Helping your children choose books they will love

I reading

Lovereading4kids.co.uk is a book website created for parents and children to make choosing books easy and fun

Opening extract from

A Crime of Fashion

Written & Illustrated by

Carina Axelsson

Published by

Usborne Publishing Ltd

All Text is Copyright © of the Author and/or Illustrator

Please print off and read at your leisure.

Lovereading4kids.co.uk



After zipping my dress, the stylist helped me step into a pair of high-heeled snakeskin sandals and gave me a thumbs up. I launched myself down the length of the room towards Claude. As I teetered past him and turned, Claude's phone rang. "What now?" he answered.

I was trying to hear what Claude was saying while concentrating on not tripping. Walking on heels is definitely easier said than done…

Remembering Ellie's command to "feel" the shoes and to "trust" myself, I lifted my eyes and as I was about to walk past Claude again, I tried to concentrate on what he was saying…

"Do you actually think I'd kidnap my own sister?"

To Gustav, as promised, and with love…
And a huge, sparkly thanks to the
ever-patient and super-fab, Jenny Savill.

First published in the UK in 2014 by Usborne Publishing Ltd., Usborne House, 83-85 Saffron Hill, London EC1N 8RT, England. www.usborne.com

Copyright © 2014 by Carina Axelsson

Cover illustration by Yusuf Doğanay

Author photo by Anne-Marie Mulot

The right of Carina Axelsson to be identified as the author of this work has been asserted by her in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act, 1988.

The name Usborne and the devices  are Trade Marks of Usborne Publishing Ltd.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise without the prior permission of the publisher.

This is a work of fiction. The characters, incidents, and dialogues are products of the author's imagination and are not to be construed as real. Any resemblance to actual events or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN 9781409563686 JFMAMJJASO D/13 02990/1

Printed in Chatham, Kent, UK.

She was being pushed up a stairwell – of that much Belle was sure.

"Come on, faster," urged the gruff voice behind her. "Do you think we're window-shopping at Chanel?"

She couldn't have answered the question if she'd wanted to – the tape on her mouth made sure of that. Up, up, up they climbed. It was a tight, steep, stone stairwell – an old one, judging from the worn edges and uneven steps she kept tripping over. But, then, buildings in Paris were full of old stone stairwells – if they were still in Paris, that was. The tightly bound blindfold was preventing her from confirming what the rest of her could only feel.

Suddenly they came to a halt. From behind, an arm reached out along her side and a key was worked roughly into a lock. There was a raspy scrape, then a click, as the lock was opened.

"This is it, gorgeous – your ivory tower."

Her blindfold was removed and the tape on her mouth was pulled off, but, before she could cry for help, she was unceremoniously thrust onto a musty bed, its metal springs squeaking loudly in complaint as she landed on it.

"Get some rest," she was told, as her captor retreated, "and we'll negotiate later."

She lay face down with her wrists tied. Seconds later she heard the key turn.

Belle was locked in.

SUNDAY MORNING

Unfashionable Beginnings

There was no backing out now, I thought as I slipped the two tickets out of their envelope for a last look before putting them into my tote bag. They looked harmless enough. Although why shouldn't they? It was hardly their fault I was being shipped to Paris.

AXELLE ANDERSON
London St. Pancras – Paris Gare du Nord
Train 3309 Departure Time 15h05
Coach 12 Seat 35

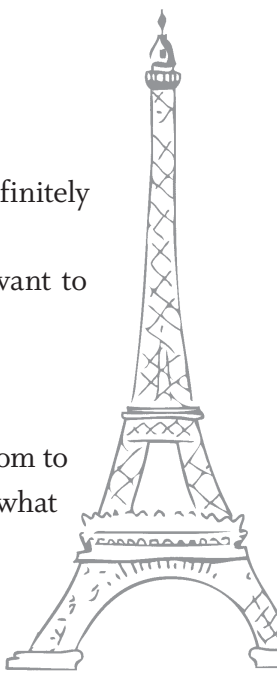
Nope. No getting out of it – that was definitely my name printed there.

"Axelle, hurry up, would you? We don't want to be late!"

And that was definitely my mum's voice.

"Axelle?"

"Coming!" Quickly I lurched across my room to the wardrobe opposite my bed. I didn't care what



my mum said – I was taking it. As far as I was concerned, I needed all the good vibes I could get. From the back of the bottom drawer I pulled out my lucky jumper and shoved it into my tote.

"Your father has started the car!"

"Coming!" With a last look around my room and a quick kiss on the top of Halley's furry white head, I bounded down the stairs.

It was sunny and bright that afternoon; a brisk spring breeze whistled through the St. Pancras terminal as, thirty minutes later, I waited for the boarding call for my train with Mum and Dad.

"Axelle, did you pack your new jumper?"

"Don't forget to charge your phone."

"And did you have to take your old tote bag? After I've just bought you a new one?"

"Forty-four, Axelle! Don't forget to put a +44 before dialling any English number."

"And for goodness' sake, DO brush your hair while you're away, Axelle. Every day."

No, I hadn't packed my new jumper, I'd packed my old and lucky jumper, but there was no point admitting to that now. Like, how old did they think I was? And hadn't I been to Paris often enough that I knew how to dial out?

Parents. Honestly.

"And remember, Axelle," said my mum, "this is *your* week. Enjoy yourself!"

Right, I thought. If this is *my* week then why am I going somewhere I don't want to go to do something I absolutely don't want to do?

"You might end up liking it so much you'll never come back!" my dad said.

Yeah, ha ha, Dad.

The final call for my train was announced over the loudspeakers. I gave my parents a last hug, then turned, stepped through the automatic doors and queued for security. Minutes later I climbed into my carriage on Platform 5, one floor up from the entrance level. I could just see my parents near the Searcys bar next to the platform. My mum was walking along, looking into the carriage windows. She saw me just as the train began to pull out of the station.

I waved goodbye to my family as the train began its two-and-a-half-hour journey to Paris. I kept waving until they were nothing more than pinpricks of colour on the now distant platform and then, with the final turn out of the train station, disappeared from view altogether. I leaned back deeply in my seat and stretched my legs out in front of me, careful not to hit the stockinged ankles of the lady sitting across from me.

This wasn't my first trip to Paris – I'd been many times before. But this was my first trip alone…and, contrary to

what probably happens to most sixteen-year-old girls, I was being sent to Paris for Fashion Week as *punishment*.

I'll start at the beginning: what I love most in this world is a mystery. Getting to the bottom of a story, finding a secret, following a riddle, solving a puzzle, that's what makes me buzz. Discerning the differences between what people do and what they say is fun, a never-ending game of find-the-motive. My mum likes to say sleuthing is my "hobby", but that's like saying Lady Gaga likes to sing in her spare time. And despite my mum's many delusional attempts to push me to do something else, all I've ever wanted to be is a private detective.

"I blame your gran," she always says. "Every time I turned my back she'd switch off *Sesame Street* and pop in one of her Agatha Christie DVDs. Instead of Elmo and Big Bird you had Hercule Poirot and Miss Marple."

Then I always say, "It hasn't done me any harm!" which makes my mum roll her eyes. "Besides," I continue, "what's so wrong with wanting to be a private detective?"

"Axelle, detective work is for old men shuffling around in trench coats," she likes to remind me, "although, mind you, Burberry has some nice ones out right now – but, still, Axelle, is that really what you want to be?"

"What about Nancy Drew? She's not an old man in a trench coat."

"True. But she didn't get that convertible by solving mysteries."

"Maybe she didn't, but I will."

"Right." Then, at this point there is always a short pause, after which my mum invariably starts with the one idea I'm absolutely allergic to: "Axelle, why don't you give modelling a try?" This is my mum's big wish, that I become a model (failing that she'd love me to take over her successful interior design business – but modelling wins by a long shot). "Your Aunt Venetia could help you and with your long legs—"

"I'm short, Mum, remember?"

"You're not *that* short, Axelle, and if you cut your hair…" Blah, blah, blah.

It's always the same, round and round we go. It's the one story I never seem to get anywhere with.

At least my best friend Jennifer Watanabe is supportive – up to a point.

"I mean, you *are* good at finding stuff out, Axelle. Remember how you found Mrs Singh's missing mail? And remember my mascara?"

"Halley found your mascara in the garden. That hardly qualifies as great detection."

"Still. I wouldn't have found it without you – I mean, she's your dog."

"Thanks, Jen."

"Anyway, my point is, even if you are good at figuring

things out – and you are – what could be the harm in, you know…trying to *improve* yourself a little?"

The problem with Jenny's ideas for my self-improvement is that they always involve my appearance. Lying on her bed as we had this discussion for the hundredth time, I watched as she looked at me through half-closed eyes, like an artist before a lump of fast-drying clay. "Your silence is becoming ominous, Jenny," I said.

Jenny herself left no room for improvement – she was perfect, as far as I could tell. Her straight black hair fell in a shiny sheet to the middle of her back, her face was devoid of pores and her delicate build never failed to make me feel gangly by comparison.

"If you'd just let your hair—"

"Don't start with my hair, Jenny."

"And your glasses—"

"I like wearing my glasses!"

Jenny shrugged her shoulders. "Fine. Have it your way. But you could easily look totally amazing. You'd have everyone at school eating out of your hand. I mean, look at you, Axelle, you're slim and you've got the longest legs of anyone I know. Lots of people think you're a model…"

Jenny left the rest unsaid – namely, that lots of people think I'm a model…*until I turn around*.

"It's your hair, Axelle. It's too overwhelming. And those glasses – do they have to be so big? And so *heavy*? And why can't you let me do your make-up instead of—"

"You know why I do what I do. I mean, how am I supposed to be a detective if I walk around looking like some supermodel? Then I'll have everyone staring at me and I'll never get to the bottom of anything. As a private eye I'm supposed to blend in, remember?"

"You sort of have a point… "

"I *totally* have a point."

Sometimes talking to Jenny could be scarily similar to talking with my mum.

For the most part I think I've always managed to combine my detective work with school and home quite well. The investigative column I write for the school magazine gives me some good cover when nosing around and as long as I keep my grades up – which I do – there isn't much my parents can say. *But* there have been a few incidents lately that, for whatever reason, seem to have exploded out of all proportion, like mushrooms after a rainy day. And, unfortunately, the worst one had to happen when I was with my mum…

A few weeks ago Mum and I went shopping together at her favourite department store. She loves shopping there so much that I would actually count it as a hobby of hers. Anyway, we were at a cosmetics counter and my mum was being given a facial by a woman with dark hair scraped back into a hard bun. She wore lots of jewellery and

enunciated her words v-e-r-y c-l-e-a-r-l-y. She was telling my mum that she knew the products worked because just last night she had celebrated her fortieth birthday and see how fresh and youthful her skin looked. Needless to say that got me thinking because, honestly, her complexion did look fresh and youthful – suspiciously so. While my mum told her, "Wow, you look amazing for your age," I slipped behind the counter and took a look around. Within thirty seconds I'd found what I was looking for.

"Excuse me," I said, "but is your name Leanne?"

"Why, yes," she answered, surprised. "How did you know?" I saw one of my mum's eyes slowly open, panic beginning to register in it. With that green stuff slathered all over her face and her hair pulled back into a hairnet, she looked like an angry turtle. Anyway, I was hot on the trail of truth and wasn't about to let my mother stop me.

"Right. So, Leanne, why did you just lie to us about your age?"

Underneath its layer of powder, the saleslady's face turned white. My mum's second eye opened, the panic changing into outright anger.

"According to your employee card you're actually only thirty-two – or is that a lie too?" I didn't want to get her in trouble or anything – I simply wanted the truth – but no sooner was it out of my mouth than a tight-lipped silence filled the air. The saleslady was not amused. Neither was Mum.

We had to cross the entire cosmetics floor and then walk along a good length of Knightsbridge in the glare of broad daylight with Mum's face slathered in a bright green face mask. As Mum drove out of our parking space (a bit too quickly, I thought), she seemed stressed, so I said, "Mum, calm down. I'm sure that with a lot of warm water and some elbow grease that green guck will come off your face."

Suddenly the car swerved, narrowly avoiding a few pedestrians and a bus. I thought Mum was about to have a heart attack. But no. "This has nothing to do with the mask on my face, Axelle! It has to do with you! You should calm down and STOP STICKING YOUR NOSE INTO OTHER PEOPLE'S BUSINESS." Mum was wiping furiously at her face with a tissue she had found in the glove compartment but she wasn't having much luck – the mask had dried to a pretty hard consistency.

"I don't do it intentionally – it just kind of happens. I get a feeling about something and then I need to follow it to its natural conclusion."

Mum gave me a look that even the hardened streaks of the face mask couldn't disguise the meaning of.

"'Just kind of happens'? This time you've gone too far, Axelle, really TOO FAR. You have no limits when it comes to snooping around. None. Zero. You've got to start going out more, doing more, seeing more… I mean, you've spent more time in the last year working on your 'cases' for your school column or spying on our neighbours than most girls

your age spend in the bathroom."

"But, Mum, she was lying to you!"

"And so what, Axelle? Who cares? It was only a facial and the poor woman was only trying to do her job. She's not Mrs Peacock in the conservatory with the candlestick! Life isn't a game of Cluedo!"

"I was only trying to help. It's not my fault if I felt something was off with what she said – and, by the way, I was right!"

"Axelle, that 'I felt something' line doesn't work any more. It's time you discovered there's more to life than solving mysteries which don't even exist."

Needless to say, the ride home was quiet after that, although as we drove past Marble Arch my mum let slip (in the same way one lets slip a lion from its cage) that perhaps it was time that she and my dad helped me "take full responsibility for your actions". Well, as time would prove, it wasn't an empty threat. The seed of the idea must have already begun to sprout, and by the time we turned out of Hyde Park at Bayswater, I've no doubt that her plan was fully formed.

Four nights ago (and three weeks after the face mask incident) it was my birthday. And because it fell on a school night, we were to have dinner at home. Mum was going to make pizzas and Jenny and her parents were coming round. "We have a special surprise for you tonight, Axelle," Mum told me that morning.

My mum's idea of a special surprise tends to have sleeves.

But maybe I'd get lucky and my parents would give me the periscope I'd been asking for. ("If they don't give you one," said Jenny, "then we can make one with mirrors from my supply of make-up freebies.") Anyway, I crossed my fingers and hoped this was the surprise my mum was so mysteriously alluding to.

After dinner the cake was brought out. As the birthday girl I had the privilege of cutting it. Now all I had to do was sit back, eat my cake, and wait for my present.

WRONG.

As I was scraping up the last bits of cake with my fork, my dad decided to drop the bomb. He pushed his chair back and cleared his throat. "Axelle, your mother and I have a wonderful gift for you. We've put a lot of thought into this and we feel sure we've found a gift that will mean something special to you…"

Can I just say that at this point all of my alert systems were *on*. Any time my parents start using words like "wonderful", "thoughtful" or "special", I get nervous.

My dad cleared his throat again before continuing. "For your sixteenth birthday we have decided to send you – alone – to your favourite city…the city you know so well…" My dad paused, hand frozen in mid-air as he smiled at me and waited.

Paris was the only city besides London that I knew well. My aunt lived there. I'd grown up going regularly with my mum to visit her. I even had a French name. And while I

liked Paris – *really* liked it, even – there was something about my dad's frozen smile that made me nervous. "Uh… Paris?" I carefully asked.

"Exactly! Paris! And you'll be there for Fashion Week."

A haze of silence descended upon me as I digested this surprise. As if from the end of a long tunnel, I heard my mum say, "And you'll leave on Sunday."

How did we go from periscope to Paris? HOW? Even a surprise with sleeves would have been better.

I was in shock. My mouth just kind of hung limply open. My hair hung, too. I mean, PARIS? And FASHION WEEK? ME? Surely this was some kind of joke?

"And," my father continued, "thanks to your Aunt Venetia, you will be spending your time there working as her personal fashion assistant at *Chic: Paris* magazine!"

Right. It wasn't a joke.

After this last cruel bit, I was in a state of such anger and stupefaction that, honestly, it's a miracle my hair didn't spontaneously combust and just disintegrate off the top of my head. To make matters worse, the Watanabes (yes, *et tu*, Jenny) were oohing and aahing and making all kinds of aren't-you-the-lucky-one comments.

"But I don't want to go to Paris! I know nothing about fashion nor am I even the least bit interested in it! I LIKE WEARING A SCHOOL UNIFORM PRECISELY BECAUSE I DON'T HAVE TO THINK ABOUT FASHION!!!"

"Axelle, calm down, please. It's only for a week and,

besides, this is an opportunity any girl would love," Mum chirped brightly.

"But I am not any girl! And I don't want to go to Paris or work in fashion! And I don't want to work with Aunt Venetia! She's a dragon!"

"Listen, Axelle," my dad said, "you know we wouldn't ask you to do this unless we felt it was important. We feel you've been going a bit overboard with your 'detective work' lately, and, well, this could be a wonderful opportunity for you to see new things, expand your horizons…"

ARGH! PARENTS. How corny can they get? "Yeah, but—"

"No buts, Axelle," my dad said sternly. "If you don't go to Paris then Aunt Venetia is ready to set up a week-long internship at one of the magazines here in London."

"I wonder if *Vogue* would have you…" my mum chimed in.

I felt my mouth fall open again. "You can't be serious?"

"Actually, Axelle," my parents answered in unison, "we are."

"You decide," my mum finished for them both. "Paris or London."

I slumped into one of the living-room armchairs and closed my eyes. I couldn't believe this was happening! Jenny must have wisely decided I needed a bit of time to myself because she stayed at the table. Suddenly I felt claustrophobic. I heaved myself out of the armchair, grabbed my dad's cardigan, climbed the stairs up to our tiny roof terrace and

gave in to my anguish on my own. The one person in the world who would have understood how I felt – and who no doubt would have vetoed the entire Paris idea – was Gran. And she wasn't here. How I missed her.

Wrapping the cardigan tighter around myself, I lay down on the chaise longue, looked up at the sky and took a deep breath. I told myself that a week wasn't for ever. I'd go to Paris – that much was sure. There was no way I'd stay in London and submit to Mum's daily interrogations on everything I'd been doing at *Vogue* or wherever. Besides, with a bit of luck my workaholic Aunt Venetia just might forget about me for long enough to let me do some exploring on my own. Seven days in Paris with my fashion editor aunt couldn't be that bad…could it?

Actually…

Yes, it could.

I know I was angry when I called my aunt a dragon, but, honestly, my Aunt Venetia really is a dragon – and a dragon of the worst kind. She's a fashion dragon – which means that instead of breathing plain old flames, she breathes silk and patent leather and address books filled with unpronounceable names.

I admit that after years of listening to my aunt bang on about fashion I know quite a bit about it. But still…that doesn't mean I want to be a part of it – not even for a week!

I lay outside for some time, looking at the stars. Eventually, I heard Jenny and her parents leave, after which

the house went quiet. Thankfully, I was left alone. Even Halley wasn't scratching at the door to join me.

You decide: Paris or London.

My parents' ultimatum continued to ring in my ears. Again my thoughts switched back to my gran. She would have known just what to tell me, how to make me see the bright side of things (is there a bright side to fashion that doesn't involve sequins or neon lycra?). Of course, more often than not, Gran's favourite solution consisted of a pot of tea and the latest episode of *Midsomer Murders*. "Come sit with me, Axelle," she'd say with a twinkle in her eye. "It'll do you good to get your mind off school" (or my parents or whatever the problem of the moment was) "for an hour." And she was right – I always left feeling better.

Anyway, my decision was made – Paris it would be. Quietly I made my way to my bedroom, undressed, and slipped into bed beside Halley's snoring warmth. Her sweet little West Highland white terrier eyes were shut tight. Halley, I thought ruefully, had been a much better birthday gift (for my 10th) than Paris Fashion Week. My last thought before closing my eyes was a silent prayer that I'd manage to survive both Fashion Week in Paris and my aunt – and that one day soon I'd find a case to solve that was so interesting, so big, so undeniably juicy that my parents would finally bow to the inevitable and give up in their efforts to change me.

That wasn't asking too much, was it?