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**Opening Extract from...**

# **The Kill Fee**

Written by Fiona Veitch Smith

Published by Lion Fiction

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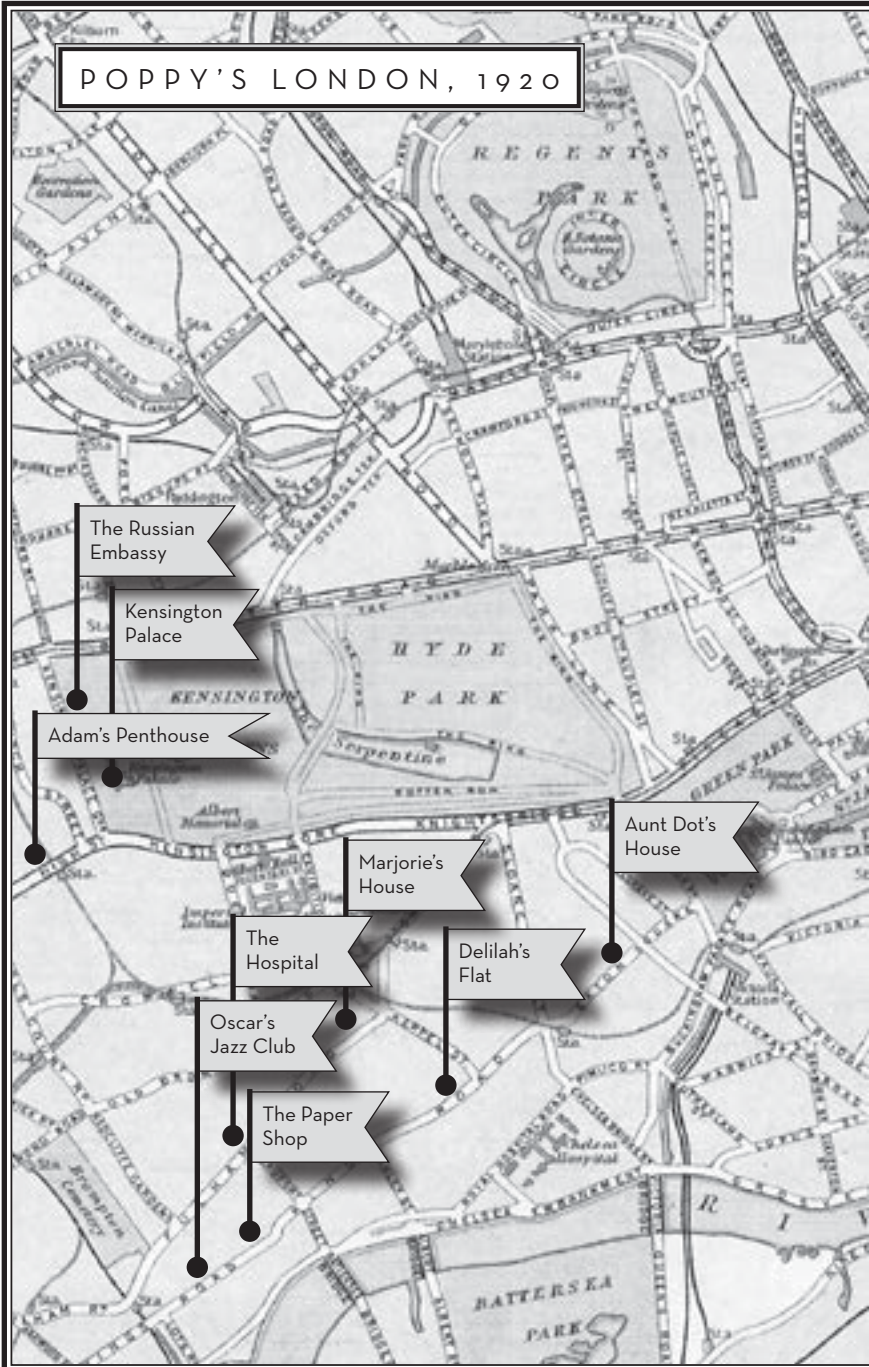
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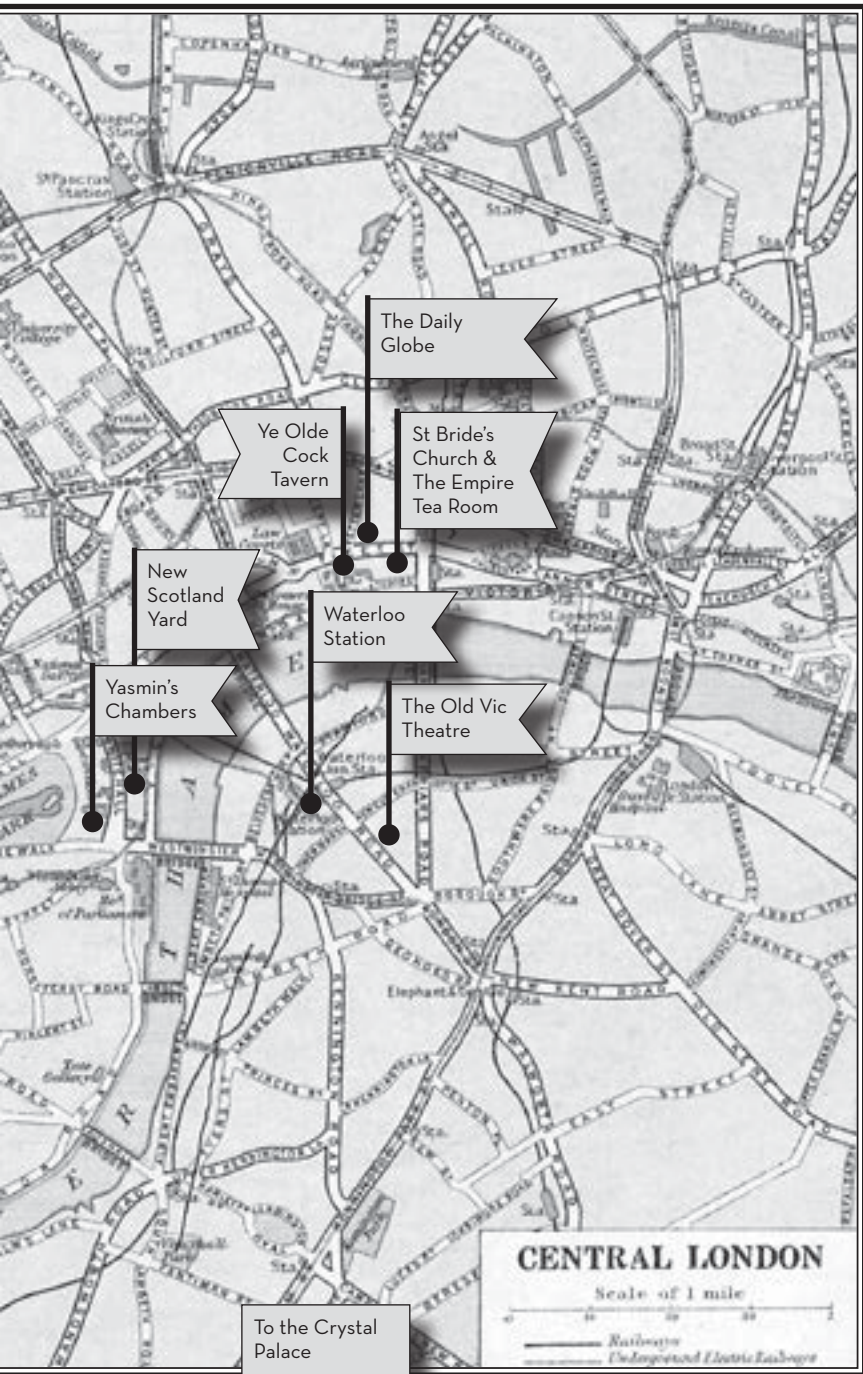
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*For my dad,  
Dougie Veitch,  
whose loyalty is an inspiration.*

# POPPY'S LONDON, 1920





The Daily  
Globe

Ye Olde  
Cock  
Tavern

St Bride's  
Church &  
The Empire  
Tea Room

New  
Scotland  
Yard

Waterloo  
Station

Yasmin's  
Chambers

The Old Vic  
Theatre

### CENTRAL LONDON

Scale of 1 mile



To the Crystal  
Palace

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Since the publication of the first in the *Poppy Denby Investigates* series, *The Jazz Files*, in September 2015, it has been a flapulous year. Thanks to film producer Dawn Furness for introducing me to that adjective. Since first hearing it I have used it in interviews and press releases, as it so aptly sums up the experience of being an author of books set in the flapper era.

I have had a flapulous time making and dressing in 1920s gear for photoshoots and launches, writing and directing a short book trailer – where I played a suffragette corpse – and visiting book groups and festivals. Thanks to film-makers Tony Glover and Barbara Keating, actress Amber Irish, the Northumbria University costume department, Noelle Pedersen from Kregel, photo editor Mark Richardson, and photographer Ruby Glover. Also not forgetting the photographic and film editing skills of my husband Rodney Smith and his beautiful assistant, our daughter Megan. Hats off too to jazz musicians Yussef Nimer and Jimmy Madrell.

A round of applause is also due to all my friends, family and colleagues who have happily spread the word, attended the launch party and toasted Poppy's success with very cheap "champagne". A special word of appreciation is due to Keith Jewitt of Northern Screenwriters, who has been an immense support and is now an honorary flapper.

As always, my fellow authors and members of the Lioness Club have been a great encouragement, as well as the editorial and marketing teams at Lion Fiction and Kregel. Particular thanks to commissioning editor Jessica Tinker, who takes to heart Oscar Wilde's advice that one should always have something sensational to read on the train. Also to Rhoda Hardie and Remy

Kinyanjui of Lion marketing, assistant editor Jess Scott, editor Julie Frederick (all the best with baby number three!) and the design team.

And finally, to all Poppy Denby's flapulous new fans: the readers and reviewers who have said they can't wait to read about her new adventures. Well, without further ado, here they are...

# CHARACTERS

## FICTIONAL CHARACTERS

**Poppy Denby** – arts and entertainment editor for *The Daily Globe*, London. Daughter of Methodist ministers from Morpeth, Northumberland. Our heroine.

**Dot (Dotty/Dorothy) Denby** – Poppy’s aunt. A former leading lady of the West End stage; an infamous suffragette and influential benefactor of feminist and socialist causes. Crippled during a suffragette demonstration in 1910.

**Miss Gertrude King** – Dot’s recently appointed assistant.

**Grace Wilson** – Dot’s long-term companion and fellow suffragette, currently serving a two-year jail sentence.

**Marjorie Reynolds** – leading female MP, minister to the Home Office and friend of Aunt Dot.

**Oscar Reynolds** – son of Marjorie, owner of Oscar’s Jazz Club.

**Delilah Marconi** – Poppy’s best friend, actress at the Old Vic, daughter of deceased suffragette, jazz scene socialite and Bright Young Thing.

**Victor Marconi** – Delilah’s father, wealthy hotelier from Malta, nephew of famous Guglielmo Marconi (Uncle Elmo).

**Adam Lane** – Delilah’s current boyfriend, actor at the Old Vic.

**Daniel Rokeby** – photographer at *The Globe*, suitor of Poppy.

**Rollo Rolandson** – owner and chief editor at *The Globe*, American, virulent anti-prohibitionist, compulsive gambler, suffers from dwarfism.



**Ivan Molanov** – archivist at *The Globe*, White Russian emigré, close friend of Rollo.

**Ike Garfield** – political editor at *The Globe*, West Indian, new to staff.

**Mavis Bradshaw** – receptionist at *The Globe*, “mother” to staff.

**Vicky Thompson** – editorial assistant at *The Globe*, new to staff.

**Lionel Saunders** – arts and entertainment editor at *The Courier*; embittered rival of Poppy; ex-*Globe* journalist; snake in the grass.

**Yasmin Reece-Lansdale** – female solicitor hoping to become Britain’s first female barrister, girlfriend of Rollo Rolandson. Daughter of British major general and Egyptian socialite.

**Comrade Andrei Nogovski** – security consultant at the Russian embassy; Bolshevik.

**Vasili Safin** – People’s Commissar for Foreign Trade, Bolshevik; temporary stand-in for Russian ambassador to London, whose post is currently vacant due to civil war in Russia.

**Princess Selena Romanova Yusopova** – White Russian refugee, ageing actress, currently starring in *The Cherry Orchard* at the Old Vic; cousin of Tsar Nicholas II; friend of Dot Denby and Victor Marconi.

**Detective Chief Inspector Jasper Martin** – head of the detective division, Metropolitan Police.

**Count Sergei Andreiovich** – former emissary and military advisor of Tsar Nicholas II.

**Countess Sofia Romanova Andreiovich** – wife of Count Sergei.

**Anya Andreiovich** – their seven-year-old daughter; has a dachshund called Fritzie.

**Nana Ruthie/Ruth Broadwood** – English nanny to Anya.

**Arthur Watts** – barman at Oscar’s Jazz Club.

**The man in the bearskin coat** – for me to know and you to find out.

## HISTORICAL CHARACTERS

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**George Bernard Shaw** – British playwright, founder of the Fabian Society and leading socialist.

**Norman Veitch** – founder of the People's Theatre in Newcastle upon Tyne, member of the Fabian Society, friend of George Bernard Shaw (distant relative of the author).

**Lilian Baylis** – founder of the Old Vic Theatre, the National Theatre, Ballet and Opera, champion of theatre for the people.

**Constantin Stanislavski** – Russian theatre director and one of the most influential drama theorists of the twentieth century.

**Prince Felix Yusopov** – assassin of Rasputin, son of wealthiest man in Russia, White Russian refugee.

**Princess Irina Alexandrovna Yusopov** – wife of Felix, cousin of Tsar Nicholas II and (in this book only) Princess Selena.

**Empress Maria Federovna of Russia** – Mother of Tsar Nicholas II, sister of Queen Alexandra of Great Britain, refugee. Originally Princess Dagmar of Denmark.

**Queen Alexandra of Great Britain** – Mother of King George V; former Danish princess.

**Tsar Nicholas II and Tsarina Alexandra (Nicky and Alix)** – last reigning Romanov monarchs murdered with their five children in 1918.

**David Lloyd George** – Prime Minister of Great Britain (1916–22); Chancellor of the Exchequer 1908–15.

## WHITE OR RED?

In *The Kill Fee* you will hear a lot about White and Red Russians. To help avoid confusion, here is a short summary of the differences between them.

After the Russian Revolution of October 1917, the Russian Empire was thrust into a civil war that lasted three years. In a complex set of alliances, the warring parties were broadly divided into two groups: the Whites and the Reds. The Reds were supporters of the Bolshevik Revolution, hoping to restructure Russia along communist lines. The Whites were those opposed to it. There were many types of White Russians and associate allies, with different motivations and strategies, but they are embodied in this book by the aristocratic families and their supporters who wanted to retain the old imperial system under the rule of the tsar and his family.

However, the Whites were also split between the moderate reformers, who in the years up to October 1917 tried to get Tsar Nicholas II to implement constitutional and social reform to try to avoid wholesale revolution, and the tsarists, who resisted them. History tells us the reformers failed.

Before, during and after the civil war, tens of thousands of White Russians fled their motherland and ended up as refugees in other parts of the world. Some of them came to London – including members of the Romanov royal family – and it is against this backdrop that *The Kill Fee* is set.

Poppy's first encounter with the Russians is at the Russian embassy in October 1920. The embassy is staffed by an uneasy

mix of Reds and Whites, as the outcome of the civil war has, as yet, been undecided. But as the war comes to a head in the Crimea – and in fact ends only a few weeks after the close of this story, on 7 November – the Reds are positioning themselves for a full takeover. The British government is also watching with interest to see which side will win.

If this were tennis, we'd be in the fourth set, with the Reds already having two sets marked on the scoreboard and leading 5:3. They are only a few serves away from match point...

## CHAPTER 1

### OCTOBER 1917, MOSCOW

Above the glow of gaslight a sprinkling of stars was beginning to appear. A man kicked at the golden leaves carpeting the pavement which would, by morning, have a dusting of frost. He pulled up the collar of his bearskin coat, wondering why, only that morning, he had felt overdressed. But he had been in Moscow long enough to know that things changed quickly in this city, very quickly, and a gentleman needed to be prepared for whatever the winds of change might blow his way. His fist tightened on his bone-handled cane and he allowed his thumb to rub against the secret clasp that would unsheathe the rapier closeted within.

His head swivelled towards a sudden blast coming from somewhere near the Kremlin, startling the swans that were accompanying him along the banks of the Moskva. He waited for the plume of smoke to rise on the skyline – he didn't wait long.

*So Lenin's getting his way then,* he thought bitterly, still smarting that the performance of *The Golden Cockerel* that he had been waiting months to see – and for which he had paid an emperor's ransom – had been cancelled so the little red gnome could address the joint Moscow Soviets in the grand Bolshoi auditorium.

Another bang and then another came from the direction of Red Square. The man clutched his cane and quickened his steps. If news from St Petersburg was anything to go by, he would not have long to pay a visit to the aristocratic family who lived in this neighbourhood before they too might be forced to flee with the other White Russian evacuees.

As he rounded the corner into the wealthy boulevard his heart sank. It was barricaded top and bottom, and manned by drunken soldiers in tattered uniforms, brandishing an assortment of weapons from rifles to pitchforks. Whether loyal to the Reds or the Whites he didn't wait to see, but ducked into a hedge before he was spotted. The sharp twigs clawed at his face and hands as he forced his way through the dense foliage; he emerged into a quiet garden, bathed in light spewing from a dozen windows. This was 67 Ulitsa Ostozhenka, home to a family with Romanov connections and, if the intelligence he'd received was correct, keeper of one of the prized Fabergé eggs.

The royal family had been under house arrest on the outskirts of St Petersburg since February, and their previous residence – the Winter Palace – was now guarded by forces loyal to the Duma, the new Russian parliament. Aides to the tsar and tsarina had managed to smuggle out the cream of the palace's treasures and had placed them with various "treasure-keepers". Rumours abounded that the family at 67 Ulitsa Ostozhenka was one of them. It was a dangerous task and the man in the bearskin coat feared for their safety.

Two years had passed since he had last been at the house and he wondered if the French window overlooking the herb patch still had the loose catch. It did. With a little jiggle he silently slipped into the conservatory.

Very little had changed. There were the same wicker chairs and pot plants; the teak card table with the *découpage*

embellishment; the silver tea-trolley and white-tiled floor. As expected, at this time of night, the room was empty. The family, if at home, should be in the upstairs drawing room having their post-supper coffee; but he couldn't guarantee it, not with the children, and the servants of course could be anywhere. That is, if they had not already deserted the family. The Bolsheviks promised the world to the serving classes and he had heard tales of once faithful butlers and parlour maids turning on their employers. Loyalty could not be guaranteed and if the soldiers on the boulevard decided to break in and loot the place, they might not meet much resistance.

He ran his thumb over the secret catch on his cane and slipped from the conservatory into the hall. Down the hall, to his relief, he could see the front door was securely bolted shut – but there were other doors to the residence. He stopped to listen: murmurings from downstairs, but nothing above. He mounted the stairs.

His destination was the first-floor library where, he had been told, the family had secretly installed a new safe since his last visit two years before. Apparently not even the servants knew its whereabouts, but since his informant was the very person who had installed the safe, the man in the bearskin coat was confident he could find it.

He heard peals of laughter from downstairs: he paused, his hand on the doorknob. When he was certain the voices were not coming any closer, he slipped into the library and closed the door behind him. The room was dark, the bookcases hulking giants around him. Unwilling to turn up a gaslight he edged his way around the room until he reached the window. He pulled back the drapes enough to allow a shaft of moonlight into the library – until the bookcases softened to their normal form. He could now see enough to differentiate furniture from wall and

through the silver glow located the Rembrandt he had been looking for. He paused again, listening, but all he could hear was his own breathing and the tick-tock of the library clock.

He unhooked the painting and propped it up on a nearby sofa, pausing a moment to ensure the masterpiece did not slip onto the floor. Then he turned his attention to the safe. It was a 1915 York Safe & Lock. He had broken into many security devices in his career and for a man of his considerable talent, the York was not the most complicated. It did not take him long to crack the code.

Inside were an assortment of jewels, bundles of cash and – the object of his search – an ornately jewelled egg, given to Queen Maria Federovna by her husband Alexander II. He pulled out an oilskin from his inside coat pocket and wrapped the egg in it, before inserting it back into his pocket. He perused the rest of the loot and selected a ruby and diamond ring and a pair of emerald teardrop earrings which, if he wasn't mistaken, had once belonged to the unfortunate Marie Antoinette. He put these in a velvet pouch which he tucked into his trouser pocket. He left the cash; it would be worthless in a few months if the revolutionaries had their way and the economy continued into free-fall. He closed the safe, spun the lock and then lifted the Rembrandt from its bed on the sofa. For a moment he considered slitting it out of its frame, but resisted. The missing painting would draw attention to the fact that the safe had been tampered with, and besides, his business was in jewels, not fine art.

A smash of glass and raucous laughter from somewhere downstairs made him stiffen: it was closer than before. The man shut the safe, replaced the Rembrandt and hurried to the library door to listen. The laughter grew louder; someone was in the hall below him. He checked his mind's eye to see if he had closed



the French door properly – he had. Good. Confident he hadn't been noticed, he had no reason to doubt he could slip out as quietly as he had come in. Yet something stopped him.

Why was there no sound from the upper levels? No murmurs from the drawing room, no music, no crying of children and no sound of a bath being run above? Was it only the servants at home? Why then had they not turned out the upstairs lights? Since the February Revolution – and of course before that, during the war with Germany – fuel had been scarce. Even the wealthiest families were forced to economize. And he knew that this family – the Andreioviches – was no exception.

He remembered the dinner party he had attended here in 1915, where the lady of the house proudly announced to her guests that there would only be four courses rather than five as part of their “war effort” and apologized for the smaller portions of poultry and beef. Everyone had applauded her for her loyalty to Mother Russia and said they were praying for the safe return of her husband. The gentleman of the house – Sergei Andreiovich – was a special military emissary of the tsar, his whereabouts unknown.

Although the woman's husband was gone, she wasn't alone. Her unmarried brother lived with her, and her two boys would be in their mid-teens now. There was also her mother-in-law, a doughty cousin of the empress Maria Federovna, and of course little Anya. The man in the bearskin coat smiled as he remembered the girl's face when he had given her the present he had brought to the party: a dachshund puppy. The mother had frowned her disapproval, but relented when the little poppet begged her to let “Fritzie” stay.

But where were they all? The man knew he should leave, but his concern for the family prevented him. Another smash from below and a roar of laughter brought him to attention.

It sounded as if someone was in the cellar smashing bottles – accidentally or on purpose he had no idea. With his thumb on the secret catch, he worked his way down the landing, peering around doors, searching for the family. On the first floor was the library – from where he had just come – the music room and family drawing room; on the second the bedrooms, bathrooms and nursery. The ground floor held the more formal reception rooms and conservatory, and downstairs the servants’ quarters, kitchen, scullery and cellar.

The library, he knew, was clear. He peered into the music room – that too was unoccupied. Only the drawing room remained to be checked. As he pushed open one of the double doors with his cane his stomach rose to his throat. Splayed across the Persian carpet, divans and coffee table were the bodies of half a dozen people. He rushed in and knelt beside a woman in a yellow silk gown – the Countess Andreiovich, her throat slit, eyes staring. He scanned the other bodies for signs of life: there were none. Two teenage boys – their chests blasted open by a shotgun – an older man, probably their uncle, with gunshot wounds to the stomach and head, and an old lady whose throat had been hacked rather than slit. The sixth body was of a man in his sixties wearing livery – a loyal servant, a butler perhaps – with defensive wounds on his arms and a bullet through his temple.

The man heard two people shouting: “Time to clear out; get what you can!” and then, “What should we do with them?” He could not fathom the reply. He flicked the catch on his cane and released the rapier, stepping over the bodies as he approached the door. He looked to left and right: the landing was still clear. Dare he try to go down the stairs? The voices sounded as though they were in the stairwell. Perhaps the window might be a better option. But as he walked back across the room his ears pricked

at a sudden whimper and a stifled yap. It was coming from the sideboard. He checked over his shoulder, then approached the source of the noise. He listened again: silence. But he hadn't imagined it. And there was, after all, one body missing.

He carefully opened the door, whispering as soothingly as he could, "It's all right; don't be frightened," and to his immense relief was met by the large brown eyes of a little girl and the growl of a small dog.

"Shhh, Fritzie, shhh."

"Anya, don't be frightened. We need to get out of here. Come." He reached out his arms and the dog snapped at him. He pulled back.

"Where's Mama?"

"Mama can't come right now. But we need to get out."

"Are the bad men coming?"

"Yes, the bad men are coming. But I'll help you. Come."

He reached out again and grabbed the dog by the collar; it twisted around to bite him but couldn't reach. Then he held out his hand and took Anya's. Thankfully she came without any trouble. But as she stood up, her eyes widened in horror. She screamed. The man dropped the dog and slapped his hand over her mouth. Fritzie launched himself at him, baring his canines. He kicked him aside. Anya struggled against him. Then he heard someone running down the landing. Holding the child under one arm and clasping his rapier with the other, he turned to face the door.

But instead of a gang of Bolsheviks there was an old lady, her face battered and bleeding.

"Nana Ruthie!"

"Put down that child," said the woman in English.

Although he understood her, the man did not comply but pointed his rapier at the old woman's chest. She didn't flinch.

“Put her down,” she repeated in Russian.

“The killers will be back. We have to go,” he replied in the same language.

“And how do I know you are not one of them?”

“You don’t. But you must trust me. I know the child’s name is Anya and I know the dog was a gift from a dinner party guest.”

“Everyone knows that.”

“Oh, for heaven’s sake!” He lowered the rapier and grabbed the old woman by the arm. “Take the girl and follow me.”

The English nanny stood her ground for a moment, then complied. Anya ran to her and threw her face into the old woman’s skirts. The dog jumped up, and the old woman caught him in one arm.

The man strode over to the doors, pulled them shut, then slotted a fire iron through the ornate double handles. It wouldn’t hold for long, but it was the best he could do. Then he went to the window and slashed at the drapes with his sword. He opened the balcony doors and dragged the shredded curtain out onto the small patio, then called the old woman and the child to him. They came, Anya snivelling and sobbing as they manoeuvred their way around the dead bodies.

“I’ll lower you down. Can you hold on to the child?”

The woman straightened her spine and stared at him with the condescension and forthrightness of her race: “I am an Englishwoman. I shall do whatever is necessary.”

He didn’t answer, but tied the curtain cord around her waist. She gave quick instructions to Anya to hold on to Fritzie and then picked them up. With a nod, she was ready.

The double doors rattled. A voice boomed: “Who’s in there? Open up now!” Then a loud thump as someone threw his weight against the shaky barricade. More shouts and the sound of a crowd gathering.