.'

With a grunt, Bessie knelt down on the rag rug on the rough brick floor, barking out orders as usual. 'Pass my shawl over, Marigold, and we'll lay her on it for a bit, have a look over her. Violet – get the kettle on.'

Violet did as she was commanded, then looked grimly down at the child. She didn't want the puny thing there. There was barely enough to go round as it was.

'Mom. How long's it got to stay? *Mom?*'

But Bessie wasn't listening.

Marigold knelt over the baby. Her black hair was chopped into a bob, chin-length, parted severely down the right side and yanked back from her face with a couple of kirby-grips. She stared and stared.

Rosina, baby of the family herself, stood twiddling her long plaits, full of questions and jack-in-the-box energy. No one could ever miss the fact that Rosina was there. Violet stayed back, feeling outside it all, seeing her mother's thick, stockinged calves and the worn heels of her shoes as she knelt over the child.

'Mom?'

'Oh, shurrup, Violet – stop keeping on!' Bessie was peeling back the rags in which the baby was wrapped.

‘Don’t see why we have to have it,’ Violet said sulkily. ‘It’s ugly.’

‘Not half as ugly as you were. And it’s a girl, not an it.’

‘What’s her name?’ Rosina asked.

‘The woman never said.’ Bessie knelt back on her haunches. ‘We’ll have to think of summat. What about Daisy? Marigold – there’s a tanner in the jug up there – run over to Mrs Bigley’s and ask her for a tin of Carnation. I’ll have to feed her, soon as she wakes.’

Marigold followed her orders, as usual.

Bessie scooped the child off the floor and stood looking at her, deaf to anyone else. She started humming a little tune and carried her through to the back, with Rosina following as if the baby was a magnet. Rosy wasn’t frightened of Mom.

Violet stood scowling in the front room, in her old dress that was too short, socks sagging down round her ankles. She stuck her thumb in her mouth. As usual, she felt invisible.

## *Chapter Two*

Daisy was the first in a long line.

There was nothing official about it, not then. In the seething, over-populated slum houses of north Birmingham there was many a mother at the end of her tether, worn down by having child after child. Bessie made her name in the district.

'Take the babby round to Bessie Wiles – number two, back of sixteen in Spring Street. She'll have it off you for a bit. And her house is clean as a pin.'

She was already a tough heroine of survival in their eyes. There was Bessie, widowed at twenty-six with four to bring up, worked like a Trojan, up cleaning pubs before dawn, taking in washing, carding buttons and pins for the factories. All the energy in the world, while weaker vessels fell along the way. And everyone came to her for advice. She had the neighbourhood just where she wanted them – respectful, fearful and under her thumb.

Bessie took in the babies of mothers who died birthing them, or were taken with infections or plain worn out. She kept them until they went back to their families, or handed them over to the orphanage and was paid for her trouble.

That wasn't the first time they had had other children living in the house. Bessie had once taken in some of Mrs Davis's children. Mrs Davis, a weak, cringing woman,

lived two doors away then, and life was one long struggle. They were 'three-up' houses, with two tiny bedrooms on the second floor and cockroach-infested attics, and Mrs Davis had eleven children, nine of them boys, a wastrel of a husband and her father-in-law lodged with them as well. For two years, off and on, during the Great War, Bessie had taken the two girls in every night and they slept top to toe with Violet and Rosina.

'You're golden, Bessie,' Mrs Davis frequently said, with whining gratitude. 'I don't know what I'd do without you, that I don't.'

'Oh, I know what it's like in a big family, Clara, Bessie would say, magnanimously. 'What are neighbours for, bab, if not to help?'

Violet was four when the Davis children started sleeping in her bed. They were wriggly, vexing girls, prone to itchy suppurating rashes. Violet could remember the feel of little Ethel Davis's freezing cold feet if she stretched out, and Florrie Davis wet the bed. The room always stank of wee and every morning when they woke the mattress was freezing cold and wet. She was overjoyed when the Davises did a moonlight flit to dodge the landlord and she could sleep in a dry bed again without Ethel's scratchy toenails.

Now it seemed that a whole parade of babies couldn't do without Bessie either. As fast as one was sent off to a new home a new one arrived, and at times there were as many as three at once. Bessie rose to the occasion magnificently. She got Uncle Clarence, her brother who lived with them, to build cradles out of apple boxes. She knitted coloured squares for blankets. There were always kettles of water on for cleaning out babies' bottles and Bessie was seldom without a child in her arms. All life seemed to revolve round her.



Marigold and Charlie were thirteen then, and Bessie made a decision. One evening as they sat over tea in the sputtering gaslight, with a baby asleep in the corner, she said, 'I've been thinking about our Marigold, Clarence. There ain't no point in her stopping on at school - 'er's never going to be one for books and learning, not the way she is. You can stop at home and give me a hand from now on, Mari.'

Marigold looked dreamily up from her plate of liver and onions, barely seeming to realize what was being said. There was a thick streak of gravy down the front of her blouse. Violet knew that Marigold didn't like school. She could just about read and write but she was slow in every way, couldn't keep up with the running about, and all the teasing from the others.

'I don't know,' Clarence said. He ruffled a hand through his receding hair as he often did when Bessie asked his opinion. He was as thin and weedy as she was big and ebullient. Even in his early thirties he seemed like an old man, sitting there in his shirtsleeves, shoulders hunched. 'We'll have the bloke keep coming round from the Board if you keep her home.'

'Oh, I'll soon see to him,' Bessie said, drawing in a fierce breath that expanded her enormous bosom even further under her black frock. 'You'd like to help with the babbies, Marigold, wouldn't you?'

'Can I stop at home an' all?' Rosina asked.

'Don't talk *stupid*,' Charlie sneered at her.

Rosy stuck her tongue out at him when Mom wasn't looking and Charlie gave her one of his stodgy looks. He was like an old man as well, Violet thought.

Clarence wiped his chin on the back of his hand. 'Whatever you think's best, Bess.' That was what he always said in the end.

So at thirteen, Marigold stopped going to school and stayed at home and learned about looking after babies. She never said if she cared either way. In any case, Violet never heard anyone ask her.