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The Jazz Files

Poppy Denby Investigates

Written by Poppy Veitch Smith

Published by Lion Hudson

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THE JAZZ FILES

POPPY DENBY INVESTIGATES

Fiona Veitch Smith

LION FICTION

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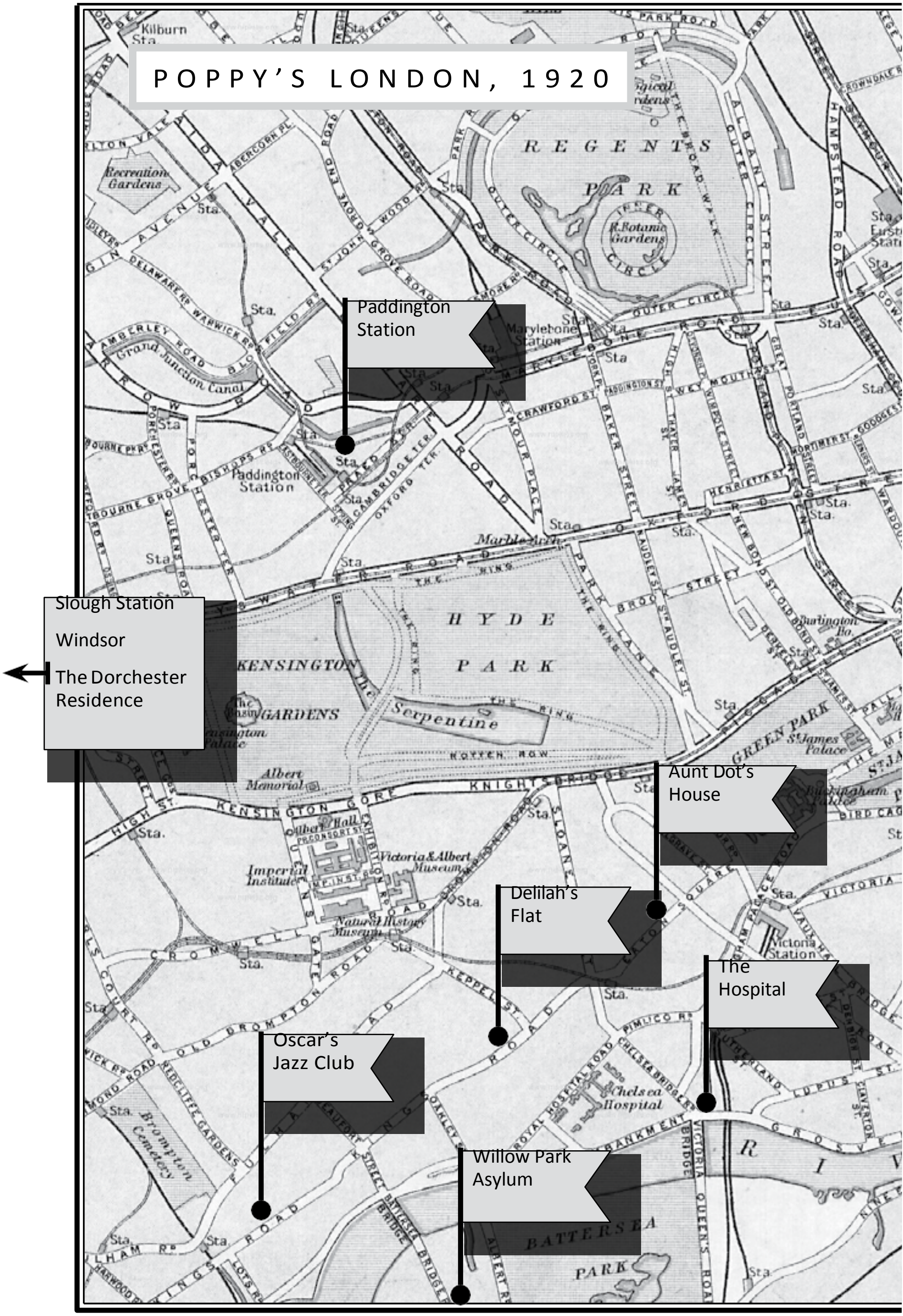
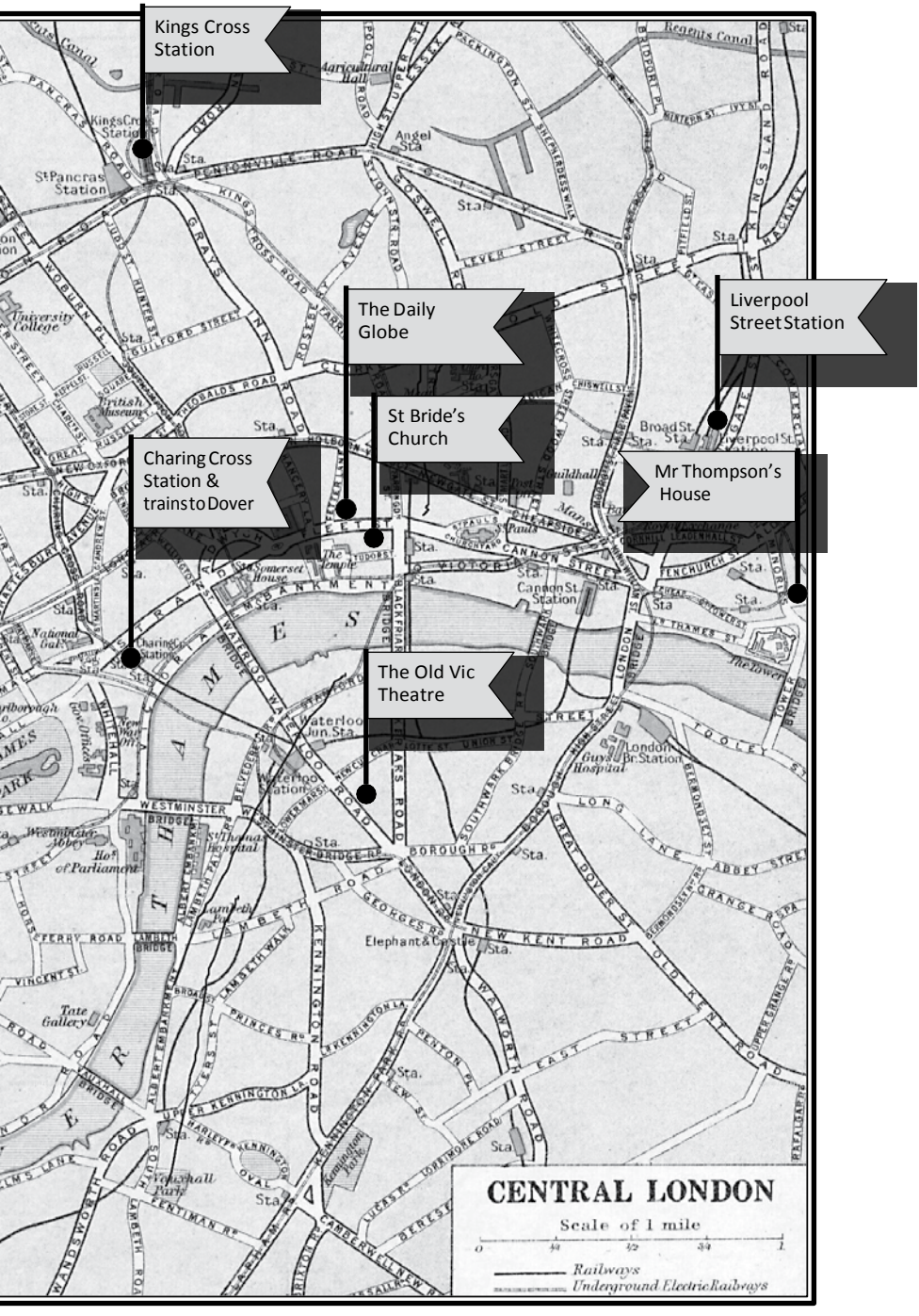
For my mam, Elizabeth Veitch.
I miss you.

POPPY'S LONDON, 1920




Kings Cross Station
The Daily Globe
Liverpool Street Station
St Bride's Church
Charing Cross Station & trains to Dover
Mr Thompson's House
The Old Vic Theatre
CENTRAL LONDON
Scale of 1 mile
Railways
Underground Electric Railways

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A hearty big thank you is also due to my editor Julie Frederick, who brought a great deal of spit and polish to the manuscript and somehow knew how to turn those pesky "close quotation marks" the right way round. And while I'm tossing bouquets, can Jess Scott, Simon Cox and Rachel Ashley-Pain line up too?

Thanks too to CSI Paul Trembling, who advised me on the drying times of blood and ink. Without him I would still be experimenting with pin pricks and a stop watch in the kitchen. And finally, to my wonderful family, Rodney and Megan, who since they first heard the name Poppy Denby in that Rothbury cottage, have made room for her in their hearts and in our home.

Characters

Fictional characters

Poppy Denby – cub reporter on *The Daily Globe*.
Dot Denby – Poppy's aunt. A former West End leading lady and infamous suffragette.
Grace Wilson – Aunt Dot's companion. An accountant and former suffragette.
Frank Wilson – Grace Wilson's estranged husband. Former women's suffrage activist.
Delilah Marconi – nightclub dancer, socialite flapper and up-and-coming actress.
Gloria Marconi – Delilah's mother, suffragette and former actress.
Elizabeth Dorchester – former suffragette.
Lord Melvyn Dorchester – Elizabeth's father, Tory peer and leading industrialist.
Viscount Alfie Dorchester – Elizabeth's brother, Bright Young Person, recipient of the Victoria Cross.
Lady Maud Dorchester – Elizabeth's mother and a suffragette. **Sophie Blackburn –** researcher at the Radium Institute, Paris, former nurse and suffragette.
Marjorie Reynolds – leading female MP.
Oscar Reynolds – Marjorie's son, owner of Oscars' Jazz Club.
Mr Thompson – a window cleaner.

Mrs Thompson – Mr Thompson's wife.
Vicky Thompson – Mr Thompson's daughter. **Billy Thompson –** Mr Thompson's son.
DCI Richard Easling – detective chief inspector with Scotland Yard, Metropolitan Police.
Rollo Rolandson – editor of *The Daily Globe*, originally from New York.
Daniel Rokeby – photographer at *The Daily Globe.*
Bert Isaacs – political editor at *The Daily Globe.*
Lionel Saunders – arts editor at *The Daily Globe.*
Mavis Bradshaw – receptionist at *The Daily Globe.* **Ivan Molanov –** archivist at *The Daily Globe.*
Miss Swan – member of Thomas Cook touring party to Paris.
Henri – receptionist at The Radium Institute, Paris.

Historical characters

Marie Curie – head scientist and founder of The Radium Institute, Paris. Joint Nobel laureate for the discovery of radium. **Lilian Baylis –** founder of The Old Vic Theatre, London. Later to found the National Theatre, Opera and Ballet.
Robert Atkins – leading West End actor and director. Director of Shakespeare at The Old Vic.
Charlie Chaplin – Hollywood film star, writer, director and producer. Originally from London.

Coming

By Charlotte Perkins Gilman

Because the time is ripe, the age is ready,
Because the world her woman's help
demands, Out of the long subjection and
seclusion Come to our field of warfare and
confusion The mother's heart and hands.

Long has she stood aside, endured and
waited, While man swung forward, toiling on
alone; Now, for the weary man, so long ill-
mated, Now, for the world for which she was
created, Comes woman to her own.

Not for herself! though sweet the air of
freedom; Not for herself, though dear the new-
born power; But for the child, who needs a
nobler mother, For the whole people, needing
one another, Comes woman to her hour.

From: ***Suffrage Songs and Verses*** *by Charlotte Perkins Gilman (1860–1935). New York: The Charlton Company, 1911.*

Chapter 1

5 November 1913

A scattering of snow lay across the railway yard, transforming the industrial clutter into a picture postcard: a work of art that could be hung for a night but removed when light and sanity returned. A woman, whose skeletal frame was wrapped in a coat that had once been worn to Royal Ascot and a silk scarf that had graced the owner's neck at a reception at Windsor Castle, picked her way from sleeper to sleeper. She hoped to reach the commuter station at Slough before the snow soaked through her kidskin shoes and her frozen fingers lost all feeling.

A whiz, squeal, bang caught her attention and she watched as green, blue, and red flares lit up the sky above the roof of the locomotive sheds. She wondered for a while what it might be, not really caring, but at least it gave her mind something to think about apart from the limb-numbing cold.

Ah, it's Guy Fawkes, she concluded, not knowing the exact date, but feeling that it must be early November. She counted back the days, the weeks, and the months to the end of July when she had been arrested and dragged to the Old Bailey to be tried. If she'd known then that she would be kept in the same clothes for the whole of her three-month sentence she would have worn something more appropriate on the day she joined her sisters to firebomb the members' stand at Lord's.

Her stomach growled. It had been days since she'd last had a proper meal – if you could call a porridge of milk and bread pumped through her nose a meal. She'd managed to scavenge some late blackberries from the hedgerow near her family estate in Windsor, and her hands were stained the colour of claret. Her face probably was too, but she had not stopped to check in one of the gilt-framed mirrors when she'd broken into her former home. She had one thing, and one thing only, in mind: to retrieve the cedarwood box from the safe. She had been surprised to see so few servants about – which made her clandestine task easier – and as another barrage of fireworks lit up the night she realized that most of them would have been attending the bonfire party held in the grounds of the manor house every year. So she had snuck in and snuck out without being noticed, with the precious cargo tucked safely away in the canvas satchel she carried slung over one shoulder.

She had just one more thing to do before she could get on the train to Paddington on the first step of her journey to freedom. She and her friend Gloria – who had also been held at Holloway prison – had agreed to meet between the railway yard and the station at Slough. The cedarwood box would be handed over and in return she would receive a one-way ticket from Southampton to New York. Gloria would then take the box to the sisters in Chelsea, who would turn it over to the authorities. The flurry of snow was becoming a steady fall. The woman took her thick auburn plait and tucked it into the collar of her coat. *Just around the next bend,* she thought and resolutely quickened her pace.

The tracks running on either side of her began to vibrate. A train was coming. She stepped off the line and continued her journey a safe distance away from the locomotive track. She rounded the bend at the same time as the train on its return

journey from Slough. In the spotlight she saw a woman: about ten years older than her with long, wild black hair under a floppy green felt hat. It was Gloria. The auburn-haired woman raised her arm in greeting, but as she did a shadowy figure ran at full pelt and launched itself at her friend. Gloria's scream was drowned by the howl of the locomotive releasing its steam and all the auburn-haired woman could see until the train chugged past was a cloud as white as the falling snow.

And then she saw Gloria, a broken rag doll on the tracks. The train screeched to an emergency stop behind her. She stumbled towards her friend, but as she did, the shadow emerged from the cloud, hands outstretched. It called her name. She ran.

10 June 1920

Poppy Denby emerged from the steam of the *Flying Scotsman* onto Platform 1 of King's Cross station, hauling her trunk behind her. She looked around, hoping someone had come to meet her, and was disheartened to find she was alone. She checked the station clock to confirm that the time of arrival she had telegraphed to the people who were supposed to meet her was correct. Four o'clock in the afternoon – exactly on time. She shuffled a little further down the platform, as quickly as the weight of her trunk would allow her, to see if perhaps someone was waiting beyond the crowd of people and reporters who were gathered around a dais. But there was no one there.

Poppy, wearing her fawn coat with brown-fur trim, fawn cloche hat and brown T-bar shoes, blended in anonymously with the other commuters. The colours did nothing to enhance her pale, northern complexion, which might have been brightened if she had allowed her honey-blonde curls to escape the tightly

wound chignon at the nape of her neck. And her eyes, like two bluebells on a frosty morning, would have lit up the whole platform brighter than the camera flashes, if they could be seen under the low-slung brim of her mother's choice of sensible hat.

Poppy skirted the back of the crowd surrounding the dais and heard someone giving a speech: "Untold sacrifice... eternal gratitude... sorrowful loss..." Something to do with the war. She stopped to listen, but the speech was coming to an end and there was nothing to hear but polite applause. She turned around to pick up the strap of her trunk again and bumped into one of the photographers. He was holding one of those new-fangled portable cameras, about the same size as the box that her brother had kept his gas mask in.

"Excuse me, miss. I think you've dropped something." He held the camera under one arm like the bellows of a bagpipe, while with the other he thrust something in her direction. A book. The one she had been reading on the train.

"Thank you, sir. I didn't realize."

She took it from him, raising her eyes only enough to see he was in his late twenties and wearing a bowler hat.

"That's a nice accent you've got there," he observed in his own London lilt. He sounded educated but not high society.

"What is it? Scots?"

"Northumbrian."

"North-hummmm-bree-un," he mimicked.

Unsure whether or not he was mocking her, she tried not to scowl. She failed.

"Sorry, miss. Didn't mean to offend. I think it's pretty."

She doubted that "pretty" was the right word for it, but she appreciated his effort at apology.

"No offence taken." She raised the book in his direction like a steward's flag at a boat race. "Thanks for this."

"*The Mysterious Affair at Styles*. Any good?"

"Not bad so far. It's by a new writer. A woman. Agatha Christie's her name."

"A woman mystery writer, eh? Times are a-changing!"

"Indeed they are, sir." She picked up her strap, ready to move on.

"Hold on there, miss; I'll give you a hand. That looks heavy." "I can get a porter…"

"They're on strike."

"Really? I was wondering why there was no one around." "And if they're not on strike, they're dead."

She looked up in surprise. "What an odd thing to say."

He nodded to the wall above the dais. As the crowd dispersed she could finally see what all the fuss was about – a memorial listing the names of hundreds of men who had previously been employed by the Great Northern Railway but had died across the sea.

"Nigh on a thousand," the photographer commented in a flat voice. "God-awful waste."

"I don't know what God has to do with it," she said, embarrassed by his blasphemy.

"Exactly." He began fussing with his camera and kit. She suddenly noticed the skin of his hands: red, angry, scarred.

"You were at the front?"

"Yes."

"My brother too. He never came back."

He finished buckling up his satchel, slung it over his shoulder, and reached out to take the strap of her trunk. "God-awful waste," he said again, then headed off, dragging her trunk behind him.

She didn't know what to do. In just a few moments he had changed from a playful young man teasing her about her accent,

to an embittered ex-soldier. Was it safe to follow him? Her mother would have said absolutely not. Her father would have been appalled that he had used the Lord's name in vain – and in front of a lady too! But neither of her parents was there, and besides, the man had her trunk. She had not hauled it all the way from Morpeth to London for it to be lost in the afternoon commute.

"Hold on, sir!" she cried and ran after him in what her mother would have declared a most unladylike scamper.

She caught up with him in the station atrium, a hexagonal concourse with doors leading out onto King's Cross, Pentonville, and Euston Roads. Shops lined the sides of the hexagon, and commuters, waiting for their various trains on lines which spanned out from central London like threads on a spiderweb, bided their time shopping and browsing. He had stopped in the middle of the atrium, creating a little island of space around him as the sea of travellers parted to accommodate him and the trunk.

Poppy didn't seem to have the same effect on the crowd and she had to zig-zag her way through with apologies to left and right. When she reached him she was greeted with: "Is someone coming to meet you?"

"I thought so. My aunt and her friend. My aunt's in a wheelchair but her friend drives."

"I don't see any wheelchairs. Perhaps the friend came on his own."

"Her own."

"She

drives?"

"Lots of women drive."

"So they do. Well, miss, it looks like they might have forgotten you. Did you telegraph your arrival time?"

"Of course." Poppy's voice sounded more high-pitched than she would have liked. She didn't want to give the impression she

was in a panic. She wasn't. Well, not yet anyway. But it was a bother being stuck at King's Cross without anyone to meet her.

"Perhaps I could telephone." "They have a telephone?"

Poppy raised her eyebrows at him. He took the bait and grinned. "I know, I know, lots of women have telephones."

Poppy laughed. "We don't, back in Morpeth. But they do have one at the Post Office. When Aunt Dot first had her telephone put in, she rang the Morpeth exchange and asked to be put through to us. She was most put out when they told her there was no listing for anyone called Denby. So then she sent a telegram instead – like any normal person would have done in the first place!"

He was looking at her and smiling.

"What?"

"You are very pretty when you laugh, Miss… Miss… Denby?"

Poppy flushed, embarrassed by his brazenness but delighted by the compliment. "Yes, Denby. Poppy Denby."

"From Morpeth in Northumberland."

"That's correct, sir. You seem to have learned an awful lot about me in a very short time. And I know nothing about you."

He grinned. "Sorry, it's the job. Bad habit. I start interviewing people before I even realize what I'm doing."

"And before you even introduce yourself, either. How rude!" she said in mock chastisement.

He looked chagrined and pushed out his hand. "Pardon me, Miss Denby. My name is Rokeby. Daniel Rokeby. From Hackney. I work for *The Daily Globe*."

"You're a press photographer?" "I am."

"Oh, how exciting! I've always wanted to be a journalist."

"You have? Well, there are not too many women doing that job."

"No? Then it's time things changed."

He laughed again. She was beginning to enjoy hearing it and she would have carried on with their chit-chat if she hadn't the vexing problem of not having anyone at the station to meet her. She looked around her again: still no Aunt Dot or her friend, Grace Wilson. Grace was a tall, slim woman with grey hair – no one fitting her description was in sight. But a Post Office was.

"Do you think they will have a telephone in there?" She nodded in the general direction.

Daniel Rokeby's eyes widened. "Better than inside – there's one outside. I covered the opening back in March. Over there: that funny-looking kiosk that looks a bit like a skinny garden gazebo with a kaiser's helmet on top."

"There's a phone in there?"

"There is."

"But how do we pay for it?"

"There's a little slot you can put a penny into."

"Well I never! What a splendid idea, Mr Rokeby." And with that Poppy zigged and zagged her way back across the concourse with Daniel and her trunk in tow.

In the "gazebo" Poppy reached into her purse and found a penny. She didn't have much money left after paying for her lunch on the train – which was far more expensive than she had anticipated. She would have to go to the bank tomorrow, but for now she hoped Grace or Aunt Dot would be home. If they didn't come to fetch her she doubted she would have enough for the tram or bus fare to Chelsea. She opened the folded-up telegram and found Aunt Dot's telephone number. She put her penny into the slot and picked up the earpiece. Suddenly a voice came through: "London Exchange. Can we connect you?"

Delighted at the novelty of it all, Poppy gave the telephonist Aunt Dot's number and waited to be connected. It only took a few moments before her aunt's theatrical voice answered.

"Poppy, my darling! Whatever are you doing here? We were expecting you tomorrow."

"Tomorrow? No, it's today. I sent you a telegram." "Indeed you did, but the date was for tomorrow." "But it said –"

"Obviously a mixup. No harm done. Just get the bus to King's Road. Or a cab."

"Erm – Aunt Dot – can you come and fetch me? I don't have very much money."

"Well, that was very short-sighted of you, wasn't it?"

"I'm sorry. I didn't realize, I – "

"I'm teasing, Poppy, teasing! I see you have your mother's sense of humour. But there is a teensy weensy bit of a problem. We won't have the motor back until tomorrow. It's having a service, and as we weren't expecting you until tomorrow…"

Poppy sighed. There was no point reminding her that she had most definitely told her today, not tomorrow – and she had a copy of the telegram she'd sent to prove it. What was done was done and new circumstances required a new plan.

"What if I get a cab, Aunt Dot? Will you be able to lend me the cab fare when we get to your house?"

"But of course! What a marvellous idea. Tell the driver it's 137 King's Road, just opposite the Electric Cinema Theatre. And don't worry, it will be quite safe. The newspapers greatly exaggerate the dangers to women travelling alone. They're run by men, you see, and –"

"Ten seconds."

"I'd better go, Aunt Dot. I'll see you shortly. About an hour?" "Yes, that should –" They were cut off.

Poppy came out of the booth all smiles. “Sorted,” she announced. “I’m to get a cab to Chelsea.”

“On your own?”

“Mr Rokeby, while I very much appreciate your concern, and your kindness – and you a virtual stranger – I have just travelled four hundred miles on my own today; a few more will not do me any harm.”

Chap ter 2

Elizabeth Dorchester was enjoying a most rare opportunity to take in the late afternoon sun. It wasn't very often her "hosts"
– as they liked to be called – allowed her into the garden unaccompanied. They said it was for her own good – there were many dangers lurking beyond the walls of the facility, and solitude was not something she should make a habit of. But, Elizabeth countered, the fresh air would do her good; being close to nature would restore her soul – and the solitude helped her to think more clearly. She wasn't sure her hosts were convinced by the last, but they seemed to think the first two might have some credence.

She wished she could see beyond the ten-foot stone walls surrounding the garden. It had been seven years since she had seen any of the sights of London. For all she knew, she wasn't even in London any more. It could be any garden, anywhere in Europe; anywhere with roses and hydrangeas and jasmine. She had once loved the smell of jasmine. Now it was the smell of imprisonment. Her hosts of course denied that she was in prison. They claimed she was "convalescing" in a healthcare facility for people of a fragile mental disposition and that she would be free to go as soon as she was better. But whenever she thought she'd managed to convince them she was better, *he* came; and after cloistered conversations with doctors and nurses, her hosts always came to
the conclusion that she was not better after all.

He was coming again today. She had been told that he had telephoned ahead to say he was going to be a little late, as he first

had to attend the unveiling of a war memorial at King's Cross station. But he would come as soon as he could. Her hosts said she could wait in the garden. So Elizabeth Dorchester turned up her face to the dying rays of afternoon sunshine, fearing it was the closest she would ever get to being free.

The window cleaner who claimed King's Road, Chelsea, as part of his patch was just finishing up for the day when the black cab pulled up in front of number 137. His horse lifted her head wearily and looked at the motorized contraption, not realizing that soon she and her kind would be completely redundant. But she had a few years left yet; business had not been going that well for her master since the influenza, and the man could not afford such a huge financial outlay. He had lost quite a few clients to the illness. He himself had caught it and was laid up for three months. But even when he recovered, it was with reduced stamina and he could not clean as many windows in one day as he once had.

The window cleaner wheezed as he lifted his ladder and bucket into the back of the cart with Thompson and Son scrawled down the side in flaking green paint. He remembered when he and his son had painted it together before the war, their hopes for the business as fresh as the paint they stroked into the wood. But the son had died in a field in Flanders and in the five years since, the father had not had the heart to repaint the wagon without him.

Now he had no one to leave his business to. Yes, he had a daughter, but unless she married and her husband wanted to go into business with his father-in-law, best he sell up and use the money for her dowry. It never crossed the father's mind that his daughter might want to run the business herself. She had got a taste for working outside the home in the munitions

factory during the war and hoped that her father would see that she was worthy to take up the mantle of her dearly departed brother. But it simply wasn't the way things were done in their family. Thompson and Son had been passed down the male line for three generations and the father could not imagine a world where things were any different.

So he took his pay from the lady at number 137 – the lady, it was rumoured, who had been giving girls like his daughter ideas beyond the natural order of things – then doffed his hat, and with a "Gee-up, Bess!" trundled away down King's Road.

Grace Wilson was just about to shut the front door when she spotted a young woman step out of the black motorized cab. "Looks like your Poppy has made it," she called down the hall behind her.

"Poppy! Darling!" came the reply.

Half an hour later Poppy had freshened up in her room, changed into something more suitable for evening wear, and was entering the parlour where Grace and Aunt Dot were waiting for her, playing a game of snap.

"Snap! Snap! Snap!" cried Dot and giggled like a schoolgirl. "Ah, there you are, Poppy! Come and give your old aunt another cuddle." Aunt Dot had always been a full-bosomed woman and Poppy had memories of being suffocated in her ample chest as a small child, fearing she would never be able to clamber out. Since Dot's accident ten years earlier, the bosom had expanded even further and it rested like a pair of giant marshmallows on layers of meringue. The whole delicious confection – clothed in voluminous peach silk – was squeezed into a wicker basket-chair on wheels.

Dot's hair was the same as it had been when she first stepped onto the West End stage in 1900 at the ripe old age of thirty:

a nest of blonde ringlets and bows. If there was any grey in the cascade of curls, it was well hidden or dyed. Poppy looked a lot like her paternal aunt – apart from her girth – and the same bluebell eyes twinkled back at her from a plump, cherubic face.

Grace Wilson, on the other hand, was as tall and slim as a teenage boy. Her grey hair was cut short in a no-nonsense style, and she wore a sensible grey serge skirt and blouse. But belying the severe schoolmarm look was a warm smile that embraced Poppy gently as she extricated herself from her aunt's arms. Grace and Dot had been friends for as long as Poppy could remember. Unlike Dot, Grace had once been married. Her husband, Frank, had been one of the few men active in the women's suffrage movement and he had been a regular visitor to 137 King's Road in the years before the war. But then something had gone wrong. Poppy did not know what, and the most she could get out of her parents was "poor Frank".

Poppy sat down and accepted a cup of tea from Grace and a slice of cake from Dot. She looked around her and took in the Edwardian parlour that had not changed much since she had last been there when she was twelve years old. She and her parents had visited Dot when she first had her accident and tried to convince her to come back to Morpeth with them to convalesce. Dot would have none of it.

"They need me here more than ever," she had declared. "They" meant her friends and colleagues in the Women's Social and Political Union of which she, Frank, and Grace were members. On the sideboard, bedecked with a purple and green runner in the colours of the WSPU, Poppy noticed a photograph of Dot when she could still walk. She was standing with a group of friends, including Emmeline Pankhurst and Emily Wilding Davison, under a WSPU banner. Dot noticed her looking at it.

"That's the only picture I have of dear Emily. And some of the others." Dot's hand shook as she passed the sugar bowl across the silver tea tray to Poppy.

"Poor Emily," said Grace quietly, and she looked out of the window across the courtyard garden, lost in thought.

"She was a heroine. They all were," said Dot fiercely, the cherubic face galvanized with a strength Poppy knew was always just under the surface. Poppy reached out and squeezed her aunt's hand. Dot patted hers in return.

"I'm all right, pet." Then she shook out her curls, brightened her smile and asked: "So how are things with the family? I'm surprised your mother let you come."

"Let's just say it took some convincing," said Poppy wryly.

Dot's eyes twinkled and she knew her aunt was imagining the scenario when Poppy took the letter to her parents in which she was being offered formal employment as a companion and nurse to her invalid relative.

"Father had to keep reminding her that I am now twenty-two, so legally I can do what I like."

Dot giggled again. The schoolgirl was back.

"And of course he couldn't help mentioning that I had so far failed at securing a husband and needed to start earning my own keep unless I was to remain living off them for the rest of my life."

Grace's mind had returned from wherever she had wandered to a moment earlier. "But weren't you helping them at the mission?" She was referring to the charity shop and food kitchen run by the Methodist church in Morpeth, of which her father was the minister.

"I was. Running the shop and doing the bookkeeping. But I was never good at figures and they both knew it couldn't last long."

"You take after me, darling. A woman of words, not figures. Thank heavens I have Grace, or His Majesty's Customs and Excise would have had me in Holloway years ago!"

"So I really am grateful to you, Aunt Dot, for offering me this job."

"Job? What job?" she giggled again. "There's no job, darling! I just wrote that so they would let you go without too much of a fuss."

Poppy had a sinking feeling in her stomach. "What do you mean, there's no job? You said you needed a companion. And you would pay for it."

"Whatever could you do for me that Grace does not do already?" She squeezed her friend's hand warmly, but Grace pulled away and stood up, glaring down at her.

"Don't be so cruel, Dorothy! I told you it was not a very good joke. And just like I predicted, no one finds it funny except you. This is so typical of you!"

Dot patted the chair beside her. "Oh, do sit down, Grace. I'll explain it all to Poppy. Like I told you – and I will tell her – it's for her own good."

Grace was only slightly mollified, but she did as she was bid. "As you say, Poppy, you are twenty-two and not getting any younger."

"But I don't want to get married."

"I'm not talking about marriage; I'm talking about starting a career."

"A career?" Poppy could not mask the surprise in her voice. "Oh, do stop repeating my words like a parrot; it's very annoying. Yes, a career. There aren't too many work prospects in Morpeth for a bright young woman, and Newcastle isn't much better; but London, in London you will have a chance. I just needed to get you away from your parents – good as they are –

and show you the opportunities that are available for you here. Grace, pass the paper."

Grace again did as she was bid. Dot opened the newspaper to the situations vacant section and showed Poppy a cluster of red-pencil circles. "Look here: secretary wanted, central London law firm; assistant manager, Oxford Street stationer's; editor's assistant, *The Daily Globe* –"

"*The Daily Globe*? Let me see…" Poppy took the paper from her aunt and ran her finger down the column until she came to the correct circle. "That's a newspaper, isn't it?"

"It's this newspaper," answered Dot.

"And you think I would have a chance if I applied for this job?"

"More and more women are working these days," agreed Grace. "I would be if I didn't have your aunt to look after."

"How many times have I told you, Grace? You can work if you like. We can employ someone else to help me."

Grace reached out and took her friend's hand. "But you know they wouldn't look after you like I do. And besides, no one else would put up with your nonsense."

Dot laughed in agreement. "That's true." Then she turned to her niece. "Would you like to have a career, Poppy?"

Poppy's heart was racing. A career? Earning her own money? Making decisions for herself? It was all a bit too much to take in. "I don't know, Aunt Dot. What would Mam and Dad think? They only let me come because they thought I would be working for you."

Dot sighed then raised her hand to her forehead. "Grace, I think the wrong Poppy Denby has arrived. This is not the young girl who spent her days here reading women's suffrage tracts and writing letters to newspapers." She nodded to the dresser. "Top drawer please, Grace."

Grace seemed to know exactly what Dot wanted, as she opened the drawer and pulled out a small pile of letters tied with a pink silk bow.

Poppy gasped. "You kept them?"

"Of course I kept them, darling. I was so proud of you for writing them. Only twelve years old and already seeing the injustice in the world."

"But you didn't post them."

"Only the first one. I didn't dare post the rest after your mother saw your name in *The Times*."

Grace laughed. "Oh yes, Poppy, her expression was priceless. Dot was all set to send off the rest under the nom de plume 'A twelve-year-old suffragette', but I managed to talk her out of it."

Poppy smiled, remembering the delight at seeing her name in print for the very first time. She had sworn then that she would one day be a journalist. But as the years passed and the war and her brother's death and the worthy but dull work of the Methodist Mission had taken over her life, she'd almost forgotten the dreams of her twelve-year-old self. But then, when she'd met that photographer at the station… was it possible? No, she chided herself. Her parents would be furious.

Grace's brown eyes stared intently into hers. "Don't throw your life away, Poppy. Your aunt's right. You have a chance here. Why don't you take it? I'm sure we can get your parents to agree once you've got a job. And if they don't…"

"But they will!" piped in Dot.

Poppy wasn't sure they would. But she couldn't take her eyes off the pile of letters wrapped in the pink bow.

"All right. I'll give it a go. But don't tell Mam and Dad yet please. I don't want them to worry."

"Of course not, darling. My lips are sealed." Dot zipped her lips with her thumb and forefinger, then pushed the newspaper

over the table to Poppy. “It’s decided then. Tomorrow you will reply to these advertisements and see if anyone calls you for an interview. And in the meantime, all this talk of work is making me hungry.”

Grace smiled at her plump companion. “I can get started on dinner…”

“No, don’t do that. Let’s go out! We’ll go to Oscar’s.” Then to Poppy: “It’s a new restaurant at the bottom of the road. They even play jazz!”

“Jazz?” Poppy echoed.

“Oh yes, jazz! My darling, tonight your education will begin!”

Chapter 3

Anyone who was anyone would have given their eye teeth to get a table at Oscar's, and bookings were being taken two weeks in advance. But Aunt Dot, as a formerly famous actress and more recently infamous suffragette, had some sway. And an old friend of Dot's – one of the first elected female MPs in 1918 – was the mother of Oscar Reynolds who owned the club. So by seven o'clock, Grace, Poppy and Dot made their way to the front of the queue waiting to be seated. They were ushered to a prime table, just left of the bandstand, by an effusive Oscar. "Miss Denby! Mrs Wilson! How delightful to see you!"

"I'm sorry if we put you out at such short notice, Oscar. It's just that my niece has come to stay with me and I wanted her to taste the best food in London."

"Oh, Miss Denby, you're too kind! And may I say you are looking beautiful this evening?"

"You may and you must!"

"Thank heavens for that! You never know with these women's rights types; a fellow could get a slap across his chops for daring to be such a gentleman in this day and age."

Oscar and Dot laughed as if they were sharing a private joke. Grace did not look quite so amused. Nonetheless she allowed Oscar to pull out her chair for her and the three women made themselves comfortable as menus were handed out.

"How is Marjorie? I haven't seen her in a while. No doubt up to her gills in legislation. Your mother's done a sterling job, Oscar. You should be very proud of her."

"She wouldn't be where she is now if it weren't for you." Oscar produced a wine list with a flourish. "May I recommend the Bordeaux? Or if you're in a party mood, the champagne. A particularly good vintage…"

"Oh, definitely the bubbly; what do you say, Poppy?"

Poppy, who had never had "bubbly" in her life, was not quite sure what she was agreeing to, but she did so anyway. However, when she opened the menu she balked at the prices. There was no way she could even afford a starter. But Dot told her not to be so silly; that she and Grace were treating her. Poppy wasn't sure where Dot got all her money, but it was rumoured that when she was an actress she had been the favourite of the Prince of Wales and had been on the receiving end of extravagant gifts. She had converted them to cash and on the advice of her good friends Frank and Grace, had invested it in shares. Now it seemed Grace managed her portfolio for her. It provided a tidy income for the pair, as well as helping to bankroll WSPU campaigns.

So not only did Poppy have champagne for the first time, but oysters and sea bass too. She felt a little guilty eating so much when she knew the people at the mission in Morpeth would be having bean stew at best, but she reminded herself that Dot made substantial donations to the mission every year and that she could do the same when she started working. She was going to start working! She was going to have a career! She felt positively giddy from excitement and champagne, and whatever guilt she might have had about her parents was disappearing in a bubbly haze. And then, just when she thought the night couldn't get any better, the band struck up a tune.

So this was jazz. Poppy had never heard anything like it. Back home at the Methodist chapel her mother would plonk out old Wesley hymns on the honky-tonk piano that had lost most of its felts. And she could never do anything in F Major

because the B Flat above Middle C was missing. But nothing was missing tonight. Joining the pianist was a drummer, a clarinettist, a trumpeter, a trombonist, a double bass player and a dapper chap in a pinstripe blazer playing what Poppy believed was called a banjo. Aunt Dot told her the joyful, toe-tapping tune was called "The Tiger Rag".

"If I wasn't in this wretched chair, I'd get up to dance!"

As if on cue, couples tossed down their napkins, leapt out of their chairs and began cavorting across the dance floor. "It's called the Black Bottom!" Dot clapped and laughed, and even Grace cracked a smile. As the band brought "The Tiger Rag" to a close and moved into another upbeat number, a young woman spun out of her partner's arms and started dancing alone in the middle of the floor, her arms spinning like a windmill, her knees turned inwards and her legs kicking out to the sides. The other couples formed a semi-circle around her and started clapping and cheering. Poppy was itching to get up to dance herself, but she didn't know how. But then people started forming a train behind the solo dancer and she led them around the room in a quirky little dance with legs kicking to left and right. As the train passed her table, Poppy jumped up and joined the end. The train got faster and faster as it snaked its way in and out of tables – then, at one point, over a table! – and Poppy's head started spinning. The whole room became a blur: the dancers, the music, the lights. Poppy let go of the person in front of her, lost her balance and spiralled to the floor. But the train went on, circling around and around her. Poppy pressed her forehead to the floor; the cool of the tiles was soothing. The music faded, the dancers began to clear and suddenly, above her, someone came into view. It was the solo dancer, smiling and reaching out her hand. Poppy took it and was hauled up. The young woman laughed.

"Are you all right?"

"I – I – think so."

She laughed again and led Poppy back to her table.

"Too much champagne, I think," said Grace and passed her a glass of water. Poppy drank it gratefully.

"Delilah, darling! I didn't know you were coming tonight. I would have booked a table for four!"

Poppy, feeling a little better, focused on her rescuer. She was in her early twenties, short and slightly built with a sleek black haircut in a fashionable bob, Mediterranean olive skin and dark eyes, accentuated by thick lines of charcoal. She was wearing the shortest sleeveless dress Poppy had ever seen. A shimmering gold number, covered in tassels from neck to hem, which stopped a good two inches above the knee. The woman wore a long string of pearls, knotted halfway at waist level, and matching "slave bangles" on each bicep. On her right forearm she wore another bangle, styled like a snake, winding its way up from her wrist. Poppy imagined for a moment that this was what Cleopatra would look like if she were reborn into the twentieth century.

"Delilah, this is my niece Poppy that I've been telling you about. My brother's daughter from Northumberland. Poppy, this is Delilah Marconi. Her mother, Gloria, was a dear friend of ours. Like Emily, she was a sister in arms and was taken from us too soon."

"Too soon," echoed Grace and slipped again into her faraway place.

But Delilah wasn't going anywhere. She pumped Poppy's hand up and down enthusiastically.

"I'm very pleased to meet you, Poppy Denby. If you're anything like your aunt you are going to be great fun. You look a lot like her, you know?"

"I know," answered Poppy. "Sorry about earlier. I'm not used to all of this."

Delilah looked her up and down appraisingly, but not unkindly. “I see that. Don’t worry, Dot, I’ll have her jazzed up in no time.”

“Good raw material, eh, Delilah?”

Delilah gave a delicious little laugh and plopped down on the vacant chair between Poppy and her aunt. “Oh, definitely.” The idea of being “jazzed up” by Delilah might have worried her at another time, but tonight Poppy felt she was ready for anything. “I’m going to be applying for some jobs in the morning.”

“Oh really? Where?”

“There are a couple of options in the paper. One of them’s at *The Daily Globe*. I’ve always wanted to be a journalist. The advertisement said they were looking for an editor’s assistant; I’m hoping to work my way up.”

“It’s the only way to do it. I’m hoping the same in my job.” “What do you do?”

“Delilah is an actress! Just like me! How did it go at the audition?”

Delilah’s face lit up. Poppy had never seen someone so exotically beautiful.

“I got the part!”

“Titania?”

“No. One of her fairies. But at least it’s a named part. Cobweb.”

“Cobweb today, Titania tomorrow! I’ll drink to that.” Dot raised her glass and the other women did the same. “To bright futures for us all!”

Elizabeth Dorchester readjusted her position on the bed, trying to ease the pressure of the straps on her wrists. She would have to put up with them for at least another night – she always did

after one of her "reassessments". A doctor would come and see her tomorrow and explain, yet again, why it was for her own good. If she could control herself enough and not lash out at him – as she had done at her visitor earlier – she would be spared the medication. She wanted to keep a clear mind and she needed to be free of her bonds so she could write the letter she needed to write. No one could know her plan; she had to play it cool. She had to keep on the sweet side of the person who was beginning to show some sympathy to her. At the appropriate time she would pass on the note and pray that it would be delivered to the right person out there in the world.

She could hear some music down the hall, beyond her locked door. One of the orderlies had brought in a gramophone and was playing a disc record. They played the recordings most nights and Elizabeth had memorized the piece note for note. It was a new style of music and she had heard the staff refer to it as jazz. A lot had changed in the seven years Elizabeth had been locked up. Apparently there'd been an entire world war. She wondered if she would even recognize what was left of the world when she finally got out.

Chapter 4

Poppy got off the bus at the bottom of Fleet Street. The bus had been full and she had been forced to sit on the top deck, open to the elements. On a sunny day she wouldn't have minded, as she would have been able to take in the sights of London between Chelsea and Blackfriars: Buckingham Palace, Pall Mall, Marble Arch, Trafalgar Square, The Royal Opera House at Covent Garden… but today was overcast and drizzly, and whatever view she would have had was blocked by a curtain of umbrellas. However, she was grateful for them and she got off the bus relatively unscathed, with both her hair and her new outfit dry and uncrumpled.

She had bought the navy blue drop-waisted dress and matching jacket with white trim on Oxford Street the previous week. It had been a compromise between Grace's suggestion for "sensible office wear" and Aunt Dot's insistence on "something with a bit of flair; something to make you stand out". The blue had been Poppy's idea: a halfway house between Grace's grey and Dot's scarlet. Grace had taken one look at Dot's proposed outfit and declared: "She's going for an interview at a newspaper, not an audition for *Carmen*!"

It had taken Poppy nearly three weeks to secure the interview. Despite Dot's declaration that finding a job would be "easy peasy", it had turned out to be far more problematic than anticipated. She had written a dozen letters in response to situations vacant, but only received replies to five of them. It had taken ten days for the first reply to reach her and she was getting very anxious

that Dot's great career plans might not work out at all. She was also feeling guilty because she had to lie to her parents. They had written and asked her how her new job with Dot was going. She was as vague as possible about the specifics and just said she was learning lots of new skills and that Dot was very encouraging. Both were true, but not in the way she knew her parents would understand it. She hoped she could get a real job soon and be able to tell them the truth. Surely they would forgive her – and Dot – if she actually had a decent, well-paid position. But that was proving trickier than she would have thought.

The first two replies said that regretfully the positions had already been filled. The third was from a law firm looking for a secretary. It asked her to send in her *curriculum vitae* listing previous experience in the legal sector. She had none. Dot wanted her to make something up: "Darling, you just have to get your foot in the door. You're like me, a quick learner; you'll impress them in no time!"

But Poppy was not prepared to live a lie. What she was doing with her parents was worry enough, but that was just temporary. And surely it was illegal to falsify references… Grace agreed with her that it was.

The fourth reply proved more promising and she was invited to an interview for an assistant manager's position at an Oxford Street stationer's. When she got there and announced she was there for the interview, she was given a quizzical look by one of the counter assistants. He asked if she was in the right place. She said she was. He ushered her into a smoky back office, announced that a Miss Denby had arrived, and quickly withdrew. Through the cloud of smoke, Poppy made out a very austere-looking gentleman with facial hair to match Lord Kitchener's. He didn't bother removing his pipe before asking, "Denby? P. Denby?"

"That's correct, sir. Poppy Denby."

"You should have said."

"Should have said what?"

"That you're a woman, girl. A woman!"

Poppy sucked in her breath and exhaled slowly, giving her time to formulate her response. "The application form did not ask me to specify," she said carefully.

"But it did specify that we are looking for an assistant *manager*, did it not?" The man ran his tongue along his teeth; then, appearing to have found something, he picked at it with his fingernail.

Poppy suppressed a shudder. "It did, sir. And I have some experience helping to manage a charity shop in Morpeth. I have kept books, I have managed stock, I have…"

The man slammed his fist on his ink blotter like a judge's gavel. "You have lied about your gender."

"I have not lied!"

"If we had wanted a woman we would have asked for a manageress. We did not ask for a manageress. Good day, madam."

The man moved his pipe from one side of his mouth to the other and waved her towards the door.

Poppy was incensed. She had prepared herself for pertinent questions that she may have been asked and had even read up on the history of stationery at the British Library. She had not prepared herself for this blatant discrimination.

"But sir!"

"What?" he spat, spraying flakes of tobacco over his ink blotter.

"I am quite capable of doing this job."

"I doubt that. We need someone the staff can look up to; whom they can respect; who can motivate them. We need

someone customers can come to for advice, and trust that what they are being told has authority; someone with an agile brain who will not tire easily or be emotionally overcome, who will not be frequently in the family way and have to take extended leaves of absence… in short, madam, we need a man. Good day to you." This time he took the pipe out of his mouth and prodded it towards the door.

Poppy turned on her heel and walked out. She fumed all the way back home to Chelsea, rehearsing what she would have said if she had the chance to do it over. She got herself so worked up that by the time she opened the door of number 137 she was in tears.

After hearing what had happened, Dot was just as incensed. "Grace! Get the motor!"

Poppy expected Grace to try to talk her out of it, but she didn't. Instead she grinned and declared: "Into the breach once more!" and grabbed her hat, scarf and motoring goggles from the hatstand.

On the drive back to Oxford Street, while bumpily applying her make-up in a little vanity mirror strapped to the dashboard, Dot regaled Poppy with a history of their lives as political activists before the war: the demonstrations, the arson attacks on sporting venues, the chaining of themselves to the railings outside number 10 Downing Street. "Those were the days, eh, Grace? We didn't do all of that so that my niece could be humiliated at a job interview."

Grace's eyes narrowed behind her goggles and she shouted over the roar of the engine: "Nor did our friends go on hunger strike, get tortured in prison and get run down by horses. You do know that your aunt's 'accident' was nothing of the sort, don't you, Poppy? A policeman deliberately ran his horse at her. And to this day he's never been charged."

Dot paused, lipstick in hand. “Let’s leave that story for another day, shall we, Grace?”

Grace looked across at her friend and nodded in agreement. When they got to Oxford Street, Grace found a parking spot as close to the stationer’s as she could, then she and Poppy offloaded Dot’s wheelchair that had been precariously strapped to the back of the motor, balanced on the spare wheel, and helped her into it. The veteran suffragette fluffed her hair, tossed her scarf and pointed her umbrella up the street. “Into the breach, sisters! Into the breach!”

Their advance was slowed by a flight of three steps leading up to the front door of the stationer’s. Poppy had forgotten about them. Grace, however, was not surprised. “It’s either the tradesman’s entrance around the back or the old heave-ho.” She grasped one side of Dot’s chair and nodded for Poppy to do the same. Dot was no lightweight and it took all of Poppy’s strength to hold up her side of the contraption. But they managed with Dot cheering them on. Back on solid ground, she pushed open the door with her umbrella and announced to whoever was on the shop floor: “Take me to the manager!”

The same assistant who had taken Poppy into the back room was still on duty. He nodded at Poppy in recognition, then turned his attention to Dot. “I’m sorry, madam, but the manager has left early.”

“A likely story! Show me the way, Poppy!”

Flushing with embarrassment, the assistant stood in front of the wheelchair and blocked the women’s advance.

“It’s true, madam; he left soon after this – this – young lady left.”

“Soon after he insulted her, you mean!”

“I don’t know anything about that, madam. But unless you are here to buy stationery, I will have to ask you to leave.”

"We are not going anywhere until we have spoken to the manager," said Grace in a voice that would have tamed vipers.

"He's not here."

Grace pushed the chair forward. The man did not move. Dot raised her umbrella threateningly. Poppy feared someone was going to get hurt.

"Let's go, Aunt Dot. Grace. It's not worth it. I wouldn't want to work here anyway. I've still got the interview at the newspaper…"

Dot pursed her lips and jutted her chin. "Don't back down, Poppy."

"I'm not, Aunt Dot. I really don't want to work here."

The assistant smiled smugly. Poppy wasn't ordinarily a spiteful woman, but she could not abide smugness. So she added: "No, I don't want to work here. I have far more ambition than that."

Dot laughed out loud and pointed her umbrella at the man's chest. "Ha! Take that!"

Then she turned her chair around and the three women left in much the same way they had come.

On Fleet Street, Poppy stood at the bottom of another flight of stairs; this one flanked by two brass globes. The plaque on the wall declared "*The Daily Globe*. Established 1900". Poppy took a deep breath, prayed a quick prayer and walked up the steps with as much confidence as she could muster. In the black and white mosaic entrance hall she was greeted by a middle-aged woman behind a polished teak reception desk with a basque relief of Egyptian gods on the wall behind her.

Poppy introduced herself and said she had an appointment with the editor.

The woman ran her finger down a list and nodded. "Indeed

you have, Miss Denby. Take the lift to the fourth floor. Turn right and the door to the newsroom will be in front of you. Go through the newsroom and Mr Rolandson's office will be on the far side. If you get lost just ask anyone for directions."

"Thank you, I will."

Then, as Poppy walked towards the lift, the woman called after her: "Oh, and Miss Denby, good luck." Poppy felt a flush of gratitude and thanked her.

Buoyed, she followed the directions to the fourth floor. In the lift – the first she'd ever been in – she told her twelve-year- old self to stay calm and pretend to be a confident woman who took job interviews in her stride.

She took her own advice and quickly checked her hair in the mirror on the wall. It was a twenty-two-year-old Poppy who stepped onto the landing of the fourth floor and pushed open the doors of the newsroom. She stifled a gasp. It was just as she had imagined it would be. Half a dozen desks were scattered around the room, each within a personal nest of filing cabinets. Typewriters clattered and a telephone pealed. A few hardy pot plants were managing to survive, if not thrive, in the smoke-filled air and there was an underlying stench of sweat. Weary-looking men with loosened ties, rolled-up shirt sleeves and braces looked up from their desks and nodded in greeting. No one seemed over friendly, but neither were they hostile.

Someone answered the telephone and called out: "Bert, it's for you. The Dorchester story." A very large man pushed aside a box of sandwiches, heaved his way out of his chair and shuffled over to the telephone desk. Poppy noticed that under his sagging belly his trousers weren't done up properly. She hoped one of the other men would tell him. They didn't. But one of them did clock that she'd noticed and winked at her. Poppy ignored him as she arrived at a door at the far end of the

room marked “Rollo Rolandson, Editor”. She took a calming breath and knocked.

“Come in!” A distinctive accent: transatlantic, possibly Canadian, maybe American. Poppy opened the door. At first she didn’t see him. The room was so full of piles of newspapers, leaning towers of manila folders, overfull bookshelves, assorted photography paraphernalia and typewriters in various states of repair that she could not have been blamed if she’d thought she’d walked into a storeroom. The transatlantic voice addressed her again from somewhere in the middle of the room. Her eyes focused through the dim light filtering through a filthy window- pane and she saw a shock of red hair above a moon-shaped face.

“Sorry for the mess. Here, take a seat.”

The red hair moved from behind what Poppy assumed was a desk and lifted a pile of files off a chair. Attached to the head was a very short, squat body. Poppy, who was five foot five, towered above him. Rollo Rolandson – if that’s who it was – couldn’t have been more than four-and-a-half feet tall. He dusted off the chair and turned his moon-face up to her with a grin. “Please, Miz Denby, take a seat.”

Poppy did as she was bid and waited for the editor to negotiate the obstacle course back to behind his desk. He picked up a sheet of paper which she recognized as her application form and perused it for a moment, making small grunting noises, and Poppy wasn’t sure whether they were of approval or disdain.

“You are a little sketchy on your experience here, Miz Denby.” He pronounced the Miss with a “z”.

Poppy cleared her throat. “I have worked in a mission.” “A Methodist Mission?”

“That’s correct.” Poppy kept her voice neutral, hoping to deflect the prejudice she was used to whenever anyone heard she attended a non-conformist church.

"So how do you feel about alcohol?" "I beg your pardon?"

"Alcohol, Miz Denby. I do believe the Methodists are prohibitionists."

Oh dear, thought Poppy, *here it comes*. She folded and then refolded her hands in her lap. "That's not entirely true, sir. Not as a rule of faith. Although a lot of Methodists are teetotallers and support temperance programmes. They have seen the damage alcohol can cause to individuals, families and communities."

He raised his hand. Poppy noted that they were particularly large. "I don't need a lesson in do-goodism, Miz Denby – I want to know whether you personally approve or disapprove of alcohol." Poppy gave an internal sigh. This was not going as she had expected. Just as she had for the stationer's job she had gone to the British Library and done as much research as she possibly could on the history of the British press. She had read samples of every newspaper that had been published in London in the last two years. She knew, for instance, that there was currently a battle going on in Fleet Street between the evening papers that were financed largely by wealthy benefactors and covered stories of interest to the "gentlemanly" classes and a new class of papers, disparagingly referred to as the gutter press, but which preferred to be called tabloids due to their more compact size. The tabloids covered stories tailored to a broader social spectrum: "jazz journalism", entertainment news and gossip; and on a more serious note, social activism, seeing themselves as watchdogs of the democratic process.

But Rollo Rolandson was not asking about any of that. He was asking about her views on alcohol. Poppy cleared her throat and chose her words carefully. "Well, sir, I don't have a problem with it in principle. I've even been known to have a glass of champagne myself."

"Excellent!" Rollo threw his hands in the air and brought them crashing down on his desk. A precarious pile of files wobbled. Poppy reached out a hand to steady them.

Rollo grinned. "And that, Miz Denby, is why I need an assistant. Your first job will be to organize this office. Can you do that?"

Poppy looked around at the clutter that threatened to engulf them both. It reminded her of the donation room at the mission. It was not quite the cutting-edge job in journalism that she had hoped for, but it was a start.

She nodded decisively. "Yes, Mr Rolandson. I can do that." "Excellent!" he said again. But this time he stopped before he slapped down his hands. Instead he reached one over the desk. "Welcome to *The Globe*, Miz Denby."

Poppy shook it vigorously. "Thank you, sir. I'm delighted to be part of the team."