



Katie Flynn

The Top Ten
Sunday Times
Bestselling Author

writing as
JUDITH
SAXTON

The Arcade

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About the Book

For the shopkeepers who work in the Arcade in the seaside town of Haisby, life is not always easy.

Diane Hopgood has moved from the bright lights of London to start a fashion boutique, expecting a quiet life, she finds both love and drama.

Anthea, her assistant, has finally managed to free herself of the dark memories of her father's sadistic abuse. But a terrible event changes everything for her.

Marj cooks and waits tables at the wine bar, under the watchful eye of Martin, a chef of undoubted genius, despite his passion for women. Why has he never noticed Marj, though?

As the shopkeepers struggle to make a living, each of them finds their life changing over the course of one eventful year.

About the Author

Katie Flynn is the author of over forty much-loved novels and has lived for many years in the north-west. A compulsive writer, she started with short stories and articles and many of her early stories were broadcast on Radio Merseyside. For the past few years, she has had to cope with ME but has continued to write.

Also available by Katie Flynn

A Liverpool Lass
The Girl from Penny Lane
Liverpool Taffy
The Mersey Girls
Strawberry Fields
Rainbow's End
Rose of Tralee
No Silver Spoon
Polly's Angel
The Girl from Seaforth Sands
The Liverpool Rose
Poor Little Rich Girl
The Bad Penny
Down Daisy Street
A Kiss and a Promise
Two Penn'orth of Sky
A Long and Lonely Road
The Cuckoo Child
Darkest Before Dawn
Orphans of the Storm
Little Girl Lost
Beyond the Blue Hills
Forgotten Dreams
Sunshine and Shadows
Such Sweet Sorrow
A Mother's Hope
In Time for Christmas
Heading Home
A Mistletoe Kiss
The Lost Days of Summer
Christmas Wishes
The Runaway
A Sixpenny Christmas

The Forget-Me-Not Summer
A Christmas to Remember
Time to Say Goodbye

Available by Katie Flynn writing as Judith Saxton

You Are My Sunshine
First Love, Last Love
Someone Special
Still Waters
A Family Affair
All My Fortunes
Chasing Rainbows
The Arcade
Harbour Hill
Sophie
Jenny Alone

The Arcade

Katie Flynn writing
as Judith Saxton



arrow books

For all the girls who worked with me at the Coffee Pot Restaurant, Wrexham, but especially for Margaret Edwards whose boundless energy and enthusiasm, sense of humour and sweet nature made all our lives easier – to say nothing of her laugh! Thanks, Mags.

Chapter One

When Sam visited the Arcade for the first time the sun had been shining. It had picked out the subtle shades in the old paving stones, made the bow-fronted windows sparkle, and it had brought the brilliant May green of the churchyard at the far end of the Arcade into focus so that the covered way had seemed an enchanted place, a pathway to romance and sunshine after the grey and brown bustle of Lord Street.

That was why he had bought the wine bar. He had sent Martin down by himself a few days later to take a look and Martin, who had gone on a grey day, had been doubtful. But then they had visited Haisby together and the sun had been shining again. It had not seemed to matter that the Arcade led only to Cloister Row and the church, that Cloister Row itself had no fascinating shops but was a meandering little cobbled street with the churchyard railings on one side and flats and offices on the other. It was a dead-end, what was more, leading not to the sea, which would have been an attraction, but merely to a chest-high, white-painted cob wall which stopped the unwary from descending abruptly down a fifteen-foot cliff onto the pebbly beach beneath.

Today however, twelve months later, Sam turned onto Lord Street, enjoying a rare rush of optimism along with the warmth of the early sun on his back. He strode along the empty, six o'clock street, aware that he was in good time and ahead of the girls, suddenly filled with enthusiasm for the wine bar, the sandwich delivery service which he and Martin had started, and for life itself. It would all turn out all right, the wine bar would suddenly become the

fashionable place to eat and drink, he and Martin would become millionaires and never have to worry again about paying the wages during January, or replacing staff, or selling off unpopular vintages.

The Arcade was bounded at either end by tall, wrought-iron gates. Sam unlocked them, swung them back, and then went down to the wine bar to open up for the girls.

The sandwich delivery service meant that in order to get the delivery girls away on time the sandwich-makers had to be in the kitchen by seven buttering, slicing, and slapping sandwiches into bags. No matter how the wine bar might falter, the delivery service thrived. Three bright, cheery girls left Sam's Place each weekday morning, baskets piled high with food, and returned at lunchtime, their bags bursting with cash.

So now, Sam unlocked the kitchen door and switched on the lights, then made for the cellar stairs. Marj would be in quite soon, she was always early, but until she arrived Sam would toil up and down the steps bringing up the sandwich fillings which were kept in the fridges downstairs.

As he worked, Sam reflected that if they had only got the delivery service and no restaurant, they would probably have been making a fortune, but the lease of the place was simply too heavy to support even a thriving business when a slow starter, like the wine bar, was part of the deal. But still ... Sam squared his shoulders and began to arrange the fillings along the back of the workbench ... this was only their first year and in fact, though they had seen the wine bar for the first time twelve months ago, it had been September before they moved in. Plenty of time to make a name for ourselves, Sam consoled himself. Plenty of time.

A shout and a clatter at the Lord Street end of the Arcade told Sam that Tony, the baker, had delivered. The piles of loaves, baguettes and rolls were piled up on a table left out for the purpose, but Sam always hurried along and got them in. You never knew, there were some pretty odd

people about even at this hour, and dogs, too. Once, a baguette had rolled out of the wire tray and been christened by a leg-lifting dog. Sam had been wary ever since.

He was halfway back to the kitchen again when he remembered that sunny days, in fact, were not necessarily good for business. The punters did not want to leave the sunshine for the glassed-in Arcade, let alone for the darker interior of the wine bar. Martin, who was artistic as well as being an inspired cook, had done out the big upstairs functions room with paper seagulls suspended from the ceiling on fine thread so that they moved in every breeze, but even this eye-catching decor was not enough to lure the punters away from the MacDonalds and Wimpys and the various Hamburger Heavens which dotted the town. Few indeed, so far, were the holidaymakers who wanted an excellent meal in a quiet setting. They preferred to spend their money on greasy chips and burgers, on gassy beer or virulently coloured pop.

Sam minded all this more for Martin than himself. Martin was his twenty-seven-year-old nephew, the only son of his beloved elder brother, Edward. When Edward had known he was dying he had asked Sam to keep an eye on Martin, and with good reason, for Martin, though a genius, was also a hard drinker with the unreliable temper which sometimes seems to afflict gifted chefs. Consequently, within three years of his father's death, Martin had lost half-a-dozen excellent jobs. He had insulted a valued customer at the Savoy, thrown knives on board the *QE2*, lain on the kitchen floor of the Ritz in both a drunken stupor and the remains of his famous sherry trifle, tried to seduce a very rich, big-bosomed American lady ... the list went on and on, with Martin repentant each time ... until it happened again.

Sam had done his best but it had been difficult because his wife, Joanne, had hated Martin. It turned out she had

not been all that fond of Sam, either, since she left him, bored by his addiction to gardening and birdwatching, deriding his steady but poorly paid job in the drawing office of an engineering firm. Joanne had ambition, and a strong sex drive. Sam had neither. He had quickly begun to view bed as a penance and had become adept at falling asleep as soon as his head touched the pillow. He knew he had been a bad husband and his chief emotion, when Joanne ran off with the man next door, had been relief. Now he could concentrate on doing his best for Martin. In fact, even buying the business had been a sort of escape, because the man next door had been married to the woman next door, and first she swamped Sam with reproaches and bitterness and then she began to insinuate that they could do a lot worse than to comfort each other. Sam, terrified, sold up and began to look for a restaurant even before Martin had slid under the kitchen table at his latest hotel. Within a month they had discovered Haisby-on-sea, found the Arcade, the wine bar, and the little house on Harbour Way.

Now, Sam staggered across the kitchen with the bread, laid the loaves in their appointed places, then made his way out into the Arcade once more, picking up the big yard broom as he went. Despite the fact that it was Monday morning and the Arcade did not open on a Sunday, the place was a mess. At the Lord Street end it was amazing how much litter gathered. The idlers and drunks who threw tins, chip papers and worse into the Arcade could not manage a really good hurl so they posted their unwanted packaging absently between the wrought-iron bars, as though in the honest belief that the Arcade had been built as an enormous waste-bin especially for their convenience. And convenience was the word, Sam thought resignedly, eyeing a large puddle. Some enterprising soul had piddled in a fine arc through the gates; he would have to go back and fetch a mop and disinfectant. He didn't want his girls facing *that* first thing in the morning.

Sam fetched the mop and bucket and returned to his task. He tried not to remember the last Bank Holiday, May Day, which had dawned cold and overcast and had been a financial disaster. Even though it had come out quite nice after about eleven, no one had wanted a meal. They had set out late from their homes and on arrival in Haisby had bought takeaways; toffee apples, bags of popcorn, chips. The wine bar had only done fourteen meals all day, a disaster. Sam and Martin had cleaned down the kitchen in depressed silence, scarcely daring to catch each other's eyes; all their hopes had come to nought, the bright optimism of their fellow traders had proved false.

Clearing up that night, when Martin had stomped off home, Sam wielded his big brush on a sea of chip papers and lolly wrappers, for the eaters of takeaway food are prodigal with their rubbish, and wondered desperately if he and Martin should lower their standards, go for chips and mushy peas and brightly coloured drinks. But it would be the last straw for Martin's hopes of beating the twin demons of drink and depression, to see the one thing he did excellently well brushed aside. No, they would struggle on for two years, as they had promised themselves when they first opened the place, and then see how things were.

Sam finished mopping and was about to make his way back down the Arcade when a bus screeched to a stop on Lord Street and a pair of long legs with a brief blue skirt above them descended onto the pavement. It was Marj, the morning manageress, getting off the bus with all the energy which Sandra, getting off the bus in her wake, lacked.

'Cheers, Fred, see you tomorrer,' Marj shouted, giving the bus driver the benefit of her wide smile and then turning her large, grey-green gaze on Sam. 'Hi, Sam! What a day, eh? Wish it was my holidays! Had a good mind not to come in, nearly phoned to say I'd broke me leg!'

Marj threw back her head and laughed, high and clear, a blackbird's shout. Behind her Sandra wobbled along on heels so high she looked thin as a rake.

'Morning, girls. You go and get started. I'm just clearing up.'

'Sure will, Sam.'

The two girls click-clicketed past, high heels tapping, smelling of soap and talc, clad in summer dresses today instead of the usual jeans. They would want to go out in their coffee break and sit on the tombstones in the churchyard, stripping off as many of their garments as they dared – and that would be a good many – to soak up the sun.

Sam finished mopping and was following them along the paving when a bicycle's soft tick-tick made him draw prudently to one side. It was Poppy Bates, the third member of the team, who cycled in to work from the outskirts of town each day.

Sam, flattened against the wall, shook his head at her as she tore past.

'Go carefully, Poppy, there's a good girl.'

'Hi, Sam. Not late, am I?'

'Not yet.'

Poppy grinned and hurled herself off the bicycle. She was a small girl, just sixteen, on a youth training scheme, and Sam had a soft spot for her. She was always dropping things and burning things, but she was keen to right her mistakes and worked late when they were busy with never a word of complaint. Furthermore, so zealous was she in chasing non-payers to breathlessly point out their mistake that even Martin, who was harder on the girls than the soft-hearted Sam, could be heard to make excuses for Poppy.

'She's a good cook when she gets things right,' Martin said as Poppy took a perfect soufflé from the oven – and dropped it, excruciatingly, on her own sandalled feet. 'But

until she gets things right all the time she's a small disaster area.'

Marj was the efficient one. Smoothly, without a hiccup, she ran the sandwich side of the business, her voice breaking up into the raucous, unbelievable laugh which could be heard a mile out to sea in a gale. She lived a bus ride from work and went home when the sandwiches were made and the fillings for the next day prepared, then returned to help with lunches and to cook, so that Sam could have a bit of time to himself before they started evening meals – when they did evening meals, which was not often.

Sandy was a dreamer. She seemed to attract rotters and sometimes she made a batch of sandwiches all wrong, or tipped pepper into cake mix.

'Will you leave off a-dreaming, gal Sandy!' Marj would shout, putting things right at her usual speed. 'Come to your senses, my woman, and give that feller a knuckle sandwich, which he richly deserve!'

But Sam knew Sandy never would. She was made to be trodden on. A willowy blonde with big blue eyes and a soft mouth, Sam sometimes had to fight an urge to shout at her himself, and he was not a cruel man.

Now, Poppy abandoned her bike in the cellars and rushed up the stairs to take her place at the workbench. The girls moved into their routine, buttering, slicing, filling. And Sam began his own morning tasks which he could, he reflected, have done in his sleep. He slid chickens into the oven to roast and put forty eggs into a pan, then stood the pan on the stove and went into the restaurant to wipe down the tables. Then he heaved a sack of potatoes up from the vegetable room and began to chip them whilst around him the girls talked, shouted to him above the sound of the radio and commented, often rudely, on the news items which interspersed the music.

It was just another Monday morning, Sam reflected as he finished a pile of chips and put them in water. And next week was the Spring Bank Holiday when he would have to pay double time and pray the day started fine, with a sharp shower at around noon to drive the punters indoors for a meal.

But things could be worse. Martin had only been the worse for drink twice in the last eight months, and both had been high risk times, Christmas and New Year. And although Martin had got rather furious a few times the girls had always managed to calm him down before he had damaged a customer, or the small but growing reputation of Sam's Place. If only more customers would come, Sam thought yearningly, plugging the kettle in for the girls' morning cuppa, then we'd be able to relax a bit.

'Kettle a-goin', Sam?' Marj shouted as he turned away from putting out the mugs. 'Right, then you git off home, kick that lazy Martin outer his pit! We'll be ready now when them sales girls arrive.'

Sam knew that Marj and her girls would manage equally well without him, that his presence was helpful but not essential, but he enjoyed the quiet of the early morning, the companionship, being ahead of himself with preparations for lunchtime. So now he made three mugs of tea, handed them round, and then went out into the Arcade and headed slowly down towards Cloister Row. He walked down to the sea-wall each morning, sometimes before his kitchen work and sometimes after, just to make sure ... of what? He did not know, but it was a soothing ritual and one he would not have missed.

Cloister Row was quiet, only the pigeons strutting and cooing on its cobbles, the offices shut, the flats above sleeping still. Sunshine spilled, golden, on the church, the gravestones, the long, unkempt grass. It fell slowly, like honey, through the emerald green of the new leaves on the trees which overhung the railings.

Sam strolled the length of the little street and then leaned against the wall, staring down. Below, the sea crept across the sand but the tide was well out today so no white-topped wavelets licked and creamed against the pebbles which mounded up into a ridge at the top of the shore. No one walked down there, either, not a footprint disturbed the shining strand. Seagulls mewed against the blue though, dipping, gliding, then coming in to land, to squabble over cast-down crusts or the remainder of an icecream cone.

Sam watched for a moment, then turned and retraced his steps. He reached the Arcade and slowed once more, glancing in the windows of the other shops as he passed in a way which would be impossible, later, when the traders were in. Every morning he did this, trying to decide which shops were an asset to Sam's Place and which made life more difficult.

Waves, the hairdresser, was always clean and pleasant and brought a lot of trade into the Arcade with its huge mirrors, comfortable chairs and bright young girls. Thank God for Emma and Jenny, bustling about with their scissors, cutting, blow-waving, perming, sending out for cups of tea and sandwiches. The two girls were both in their mid-twenties, capable and brisk. They came into the wine bar sometimes, ate interesting food and recommended friends and customers to try Sam's Place.

If only everywhere were like Waves, Sam thought wistfully, passing onto the Health Food shop next door. Run by Barry and Lana Johnson, it should have been a pleasant sight but wasn't. The window was full of bags of dried peas and beans, with a display of muesli bars and alternative chocolate. Sam counted three dead flies and sighed over the quantity of dust on the bags and boxes. It was a pity because the Johnsons were so enthusiastic, believing in their products, eating tofu and natural yoghurt and then sneaking over to the wine bar for a piece of Martin's famous Mississippi Mud Pie, or a crepe suzette.

The Johnsons were animal lovers and had a variety of tatty strays which came into the Arcade now and then, lifting a leg against someone's clean frontage or squeezing between the churchyard railings to defecate amongst the tombstones. Barry and Lana, a childless couple, loved the dogs the way they would have loved kids of their own, so it was more than one's life was worth to criticise a single one of the animals.

I wonder if a hint about the Johnson's window might bear fruit, Sam asked himself, moving on. But what was the point? Lana and Barry were doing their best, it would only hurt their feelings. Best let well alone.

Treat Yourself came next. Caresse Mortland leased and ran it and she was, as she kept telling everyone, a fashionable woman, but somehow the window was a let-down. Sam did not care for Caresse, a husky-voiced bottle-blond, but he did think she could have made a better effort with her window. Today tall jars of soap jostled with a display of perfume, most of which was hidden by a paperchase of tissues and vari-coloured cottonwool, whilst a fan of combs and brushes completed the display.

Untidy, Sam thought dispassionately. Bitty, so that the eye drifted over the display, caught by nothing. He moved on, to the window which was right opposite his own so that customers, willy-nilly, looked out at it.

Bonner's, the old-fashioned gown-shop owned by Miss Violet and Miss Dulcie Bonner, whose faded, out-dated goods were scarcely ever bought, now came next. Sitting in the wine bar, Sam's customers must have shuddered at the sight of ancient pink corsets, loopy knickers and pairs of silk stockings which would have been a snip in the last War but which would never be bought now. It could not be good for trade, either his own or other people's, but Sam knew that the Miss Bonners were weary and wanted to retire. If they did perhaps someone would take over with modern,

nineteen-nineties dress-sense, with the ability to pull the shop round, make it pay.

Cheeky little mini-skirts on a boyish model, Sam dreamed. Blouses and shirts, crisp white, mouth-tingling lemon, sweet strawberry, flirting, in the Bonner window, with lean blue jeans, baggy denim culottes.

But it wouldn't happen whilst the Bonner sisters were in charge so he might as well forget it. And besides, next to Bonner's was the antique shop, run by Archie Pinter, a retired army officer. Archie always did well because he knew his stuff, advertised in the places that mattered and had no staff worries. His window gleamed, his stock-lists were up to date, and because he was a widower he had plenty of time for the place.

Also, of course, Archie had that much envied attribute, a window on Lord Street. So he did not have to entice people into the Arcade, they could look at his display as they passed.

Having admired the antique shop, Sam crossed the Arcade and looked into the only other shop on that side, for the wine bar took up all the rest of the space. Sam liked Elias, the tall, skinny man who owned and ran Glenarvon Antiquarian Books, and knew that the shop brought the wine bar a lot of custom, browsers who might buy a paperback or who spent a fortune on rare editions often came along to Sam's Place to read in comfort, sipping a coffee or having an early lunch.

Elias's window was beautiful, with rare books held open at their most enticing illustrations, books with beautiful covers closed, and many others displaying their titles. It always drew the eye, unlike some.

But Bonner's is bound to change hands one day, Sam told himself, stepping out into Lord Street and screwing his eyes up against the bright sunshine. And Lana and Barry will realise that a food shop must be clean. Even Caresse might pull her tights up and get a bit of order into the

chaos of her window. And anyway, Sam added to himself, walking briskly along the pavement, you're off-duty now, so just enjoy yourself and look forward to summer.

At the end of Lord Street Sam turned right and then left and he was on Harbour Way. It was a pretty road with the houses all very individual, facing out across the water. Sam and Martin lived halfway along, three doors down from the Bonner sisters. Their narrow house was painted white with the front door, windows and shutters deep blue. Sam swung the wooden gate open, took two strides, and was at the front door. He unlocked it and went inside, closing it firmly behind him.

Immediately he forgot the wine bar, the Arcade, and his worries. He thought only about this dear little house which he had lovingly decorated and furnished, and about Martin, snoring upstairs.

He and Martin were supposed to take turns to open up the Arcade in the mornings, but in practice it was always Sam. Why not? Sam was an early-bird, Martin a night-owl. Now, Sam made for the kitchen. Humming to himself, he got out the ingredients he would need for Martin's breakfast. He would do a grapefruit to start with in the beautiful cut-glass bowl which had once graced Archie's window. Then bacon, two eggs and fried tomatoes. He got the butter out of the fridge and put it on the table. By the time the food was cooked and the toast made the butter would have softened in the kitchen's warmth. Sam enjoyed spoiling Martin a bit, as he might have spoiled his own son had he had one, and it did Martin no harm.

Now, he lit the grill and slid four rounds of bread under it to toast, keeping a wary eye on it as he sliced tomatoes. Things were going well, he would start his own breakfast now. Martin was skinny despite working in kitchens, but Sam had to watch every calorie and anyway he did not have time to prepare two breakfasts with the loving care which he put into Martin's meal. Sam put an egg on to boil,

setting the pinger so that he didn't forget it, and then cut himself a round of bread. No butter. Not for a five-foot-ten, fourteen-stone man in his early forties.

Breakfast prepared, Sam put the food into the oven to keep warm and went to wake Martin. He drew back the curtains and Martin mumbled a token protest as the sunlight fell across his face.

'Hey, Sam, I'm asleep,' he said, as he said most mornings, and then sat up, stretched and smiled.

He was a skinny, red-haired, freckled young man, a good deal stronger than he looked, with the light greenish eyes and fair lashes which went with his colouring. He blushed easily and blinked a lot but he could be charming when he chose, and he chose now.

'Oh, Sam, sunshine! It's my afternoon off, too.'

Sam grinned. Martin's afternoons off usually occurred when the sun shone but Sam didn't mind. He'd never been much of a one for lying on the beach, he was happier in the garden or down on the shore with a rod, and you could do both those things just as well in foul weather as fair, or Sam could, anyway.

'That's right,' he said good-naturedly. 'Here's your grapefruit; I'll bring your cooked food through in a moment.'

Martin grinned and dug his spoon into the neatly segmented fruit.

'It's lovely,' he said through the first mouthful. 'Oh, ground coffee!'

Sam went out, smiling. Martin had ground coffee every morning, but he always remarked on it. He was a good lad.

Chapter Two

Diane Hopgood woke early, what with the sunshine and a certain amount of foreboding, but once she was properly awake the foreboding disappeared and nervous excitement took its place.

She had come to Haisby for a break, partly because she needed one and partly at her mother's suggestion. Her mother had been Anne Bonner before her marriage and was very fond of her aunts, and worried about them, too.

'You need a rest, dear, and your great-aunts have quite a large house,' she had assured her doubting daughter. 'I'm not asking you to do anything, just to have a look around, see what you think. They're rather old to be running the shop, you see, but it seems they have no choice. I really am worried.'

So Diane had come down for a few days, moving into the spare room at 39 Harbour Way, helping a bit about the house, enjoying the beach and the town. And had seen her aunts' seedy, old-fashioned shop and immediately realised that her mother was right to worry.

The few days became a week, then two, but still Diane hesitated. What could she do? She wanted to help, she had no desire to go back to her well paid London job. She could spare them a week or two, perhaps even a month, to see if she could get them straight, but the great-aunts themselves were an obstacle, because they felt they were taking advantage of her.

'A lovely girl like you, with a wonderful career, trying to help in our place?' Aunt Violet marvelled. 'Oh, Diane, dear, trade is very poor, you'd be bored.'

‘Poor? It’s non-existent,’ confirmed Aunt Dulcie. ‘Indeed, there are days when we don’t know which way to turn for ... but we couldn’t involve you, dear.’

But they had known they would, of course, as soon as Diane got to work on them, telling them she could straighten them out in a month or so, that she’d enjoy it, that she had been given leave of absence from her job for as long as she cared to take it. And very soon the protests had faded to a proviso that she give up and go home the moment she wanted to do so.

So here she was, lying in bed in the sunshine, when today she was going in to the shop for the first time, to take a long, hard look at it with a view to refurbishment.

Diane got out of bed and padded down to the bathroom. She took a chilly bath because the immersion heater had only been on half an hour, then dressed in her pink flying suit, a practical garment, tying back her mass of dark curls with pink ribbon. Then she slung her bag over her shoulder and pattered out of the room, across the landing and down the stairs. (The aunts seldom left their rooms before nine, the shop was never opened before ten, often later. She reached the kitchen, made herself a cup of tea and then looked at her watch. It said twenty to nine ... she might as well go, get an early start.

Outside, the morning was fresh still, the sun warm. Gulls swooped over the harbour, their querulous cries making Diane think of childhood holidays by the sea, when her only preoccupation had been wondering whether it would rain or shine.

At this hour there were only a sprinkling of people on Harbour Way but Lord Street, when she reached it, was at its busiest. Buses, cars, delivery vans and people hurrying to work blocked the road and the pavement, with the smell of hot engines and exhausts cancelling out the earlier freshness.

Diane glanced down the Arcade and decided to nip over to the market first and get a few flowers. She found some blooms on the first stall, a handful of lilac, white scented narcissus and some deep pink tulips, and made her way back across Lord Street, dodging the traffic with a true Londoner's indifference to personal safety, looking forward, now, to this new challenge.

Aunt Violet was openly relieved that Diane was helping; she did her best to keep the books, she said plaintively, but people were so strange. The VAT man couldn't believe they neither charged nor took VAT and had worried her so much she hadn't slept for three nights.

Aunt Dulcie was different. Fiercely independent, at seventy-two she did not want to be a burden to anyone. She had taken care of Violet, a mere seventy, all their lives and would not give up now. But if Diane really wanted to help, could bring the shop back into profitability, then she would be grateful.

'I'll help with the books,' Aunt Violet had said the previous evening, gazing at Diane over the baize table-cover with its bobbled fringe, as out-of-date as the Bonner shop itself. 'But there isn't much in them; trade has been so poor.'

'We muddle along,' Aunt Dulcie said. 'I keep telling the girl that VAT man was a crass young fool, but I admit lately I've bitterly regretted Arthur never saw fit to talk about business to either of us. If he'd explained I feel sure we'd never have got into such a state.'

Arthur had been Great-uncle Arthur, an accountant and a man with considerable business acumen. But he had died fifteen years ago and since then the sisters had muddled along, as Aunt Dulcie put it, without any real understanding of what they were doing.

Diane gained the pavement and saw the antique dealer polishing his window. She smiled but did not speak. Later, when she had more time, she would go along and introduce

herself to all the traders, but for the time being a smile would have to suffice.

She reached Bonner's and unlocked. The door creaked open as reluctantly, one would think, as if it had heard about new brooms and wanted none of them. But Diane, undeterred, went inside and shut the door after her. Then she went round the counter, stood behind it, and stared.

It was appalling, there was no doubt of that. Dust lay wherever the aunts could not reach, in the curves and curlicues of the fancy banister rail which led to the upper floor and in the niches of the over-ornate mahogany counter. When Diane walked over to the rail of woollens she found dust had gathered inexplicably on the garments and was ridged inside the hangers as well. What was more the saggy woollens looked secondhand, with the outside of the arms lighter than the rest. They were far from inspiring.

Diane moved to the second rail. There were a number of dresses, many with the hemlines fixed firmly in the sixties except where they were long and draggly, dating, Diane was horrified to realise, from a period so remote she could not put a name to it.

Impossible, Diane thought, mentally relegating woollens and dresses to some emporium in the sky where they could live out the rest of their lives in luxury, never being tried on, or indeed looked at, again.

The next rail held suits. Tweed suits, which she remembered having once been told did not date. It was a lie.

Moving on again, Diane noticed as she fingered the next offering – slacks with ... heavens! ... bell-bottoms – that a musty sort of smell arose from the garments. It was not the smell of secondhand clothing exactly, though it was near it. Sniffing, Diane decided it was the faint smell of despair, compounded of tweed, silk stockings and damp carpeting, with just a trace of mothballs. This lot will have to go as

well, Diane told herself, and patted a horrible serge skirt consolingly. Faint dust arose. She went next to the window. Corsets! And long-sleeved woollen vests, in May! And who else would have silk stockings in this day and age?

The second window held hats, mostly made of felt or straw, in dark shades. They were unimaginatively clumped together on stands all set at the same height. Diane was reminded of a bed of toadstools in the dampest corner of a wood. And beneath them, lying in a dead-body attitude, was another tweed suit. It looked as though it had died running.

Diane took a deep breath, stooped, and gathered up as much of the window display as she could hold. She took the lot to the foot of the stairs, dumped it and returned for another load. Presently the window was empty, revealing the dun-coloured paintwork and the dirty glass panes.

Diane surveyed the shape of the windows, their depth, their backing, even the view of the wine bar outside. Her mind joyously embraced this part of the problem, for after gaining her fine arts degree she had trained as a window-dresser. Her 'wonderful career' had involved planning extravagant window displays and following the displays through in the store itself, so surely putting one small shop on the map would present no problem to Miss Hopgood of Barkworths!

But this, of course, was a very different challenge. Barkworths' windows were rightly famous and extremely large and the Barkworth budget was the envy of every shop in the West End. Here, the budget would be minuscule and the window equally tiny. What was more, she was going to have to tell the aunts that their entire stock was fit for nothing but the dustbin, not old enough to be sold to trendy students as antique wear, not fashionable enough for a nearly-new shop. Come to that, Diane could not see a jumble sale getting rid of her aunts' stuff. It would have to be the dustbin and she could anticipate, shudderingly, how hard it would be to persuade the aunts that what they

probably thought of as a fortune in clothing must be immediately banished from Bonner's, if the new look she envisaged was to succeed.

But first things first. She must spend today clearing the place out and cleaning, but she could find no water supply, no kettle to heat the water, no gas ring on which to balance a kettle. She had never, until today, been given the opportunity of actually seeing just how bad things were and now, with her new knowledge, she was beginning to realise that this was more than a few weeks' work. Did she really want to have a go? Give up Barkworths and all that it stood for, very probably have to sell her half of the flat to keep herself solvent until such time as the place was open and selling once more?

She pulled out the little, spindly-legged chair and sat on it and thought. She knew in her heart that she would never go back to Barkworths, not whilst Tony was there, and the store was his livelihood as it had once been hers. Besides, there were other stores which would be delighted to employ Miss Hopgood of Barkworths.

Perhaps, in time then, she would go back to London. But not now. Not for a while. So she would have a go here, see if she was capable of running a small business.

Having made up her mind, Diane stood up and headed for the door. She would go over to the restaurant opposite and beg a mop and bucket, get them to show her where her water supply was. And then she would get scrubbing!

'There's a girl at the kitchen door,' Sandy remarked. She was standing facing the glass-paned door, grating cheese for next day's sandwiches. 'Let her in, gal Poppy.'

'Right,' Poppy said, abandoning the chipper, which she was feeding with sliced potato so that they would have a supply blanched ready for lunches. 'I wonder who she is? Customers go next door.'

‘She’s not a customer, she’s the Bonner niece,’ Sam said. He was putting a new till roll on in preparation for a coffee-time rush which would probably turn out to be a trickle. ‘I saw her go into the shop a while back.’

‘Wonder what she’s doing there?’ Poppy swung the door open. ‘Morning. Can I help you?’

‘Good morning. I’m Diane Hopgood, my great-aunts keep the shop opposite,’ Diane said. ‘I’m cleaning the place out today and I wondered if you could lend me a mop and bucket and a few other things? And could you tell me where my water supply is, please?’

‘We’ll lend you the cleaning things,’ Sam said cheerfully. ‘But there isn’t a water supply, we’ll have to lend you a bucket of water as well. Poppy, get the stuff up from the cellar, there’s a good girl. I’ll run hot water.’

‘We could fill an electric kettle for you, if you want,’ Sandy volunteered. ‘But your aunts always come here and order tea or coffee when they want it.’

‘Tea or coffee? That sounds wonderful,’ Diane said gratefully. ‘Could I have a coffee and scone in about half an hour, please? I’ll come and fetch it.’

‘We deliver,’ Sam said. ‘I’m Sam, Diane, and my partner, Martin, will be in later, he’s gone shopping with Marjory, our morning manageress. This is Sandy, and the little lass in the cellars is Poppy.’

‘Hello,’ Diane said, smiling at them. ‘Nice to meet you. I expect you’ll be seeing a good bit of me because I’m giving my aunts a hand in the shop, cleaning it up a bit.’

‘They need someone,’ Sam agreed. Poppy came panting up from the cellar with the cleaning materials as he finished running water into a bucket. ‘Here, Diane, you open the doors and we’ll bring the stuff across. Believe me, I’m happy to help in any way, if only because, forgive me, the wine bar overlooks the Bonner windows.’

‘I see your point,’ Diane sighed. ‘Well, I’ll do my best to improve your outlook.’

The small procession crossed the Arcade and went into Bonner's. Sam looked round speechlessly at the almost empty shop and the banister laden with clothing. Diane followed his gaze.

'I know ... but what would *you* do? There's nothing I dare keep, the whole place has to change.'

'You're doing the right thing,' Sam said heavily. 'But we're all fond of the old ladies. I just hope you can do it without upsetting them.'

'I hope so too,' Diane admitted. 'Thanks for your help, and later, I'll pop over for a sandwich and bring it back for my lunch.'

'I'll send a girl over with a menu,' Sam promised. 'Good luck!'

He and Poppy made their way back to the kitchen, where Martin had just put in an appearance, his arms full of carrier bags. He grinned at Sam over the top of them.

'Special offer on mayonnaise,' he announced. 'Marj and I bought as much as I could carry. She's fetching butter and two big tubs of margarine.' He looked curiously at the older man. 'Where have you been?'

'Taking some cleaning things across for the Bonners' niece; her name's Diane,' Sam said. 'She seems a nice girl. She's trying to clean up for the old ladies.'

'She's got her work cut out,' Poppy remarked, taking some of the jars of mayonnaise from Martin. 'Did you see them racks, Sam? Stripped! She's tore the place to bits - what's she playing at, eh?'

'She told us, cleaning up for the old girls,' Sam said, but Poppy shook her head.

'No, she isn't just cleaning, Sam, she's taking over.'

Martin pressed his nose against the glass and peered out, then turned to face them, looking knowing.

'She looks bossy, I thought so the other day when the old ladies brought her down here. Oh, she'll make some changes, mark my words!'

‘If you’re right, then I’m grateful,’ Sam said, having given the matter some thought. ‘What could be worse than loopy knickers and corsets?’

‘Someone else selling sandwiches?’ Martin said brightly. ‘Don’t shake your head at me, Sam, it’s possible.’

‘It in’t,’ Poppy said stoutly. ‘She’s got no water.’

‘Hmm,’ Martin said, temporarily deflated. ‘Well, how about an engineering works?’

‘Oh, shut up,’ Poppy chipped in. ‘Do she look like an engineer?’

‘Not a lot,’ Martin agreed. He turned back to the window. ‘She’s kicking up an awful dust,’ he announced. ‘Now she’s brushing all the muck out into the Arcade ... she’ll cop it if I see her!’

Poppy giggled but Sandy, who had been quietly getting on with her work, straightened.

‘Whatever she do in that place, it’ll make a world of difference to us if she get it right,’ she declared.

Sam smiled. It was what they all said every time someone else opened a shop down here. It would make a world of difference. The last people to own the wine bar had let it slide, so he and Martin had made a difference but this time, with the summer coming, perhaps it really would mean improvements all round. If fashion-conscious young girls started coming down the Arcade to visit Bonner’s, and popped in to the wine bar ... if the young men from the offices on Lord Street came down in pursuit of the young girls ...

Sam dreamed on. Outside, the sun still shone, though you only caught the odd glimpse down here in the Arcade. They could do with some luck, all of them. Diane could sell the shop to someone else or run it herself, either would be an improvement. But he did hope the new owner wouldn’t try to sell sandwiches ... or beauty products ... or antiques ...