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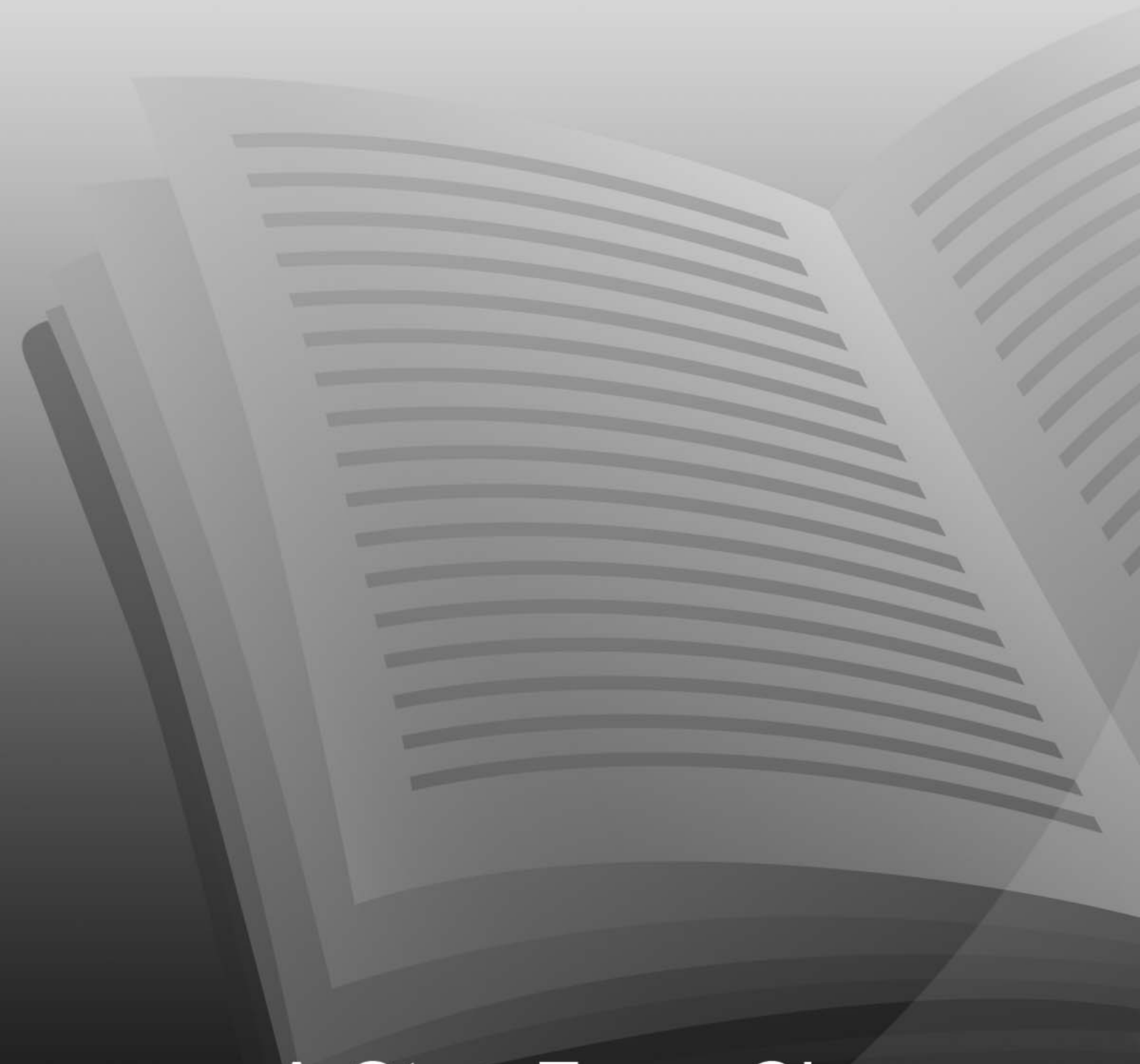

A Step From Cinnamon Alley

Patricia Burns

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About the Book

A magical love story – and a richly detailed evocation of a great city.

1909, and life is hard for young Poppy Powers. Her dad has disappeared – gone to do a season in the North somewhere and failed to return – leaving her mum to earn their keep and Poppy doing chores for Gran. Poppy dreams of being a musician like Dad, but Gran would never allow it, and Gran's rule is absolute in Cinnamon Alley.

There is more than a little of Gran's stubbornness and determination in Poppy, however, and the discovery of her Dad's saxophone, secret music lessons and the Salvation Army band bring the stirrings of possibility. Waitressing in the drinking clubs during the terrible Great War, Poppy and her dreams find a direction. It is there she first hears ragtime – and it is there she falls in love, tragically and irrevocably, with the American Scott Warrender.

Alone and destined to rely on her own talents, Poppy, with a few loyal friends and a flair for dance music, forms the Power Girls, the first all-female band. The fight for respect and recognition is doubly hard for women, but this is the heady Roaring Twenties and all the Bright Young Things are desperate to dance. Among them is Roddy Ffitch. Charming, rich, madly in love with Poppy, he introduces her to a dangerous world of endless parties and fast cars. But can he help her forget Scott?

From smoky clubs to ocean liners, from North Millwall to New York, through the war, the reckless dancing years and the Wall Street Crash, Poppy is determined to succeed, and

to make her way on her own terms. Only her last ambition remains unfulfilled – to share it all with the man she loves.

But maybe, after all, what Poppy craves is just a step from Cinnamon Alley ...

About the Author

Patricia Burns was born in Essex. After a childhood spent messing about on boats, she tried a variety of jobs from riveting plugs to serving in shops to market research. She then decided to train as a teacher, which she now combines with writing novels. In her rare spare time she enjoys lazing in the garden and entertaining friends, with the occasional bout of skiing, rock climbing and Egyptian Raqs Sharqi dancing. She is now very happily single and still lives in Essex with her three children, a cat and a delinquent tortoise.

ALSO BY PATRICIA BURNS

Trinidad Street

A Step From Cinnamon Alley

Patricia Burns

CENTURY·LONDON

To the memory of Ivy Benson, queen of bandleaders

PART ONE

1

1910

POPPY POWERS GAZED at the shiny brass trumpet. Her best friend, Elsie Booth, held it up, her face glowing with the pride of possession.

‘There – ain’t it a cracker?’

Poppy’s fingers reached out, longing to touch, to feel the weight of it, stroke the cool metal, finger the keys.

‘Yeah,’ she agreed, choking with envy. ‘Yeah, it is an’ all.’

‘Want to hear me play it?’

She did not want to do anything of the sort. She wanted to play it herself. It was not fair that Elsie should have such a thing when she did not. In the ten years of her short life, she had come to learn that things were very rarely fair, but this was just sickening.

‘If you want,’ she said.

Elsie took a deep breath, put the instrument to her lips and blew. Her cheeks puffed out, her face grew red, her eyes bulged. Eventually, a rather rude noise came out.

Poppy crowed with laughter. ‘Lovely! That’s real musical, that is. Sound a treat in the band.’

Elsie stamped her foot. ‘It ain’t easy, you know. Bet you couldn’t do it no better.’

‘Bet you I could.’

She knew she could, knew it in her heart.

‘Come on,’ she coaxed, ‘let us. Let us have a try.’

Elsie hesitated, letting Poppy plead. When a satisfying amount of wheedling had been extracted from her friend,

she relented. Poppy grinned. She always got her way in the end.

The trumpet felt right in her hands. She ran her fingers over it, savouring the pleasure of holding an instrument again. She had never tried playing a trumpet before, but instinct coupled with the lessons her father had given her on his saxophone guided her. She drew in a lungful of air and blew.

At first nothing came out, then a blast like a cow in labour. Elsie collapsed into howls of laughter.

‘Oh yeah, much better than me – I don’t think!’

Poppy ignored her. This was far too important for a game of point-scoring. She tossed her copper-coloured plaits back over her shoulders and frowned at the trumpet, considering. Lips. It must be a question of lips, and breath control like it was on the sax. She tried again, releasing her breath in a steady stream. A raucous blare came out. She altered the shape of her mouth and the note changed, into something clear, bold, challenging.

Crimson-faced and pulsing with excitement, she had a third go, this time pressing the keys. An embryonic tune emerged, filling the tiny room, and floated out over the grey streets of North Millwall.

‘I done it! I done it! I made it play!’

Sitting on the lumpy double bed that took up almost all the room, Elsie had taken on a sulky look.

‘You must of cheated. You must of done it before.’

‘I never. My Dad learnt me his sax, but I never played a trumpet,’ Poppy assured her. She plumped down beside her best friend, the trumpet still held lovingly in her hands. ‘You are lucky, Elsie. Your mum and dad let you have this.’

‘It ain’t mine. It belongs to the Sally Army.’

‘I know, but they let you learn. My gran won’t. Won’t even let me speak to her about it. “Not having no more musicians in the family,” that’s what she says.’

‘She let you join the Army and play the tambourine,’ Elsie pointed out.

‘Yeah, but only because it gets me out of the house of a Sunday. She don’t like having me hanging about getting under her feet. Mean old cow. I hate my gran.’

Elsie looked shocked. ‘Poppy! She’s your family. You didn’t ought to say that sort of thing. It’s wicked.’

‘It’s wicked to lie and all, and it’d be a lie to say I didn’t hate her. She’s horrible to me and even worse to Mum. Just because she married Dad. I’ll tell you something, my dad’s a thousand time’s better than what she is. He’s lovely, my dad is.’

‘Yeah,’ Elsie agreed. ‘He’s nice, your dad.’

They were both silent for a few moments, wrapped in their own thoughts. Through the open window came the sounds of the streets, children playing, street sellers shouting their wares, the clop of horses’ hooves. Mixed up with them was the continual background rumble of the industries of the Isle of Dogs, the clank and roar and stench of factories and foundries, repair yards and processing plants, of the countless ships and steam engines and drays that serviced them. The two girls hardly heard it. It was part of their lives, as normal as the stink of summer, or the chill fogs of winter.

Poppy sighed and stood up.

‘I better get home. She’ll be wanting me to do my jobs.’

Elsie came downstairs with her.

‘You can come and have a go of my trumpet any time you want,’ she offered.

‘Thanks, Elsie. You’re a real pal.’

But as Poppy set off along the street, she knew it was not enough. She wanted an instrument of her own. A saxophone, like her father’s. Most children here in Dog Island would have known that a dream like that was beyond imagining. You were lucky if you had a coat to wear in winter, lucky to have food in your belly each day. To want a musical instrument was plain foolish.

Poppy did not see it like that. A skinny girl with long thin legs ending in clumpy boots, she marched along, her small face set. It was not fair that Elsie was allowed to learn the trumpet. It was not fair that she was going to join in with the band. Poppy adored the band. She thrilled to the stirring rhythms, the blend of the notes, the way the voices of the instruments could be heard singly and as a whole. To be part of that would be the nearest thing to heaven. And the only thing standing between her and that bliss was Gran.

Poppy stopped at the end of the row of mean terraced houses while a brewer's dray loaded with barrels and pulled by two great Shire horses rumbled past, heading for the Rum Puncheon pub at the other end of the road. There on the opposite corner of Trinidad Street was Cinnamon Alley and her home. A three-storey building in the same drab brick as all the other houses, but standing out because of its added height. Poppy crossed the road reluctantly and paused by the house, delaying the moment of going in. Like all the houses, it let straight out onto a stretch of swept pavement, with a step which had been white that morning from its daily scrubbing. The clue to what made her home different was in the front window. It was covered with a net curtain, and two yellowing cards were displayed in one corner. The smaller one read 'J. Powers, Dressmaker. Alterations taken in'. The larger simply stated 'Clean Lodgings'. Poppy made a face at it. They were clean all right. She should know. It was she who did most of the scrubbing. She pushed open the door and went in.

The smell of onions hit her as she entered. Poppy's stomach rumbled. With a bit of luck onions meant tripe for tea. She cheered up a little and went along the dark narrow hallway, past the front parlour that was kept for important visitors and, as a special concession, as a fitting room for her mother's customers. She walked softly, hoping that her gran would not hear her. Carefully up the stairs, up into the twilight of the landing. She had made it. She pushed open

the door to the back bedroom which she shared with her mother.

‘Hello, Mum.’

‘Poppy, love –’

Her mother was sitting by the open window, stitching buttonholes. She put down her work and held out her arms, her flushed face breaking into a smile of welcome.

‘How’s my little girl? Had a good day? Teacher not been nasty to you?’

‘Oh, Mum – Elsie’s got this trumpet –’

It all poured out, the envy, the longing. Her mother sighed, and patted her shoulder.

‘You know I would if I could, lovely –’

The rest did not need to be said. Gran would not like it. Gran had hated musicians since the day Poppy’s dad came along to sweep her mum off her feet and leave her pregnant with Poppy. It had been Gran who had run him to ground and forced him to marry her.

Gran had had other plans for her daughter. She had saved for years to apprentice Jane to a court dressmaker so that she would not have to go into one of the great food processing plants like most of the other girls on the Island. And then Owen Powers came along asking for lodgings and ruined everything with his charm and his patter and his devil-may-care attitude.

‘When Dad comes back, I’ll get him to teach me his sax again. I’ll learn to play it real well, better than what Elsie can,’ Poppy vowed.

‘Hush, lovely –’ Jane looked nervously over her shoulder at the door, as if expecting to see Gran hovering there. ‘Don’t say things like that.’

And as though summoned by thought, a voice came shrilling up the stairs. ‘That you, girl?’

Poppy stuck her lip out and said nothing.

‘Poppy, answer her!’ her mother hissed.

‘You there or not?’ the voice demanded.

‘Please, Poppy – for me?’

Poppy kicked at the curly cast iron of the sewing machine stand.

‘Yes, Gran.’

‘You come down here at once, you hear me? You’re late.’

‘Old cow,’ Poppy muttered, making her mother gasp with apprehension. She made her way slowly out of the crowded little room, negotiating the double bed they shared, the work table cluttered with threads and pins and tape measures, the dummy on its stand.

Her grandmother was waiting for her at the foot of the stairs, a diminutive figure dressed entirely in black, her grey hair scraped back from a pudding-like face. There was no softening of her expression as Poppy approached.

‘What you doing up there?’ There was still a trace of a Cambridgeshire accent beneath the familiar tones of the East End.

Poppy looked her straight in the eyes, the only member of the household who dared do it.

‘Talking to me mum.’

‘Gossip. We got no time for gossip in this house, girl. Not like them lot down the street, standing out on their steps wasting their lives away. You got boots on your feet, roof over your head, decent clothes on your back, and how? Because I put ’em there. So don’t think you can be a waster, gossiping with your mother. You got to earn your keep. You hear me?’

They stood glaring at each other like a couple of cats disputing the rights to an alleyway. Poppy refused to drop her eyes.

‘You hear me, girl?’

The rebellion that was never far away surfaced. ‘I got a name,’ Poppy stated. She knew as she said it that she had gone too far.

A hard hand lashed out and fetched her a clip round the ear. It made her head ring. She clamped her mouth shut so

as not to cry out.

‘Insolence! That’s your name. Now get to cleaning the first-floor front and do it proper or there’s no tea for you tonight.’

The smell of onions was stronger than ever, overcoming the urge to resistance. If Gran made a threat, she carried it out. Stiff with resentment, Poppy went out to the scullery to fetch the bucket and scrubbing brush.

Gran was still standing in the hall, hands on hips, when she came back lugging the water. She held her tongue as she toiled up the stairs. Of all the jobs she had to do in the house, she most hated cleaning the lodgers’ rooms. Her mother just said that everyone had to do cleaning. Poppy knew this. All her friends had to help in the house. Many of their mothers had to go out scrubbing steps, or worse still, the cabins of the great ships that came into the docks. But none of them seemed to understand how she felt about clearing up after the lodgers. Three men shared the first-floor front. All Gran’s lodgers were men. She automatically suspected single girls looking for lodgings. A respectable girl stayed with her parents until she was married, or if overcrowding or some other circumstances forced her out, then she lodged with a relative. She did not, if she was decent, go seeking rooms on her own.

Some of the men stopped only for a week or so, moving on with their work or to something better, or cheaper. Others stayed for months, even years and graduated to the best rooms. Such were the ones in the room Poppy now scrubbed with an effort born of fury.

If only her father would come home again. Things were so different when he was around. There was laughter and teasing and music in the dour house. Her mother became a new woman, glowing with adoration of her handsome musician. Poppy did not even mind having to sleep in Gran’s room when it meant there would be outings all over London and stories of life on the road to liven up the dull tea table.

When her dad came home, usually before the summer season started and in the gap between summer and the pantos, then brightness filled her life. Gran tried to put a stop to it, sitting there like a black cloud casting gloom all around her, but Dad just laughed.

'Come on, my special girls, let's escape from the Gorgon and have a night out on the Town,' he would cry. And off they would go, all done up in their best clothes, to the music hall. Dad could always get them in somewhere for free. After the show it would be off to someone's dressing-room, then out to a pub or a chophouse, with Poppy listening open-mouthed to all the talk and banter and taking in every gesture. It was a wonderful world, the one her father inhabited. The trouble was, it always ended too soon. The money slipped through his fingers, and the days would become full of anxious trips to acts, to managements, and then would come the call from the agent and off he would go, to Scotland, or the Midlands, or the North, and Poppy and her mother would be left once more to Gran.

She could hear her now, stomping up the stairs. Poppy banged the brush around extra hard, so that she would know she was getting on with it. But Gran went instead into the back bedroom. Poppy could hear her haranguing her mother.

'. . . I got twelve mouths to feed this evening. I can't do it single-handed. How much longer you going to be?'

Her mother was muttering something about a job having to be finished for tomorrow.

'You can sit up this evening and do it. It's summer. It's light till late.'

That seemed to be the end of the discussion. If Gran wanted help in the kitchen, Mum would not even think of holding out against her. But Gran was in the mood for a confrontation. Poppy was guiltily aware that it was her fault. Whenever she tried to stand up to the grandmother, she took it out on Mum.

‘And another thing. Where’s that waster of a husband of yours, eh?’ she was demanding, for what seemed like the thousandth time. ‘When’s he coming back to help pay for that child? It’s his part to provide for her upkeep, not mine.’

Poppy could not hear what her mother said. Whatever it was, it did nothing to appease Gran.

‘And how long has he been gone this time? Six months? Seven? He ain’t never been that long before. And when did you last hear from him, eh? Months ago. And never a penny. I tell you what I think, my girl, I think he’s gone for good this time. You won’t be seeing him no more. Now you got old and thin working to look after his child, he’s gone and scarpered with another woman.’

Poppy’s knuckles whitened round the brush. Anger boiled in her heart. She could hear her mother sobbing.

‘– And you can stop that row. You’re better off without him, I can tell you. Never was no good. I saw that from the moment I clapped eyes on him. If it wasn’t for him, you could of made something of yourself. But you had to go and disgrace yourself with a saxophone player –’

Poppy could stand it no longer. She threw the brush at the wall and jumped to her feet.

‘Stop it!’ she screamed. She ran along the landing to where her grandmother stood in the doorway of the back bedroom. She stamped her foot.

‘You horrible old witch! It’s all lies. He is coming home, he *is*! My dad would never leave us. He loves us.’

‘Love!’

Two stinging blows landed on her head, one on each ear.

‘Love, is it? It’s easy to see whose daughter you are.’ Gran’s face was scarlet with rage. Her pale eyes bulged. ‘I’ll teach you to speak like that to your elders. You’ll clean all the upstairs, then it’s straight to bed without no tea. And there’ll be no going down that church on Sunday neither. You’ll stay in till you learnt the meaning of respect.’

Tears started in Poppy’s eyes. She knew it was no use fighting, it only made things worse. Her mother was looking at her, her expression clearly pleading with her not to say anything else. But she could not help it.

‘When my dad comes home, I’ll tell him how horrible you are to us. And he’ll take us away with him. We’ll have our own home and you won’t make us work for you ever again.’

‘Ha!’ Her head snapped sideways under the force of her grandmother’s hand. ‘Take you away, is it? I wish he would. Now go upstairs and do as you’re told and don’t come down till you’re ready to say you’re sorry.’

‘Never!’ Poppy cried. ‘I’ll never say I’m sorry.’

She turned and ran up to the second floor, flinging herself down on the landing and bursting into tears.

‘I’ll show her, I’ll show her,’ she repeated to herself, and she thumped the unyielding floor with her fists. It seemed an empty threat, for her grandmother held the power in the house. There was nothing she could do except wait for the wonderful day when her father came home again.

And then it came to her. She still had that pawn ticket. The one her father had given her for safekeeping.

2

WHEN EVERYONE HAD gone down for tea, Poppy left her cleaning things, went into her room and crept underneath her mother's work table. There, in a small cardboard box, she kept her treasures. She sat cross-legged on the floor, the box in her lap, listening. Reassuring noises came to her ears. The clatter of knives and forks on plates, gruff voices. Yes, everyone was busy for a while. Most importantly, her gran was busy. The tea was the culmination of Gran's day. For now, Poppy was safe from interference.

She opened the box lid. On top was the handkerchief with the lace corner that her dad had given her last Christmas. Then came some half a dozen postcards from various seaside resorts where he had been working the summer seasons. Poppy was distracted by them, gazing at the brown and white scenes of piers and beaches and bandstands. She had been to the sea twice, once with the Sunday School to Southend and once, for two whole days, to Brighton with her parents. They had been the happiest two days of her life. For a few moments she sat remembering that magical time, until a noise downstairs brought her purpose sharply to mind. She scrabbled beneath the pressed flowers and the newspaper cuttings, shuffled amongst the heap of pennies and ha'pennies, and there it was, tucked in a corner at the very bottom. A pawn ticket.

'Now then, my little flower,' her dad had said to her, 'I want you to do something for me. It's a secret, mind.' He had looked very solemn and mysterious. 'You mustn't tell anyone, not even your mum, see?'

‘Cross my heart and hope to die.’ She made the binding signs with her finger, a cross on her chest and a slitting motion across her throat.

Her dad laughed and hugged her.

‘No need to die over it, Pops.’

And he handed her the little piece of paper with “Body’s” printed on it, together with the number 697 and the date, 20 December 1909.

‘Keep that safe for me, Popsy. It’s very important. Think you can do that all right, eh?’

She nodded. ‘’Course. Be safe as houses with me, it will. But what’s special about it, Dad?’

‘Ah –’ he tapped the side of his nose. ‘You’ll see, all in good time. Just look after it, all right? It’s between you and me.’

She had felt so important and trusted and special at that moment. The next day, he had gone off for a Christmas date. Up in Geordieland, he had said. Poppy had looked for Geordieland on the map of the British Isles hanging on the classroom wall, but she had not been able to find it. Christmas came and went. The lace handkerchief joined the teasures in her box. The panto season passed, but her father did not return.

‘He’s got variety work up there,’ her mum said, but Poppy never saw the letter that announced this piece of news. Summer came, but no postcards arrived. Her mother looked so upset when Poppy asked where Dad was that she stopped asking.

Now, sitting under the table with the little buff-coloured ticket in her hand, Gran’s words came unbidden back to her: *He’s gone for good this time. You won’t be seeing him no more.*

It was not true. He would be back. Perhaps next week, perhaps – and this was more likely – in the autumn, when the summer season ended. In the meantime, to bring him

just a little closer, she would go and find out what this ticket was for.

The next day after school, she resisted the temptation to go and have another play on Elsie's trumpet and hurried off down the West Ferry Road, with its rows of small shops and its never-ending flow of traffic to and from the docks and the factories. Fumes from the chimneys hung heavy in the July air.

On the pavement outside Body's, she stopped. She looked up at the three golden balls hanging above her head. Nobody in her family had ever been in here. Gran did not hold with credit, let alone hocking the household goods.

Many of her schoolfriends' mums were in here every week. The Sunday clothes went in on Monday or Tuesday and came out again on payday, Saturday evening, regular as clockwork. If their dads failed to find work, then more items would be 'put away'. It was a way of life.

But if Gran found out that Poppy had been in Body's, there would be the devil to pay. Poppy took a quick glance up and down the street. There didn't seem to be anyone she knew around. She slipped into the shop.

The bell jangled, stirring the dusty atmosphere. Inside, it was twilight. Poppy stood in the cramped space in front of the tall oak counter and gazed about. All around were shelves and cupboards stacked with shadowy goods, each with a little label like the ticket in her hand. There was a suffocating smell about the place, of must and mothballs and old human sweat. The smell of poverty.

'Well?'

Poppy jumped. There behind the counter an old man was staring down at her. He had a red-veined nose and grey stubbled chin and his head was completely bald. But his small colourless eyes were as sharp as a bird's.

'I – er –' Poppy held out the precious ticket. 'I come for this.'

The man looked at the ticket as if it might bite him. He grunted.

‘You got the money?’

‘Money?’

‘You ain’t got no money, you don’t get nothing.’

‘Oh –’ She had not thought of this. She should have realized it. ‘It – it don’t say how much,’ she said.

With ill-contained impatience, the man opened the fat ledger that lay on the counter in front of him. Slowly, as if it were a great labour, he turned over the pages, running his knotted finger down columns of numbers. It came to rest at 697.

‘Two pounds seventeen and six,’ he said.

‘Two pounds seventeen and six?’

‘Plus interest.’

‘Interest? What’s that when it’s at home?’

He explained. Poppy was appalled.

‘That’s daylight blooming robbery, that is.’

‘Listen, girl,’ the old man fixed her with his piercing eyes. ‘I got a business to run. This ain’t no charity. Now do you want this here instrument, or not?’

‘Instrument?’

‘Yes, instrument. What’s the matter with you, you deaf or something? Some sort of horn thing, if I remember rightly. If you want it back you better bring in the money, or I’ll be selling it. Six months is well up.’

‘But you can’t – it’s my dad’s – that’s how he earns his living, he plays the saxophone.’

This was dreadful. She had to do something, and do it fast.

‘Look – you wait here. I’ll be back,’ she said, and raced out of the shop.

Fear thudded in her heart as she ran home. That horrible old man must not sell her dad’s sax. He mustn’t, he mustn’t. She reached the house and stopped, breathless, then eased open the door. On tiptoes, she crept along the hall and up

the stairs. Her boots creaked against the lino. She winced, expecting every moment for her grandmother to appear. She reached the safety of her room.

‘Poppy, love!’

Poppy rolled her eyes in expressive agony and put a finger to her lips.

‘What –?’ her mother did not understand.

‘Hush, Mum,’ she hissed. ‘Please!’

She dived beneath the table and grabbed the box. Out came all her savings, rolling and clinking on the floorboards. She knew to the last coin how much there was. She had earned it, in pennies, from running errands for the lodgers. If they needed tobacco or a jug of beer or a bet placing, Poppy was quick and willing, never forgetting the exact instructions. Usually, she was told to keep the change. Once or twice, when a horse had come in first, she had got a cut of the winnings. And all of it she had put away here, never quite knowing what it was that she was saving for, but sure that it was something very important. Now she knew. She swept it all into the lace-cornered handkerchief and crawled out from under the table.

‘Poppy, what are –?’

Poppy sped across the room and kissed her mother on the cheek.

‘I ain’t been home, right?’ she said. ‘You ain’t seen hide nor hair of me since breakfast.’

She slipped out again, scarcely daring to breathe until the front door was closed behind her, than raced back to Body’s.

‘There –’ She placed the bulging handkerchief on the counter in front of the man and let the corners go, so that the coppers spilled out. ‘Eleven and fivepence, and the handkerchief. That’s new, ain’t never been used.’

The man looked at her as if she was an imbecile.

‘I said two pounds seventeen and six plus interest, not eleven and fivepence.’

‘I know, but this is just to be going on with. There’ll be more.’ Poppy leaned forward and gazed at him earnestly. The counter was high, so that she could only just get her arms on it if her elbows were out sideways. She rested her chin on her hands and regarded him with the wide-eyed look that never failed to wheedle whatever she wanted out of her father. ‘You won’t go and sell that sax, will you? You’ll hold on to it until I get the rest?’

The man looked back at her, unmoved.

‘Depends how long it takes. I got a business to run.’

‘Not long at all, honest.’ It had taken her all her life until now to earn that much. But she truly believed she could do it.

The man mumbled and grumbled, but in the end he agreed, since there was not much call for saxophones on Dog Island and he did not want the bother of the journey to sell it on elsewhere. Poppy’s pennies and ha’pennies and farthings were counted out and entered in the book, and the precious ticket handed back. Triumphant, she emerged into the brassy summer sunlight.

Two pounds, six shillings and a penny to find, plus interest. Hollow and dizzy with the excitement of it all, she wandered back home. She went about her jobs in a daze. She was going to rescue her dad’s sax for him. It did not matter that the amount she had to earn was a fortune. She was going to get it if it killed her.

She started that very evening, running out for a paper for one of the lodgers and getting a pair of boots from the cobbler’s for another. It was not until bedtime that another aspect of the whole business hit her: if her dad’s sax was lying on a shelf in the pawnbroker’s, what was he playing? The question gnawed at her half the night as she tossed and turned in the sagging bed beside her sleeping mother. At one point, she even considered consulting her mum about it, but decided Mum had enough to worry about. But try as she might, she could not think of an answer, and it added to

the cold voice of reason that said that her grandmother was right, and that her father was never coming back. The thought of life without him was unspeakably grey. But with the coming of the day, she managed to push it to the back of her mind. He would come back. He must.

Jane Powers kept very much the same thought in her head. He was coming back, her Owen, her love. He was just having a bit of difficulty, that was all. They had happened in the past, these unexplained absences, and he had always turned up again in the end. But as the summer ended and autumn drew in, it became more and more difficult to hold on to her faith. This was the dead time, the space between the summer season and Christmas. This was when he should be home.

She sat at the window in the little back bedroom, hour after hour, sewing. If she moved her head a little, she could see out, but she did not often bother, for the view was less than inspiring. In the foreground, backyards marched between Cinnamon Alley and Trinidad Street and the backs of the houses in the next road, and in the distance rose the new grain elevator at the Millwall docks, the factories and warehouses and in between them, the masts and funnels of the ships. It was not a sight to help the days along as her feet rocked the treadle of the black Singer sewing machine and her hands guided the fabric under the needle. Often it was black, for mourning clothes, not that there was much call for new clothes on Dog Island. The women in the street, her friends, never had a new dress from one year's end to the next. They went up the Chrisp Street market and bought them from a second-hand stall. If they came to Jane for altering them, she always obliged, never charging. It was her little rebellion against her mother and her obsession with laying by for a rainy day. She could have made lots of odd pennies from jobs down Trinidad Street, but she didn't.

Helping her friends was a small area over which she had control, a source of pride.

Her Owen never thought about rainy days. He never even thought about tomorrow. ‘Eat, drink and be merry, for tomorrow we may be in Eastbourne,’ that was what he always said.

If only he would come back. If only she just knew where he was. But he never did do what you expected. Except that she thought he might at least have sent a postcard to Poppy. Which brought her wandering thoughts on to her daughter. Poppy had been behaving very strangely lately. Ever since the summer, in fact. She was always pestering the lodgers for jobs, and when she wasn’t out earning, she was under the table counting out her money. When Jane asked her what she was doing, she was always told that it was a secret. Jane had inspected the hoard from time to time. The amount in it varied, so the child must be spending it on something, and yet no sweets or toys came into the house. There was a lot she couldn’t make out about her daughter. Poppy looked a lot like she herself used to, except that she had her father’s colouring, but in character, Poppy was quite different. Where Jane just let herself be pushed by every tide of chance, Poppy was a rebel, a fighter. It frightened Jane, the way she stood up to her grandmother. If she went through life like that, she was sure to get hurt. But then – Jane considered this as her neat fingers guided the fabric – the one time she herself had defied her mother was over Owen. She had ended up with a saxophone player who turned her life upside down, and she did not regret it.

As Christmas approached, so her hard-tried faith in him began to trickle away. A year, a whole year, since he went away, and not a word, not a message, nothing to let her know where he was or when he was coming back. An oppressive grey cloud lay about her, weighing her down like a cloak of lead. What was the point of anything, if her Owen had gone away?

Poppy and her little friend Elsie were sitting on the bedroom floor, playing shops with snippets of fabric.

‘What’re you doing for Christmas? We’re having a big do. My Mum’s made a huge meat pudding. You should see it! Big as a football, it is, all done up in a cloth. She’s going to start boiling it tonight. And my Uncle George is bringing some oranges from up the market and my cousin Joe’s nicked a tin of ham from off of the lighter and my Aunty Vi and the cousins are all coming. We’re going to have a real blow-out and a sing-song.’

Guilt gnawed at Jane. She had not thought about Christmas at all. If Owen were here, there would be presents hidden under the bed. Often he had to leave on Christmas Eve in order to open somewhere for a panto on Boxing Day, which meant that they had their celebrations early. He would go out and spend the last of his money on wonderful, foolish presents before they went to see him off on the last train from Euston or King’s Cross. But not this year. Trembling, she listened for Poppy’s reply.

‘Oh, we’ll be putting up the decorations tomorrow, won’t we, Mum? We’ll have a lovely time. We always do. Lots of presents and things to eat and that. Lots. And singing and that. Everything. Last year I got a lovely lace hanky. My Dad give it me, a real lace hanky. It was so beautiful I never used it. You couldn’t never blow your nose on it, just have it in your pocket, like what a lady does. It was lovely, wasn’t it, Mum?’

‘Yeah, lovely,’ Jane echoed obediently. The poor child. All she had was memories. That was all they both had. But somehow she could not rouse herself to do anything about this year, however much she knew she should for Poppy’s sake.

She might have known that her daughter was not going to let things slide. On the morning of Christmas Eve, just as she had said to Elsie, she pulled the box of decorations out from the back of the wardrobe.