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*The Girl from  
Kingsland Market*

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London W1F 8AN  
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First published in Great Britain by Allison & Busby in 2019.

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A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

First Edition

ISBN 978-0-7490-2488-8

Typeset in 11/16 pt Sabon LT Pro by  
Allison & Busby Ltd.

The paper used for this Allison & Busby publication has been produced from trees that have been legally sourced from well-managed and credibly certified forests.

Printed and bound by  
CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon, CR0 4YY

# *Chapter One*

*Southampton 1920*

Phoebe Collins stood beside her fruit and vegetable stall in Kingsland Market, rubbing her cold hands together. Her mittens were not enough to totally keep out the sharp chill in the late November air, but she needed to have her fingers free to pick up her wares and serve her customers. She straightened the cabbages, polished the apples until the skins shone, moved the carrots around, picked out the few that were shrivelled and threw them into the basket beneath the stall. These, and other wasted bits, she would slip to the children who came scavenging at the end of the day to help feed their dirt-poor families.

This had been her father's stall for many years, and she'd helped to run it with him, but he'd lost his life in the Great War at the Battle of the Somme and she'd run it alone ever since. The war had been over for two years

now, and times were hard. At nineteen, she'd had no other choice. She was good at selling and had managed to make a living – albeit a small one – ever since. Her mother took in washing to add to their income at the same time looking after her brother, Timothy, or Tim as they called him. He was ten and still at school, but on a Saturday, he'd come along and help her.

Kingsland Market was set up in a square, well lit from the surrounding street lights, with many different stalls. Some were selling second-hand clothes, there was the Jones family with their pots and pans and kitchen equipment and Milly Coates with her home-made cakes and jams. On one stall Len Black, a cobbler, was at work with a boot over a last, hammering on a new set of soles, and there was Tony Jackson with his ironmongery. There were others with various goods and some selling fruit and vegetables too, but there was a camaraderie between them all. The banter could be quite saucy sometimes, but everybody was there to make a living.

Next to Phoebe's stall was Marjory Simmons, or Marj as she was known, a middle-aged woman of ample proportions and a heart as big as her body. She sold second-hand clothes, but they had to be in good condition and she was very adamant about that.

'Bloody cold today, girl, ain't it? Proper brass monkey weather. Thank the Lord it ain't raining. 'Ere, I've got a 'alf decent jumper that would fit you. You can 'ave it for a tanner.' She held it up for Phoebe to see. It was cream, made of heavy wool, with a polo neck. Phoebe looked at it and thought it was ideal for keeping out the winter weather. She handed over a sixpence and took it.

‘Thanks, Marj, it’s just what I need.’ She put it to one side to wash and wear when it was dry.

At night Phoebe would take down the canvas top that covered her stall, then wheel it to a lock-up she’d rented on the edge of the market, where it would be secure until the following morning. Once a week, she’d go along to the wholesalers to buy her stock and barter ferociously about the prices.

She and her family lived in a two-up two-down council house in a tough area of the town. Not that it seemed that way to her, after all she’d lived there all her life so to her it was simply home. It wasn’t that she was unaware of her surroundings. She knew that in the next street there was a brothel in a house rented by two girls, and she also knew to keep clear of the Stanley brothers who lived in the area and worked in the market. Their stall was full of second-hand goods bought from house sales. Lamps, furniture, china, bric-a-brac and a few antiques. Anything that would bring in a shilling or two. They were small-time villains, into anything illegal that would bring in money, but they were cunning, clever and ruthless. Always one step ahead of the law. Percy was the eldest at thirty. A dour-looking man who seldom smiled. He would look at you with a steely glare that was enough to chill your blood. His brother, Arthur, was twenty-three, reasonably good-looking with an eye for the ladies, but who had to do as he was told by his dictatorial brother.

Phoebe, aware that she was alone at night, carrying money after she closed, was prepared for all eventualities and always carried a long hatpin in the lapel of her coat, and hidden on her stall was a small cudgel, just in case of trouble.

It was Friday, pay day for those who were employed, and tomorrow was their busiest day, with families stocking up for the week ahead. Early every Saturday morning a butcher's horse-driven van would arrive and set up. Chickens and rabbits would hang from hooks at the open back of the van; on a long table in front would be displayed cuts of meat laid out ready for sale. Those who could afford it bought decent cuts, others would buy up scrag ends of mutton and bones to make a broth.

The upper classes would shop in the town centre, but Kingsland Market was where those who had little money or those looking for a bargain would do their buying.

'Mind your backs!' came a cry in a gruff male voice as Percy Stanley pushed a barrow through the middle of the market towards his stall. Sometimes the brothers would use a horse-driven vehicle when they had furniture to sell after going to a house clearance or sale. They would give the horse a nosebag to keep it quiet and would often have to clear up its mess with a shovel at the end of the day.

Every now and then the police would walk through the market, chatting to the stallholders and always stopping longer at the brothers' stall, which they searched for stolen goods. Percy would take delight in baiting them, knowing that there was nothing untoward for sale. Any stolen goods were well hidden elsewhere and trading for those was done very carefully at night, in different locations.

Whereas the police would exchange friendly banter with most of the traders, with the Stanley brothers their demeanour was quite different. They had no respect for these men, and it was a challenge among the men in the

force to be the ones to eventually catch the brothers in their illegal deals and put them behind bars.

Percy was being his usual belligerent self as the constables looked through the goods on sale. ‘Find anything dodgy, did you, then?’

One of the men looked at him with distaste. ‘You’ll end up behind bars one day, Percy. It will be my pleasure to see you locked away. Inside you may learn some manners and respect.’

Percy just laughed.

‘Every villain makes a mistake one day, and on that day, I’ll be just behind you!’ snapped one of the policemen as he walked away.

Percy just muttered a few expletives as he watched the men leave.

Eventually it was time to close. Phoebe took down the canvas cover from its poles, laid it on top of her stall. She gave a bag of fruit and vegetables to a scruffy little lad who was looking longingly at the fruit and was hovering nearby, then she wheeled her cart away, locked up for the night and walked home.

Her mother, Mary was folding laundry when she opened the door and stepped into the room. The air felt damp from the washing and Phoebe put some wooden logs into the small grate of the range to dry out the room and made herself and her mother a cup of tea, pouring the boiling water from the kettle on the hob over the fire of the blackleaded stove. Tim was sitting at the table eating a bowl of hearty chicken and vegetable soup with a thick slice of bread and dripping.

Phoebe sat beside the fire, holding her frozen hands out to the warmth, rubbing them together to help the circulation. It was good to be inside after such a long cold day. She removed her high-buttoned boots and then her stockings, plus a pair of socks, pouring some of the hot water into a bowl, adding a little cold water, then putting her feet into the bowl. She sat back in the chair and sighed.

‘I can’t tell you just how good that feels. I’ve not been able to feel my feet all afternoon.’

‘I know how you feel,’ said her mother. ‘No good me trying to dry the clothes in the backyard, they just freeze solid. The spring can’t come soon enough for me. Get yourself some soup, that’ll help warm you.’

Phoebe did so and sat at the table beside Tim. ‘You going to give me a hand in the morning?’

He smiled at her. He loved being in the market. He was a good-looking boy and polite and the ladies loved him. Marj spoilt him whenever he was there, slipping him sweets. It gave the lad something to look forward to.

‘Of course,’ he said, ‘make sure to wake me when you get up.’

‘I will – you wrap up warm. I don’t want you freezing to death!’ She rubbed his tousled hair as she spoke. He was a good lad and Phoebe hoped he’d be able to find a decent job when he eventually left school. He was bright and, in her mind, being a market trader wasn’t good enough for him. He was worth a better future.

‘Best get off to bed, Tim. We have an early start in the morning. I’ll not be long behind you.’

She and her mother shared a bed and Tim had the other room. There was no bathroom, so on a Sunday,



when the market was closed, they would haul in the tin bath, fill it with water and take it in turns to bathe. The toilet was outside and on such cold days, no one was in a rush to use it, hanging on until the last moment. In the market they used public toilets, which were a deal more comfortable, housed in a brick building instead of a shed, which let in the cold.

Phoebe, once warm, sat down and ate; it had been a long day and she was hungry. She eventually rose from her chair. 'I'm tired so I'm off to bed, Mum. I'll buy some meat tomorrow for the weekend. If we make a stew, it'll last us a couple of days. Do you need anything else?'

'No, love, that'll do. I'll be up in a while after I've ironed these sheets.' She covered the kitchen table with a heavy cloth and put out two flat irons, placing one on top of the stove to heat up. 'I'll try not to disturb you.'

Phoebe chuckled. 'You'd have a job! I'm so tired I could sleep on a clothes line.' So saying, she went into the kitchen, swilled her face, cleaned her teeth, then made her way upstairs, undressed and climbed into bed, snuggled under the blankets, knowing that tomorrow would be a busy day.