

Russian Roulette

E. E. Smith

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This strong, unapologetic heroine brings an exciting twist to the Cold War thriller genre.

Russian Roulette is E. E. Smith's third novel in a series set during the Cold War in the 1950s. This series features Alexis Smith, a young private investigator with a knack for quickly solving mysteries. However, this sleuth does not merely solve cases: she does so with sharp-eyed style.

In this installment, Alexis becomes concerned when her former landlady reveals that she believes her new tenant was a Bolshoi Ballet dancer and is now a Russian defector. At the same time, a local department store owner hires Alexis to discover who is stealing a large amount of high-end merchandise. Once Alexis resolves these matters, she travels to Britain to help a friend in MI5 gain information about a Russian count and his wife whose lives may be in danger.

Although this series is set in the 1950s, Alexis is a very modern character with a charming twist. She accurately describes herself as someone who likes to jump in to help people, even if it means getting herself into trouble. She brandishes her derringer coolly on more than one occasion. She demonstrates leniency toward those who would have harmed her and shows no fear of a hardened KGB agent who has her at a disadvantage. At the same time, Alexis states unequivocally that she works in a man's world and is unapologetic about asking for favors from powerful male friends to accomplish her tasks. As she says, it really is not her fault if they fall in love with her. Moreover, she's not above enjoying spending her investigative fees on a Dior shopping spree before jetting off to Britain to help her friend.

Smith's fast-paced writing style suits her main character's desire to jump in with both feet. Within the first three pages, Alexis is on the case when the landlady's description of her tenant arouses her suspicions. While working to learn the truth about the tenant, Alexis takes on the department store case and seeks to discover the source of political graffiti on her landlady's door. Alexis barely sits down at her desk after solving her first cases, when the phone call sending her to Britain to aid MI5 comes in. Once there, the pace does not slacken.

This fast pace may prevent Smith from writing more complex mysteries. For instance, Alexis recognizes the stolen department store merchandise easily and immediately notices one character's dislike for the countess's dog. These are only minor examples cited out of concern for giving too much away. However, because the action is only seen through the main character's point of view, the story might benefit from more challenging cases.

Russian Roulette can best be described as a light, entertaining novel with a particularly beguiling main character. It would be interesting to see Alexis face more difficult mysteries in the future. She would most certainly rise to the occasion.

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