TAYLOR & ROSE

Secret Agents

PERIL IN PARIS

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TAYLOR & ROSE
Secret Agents



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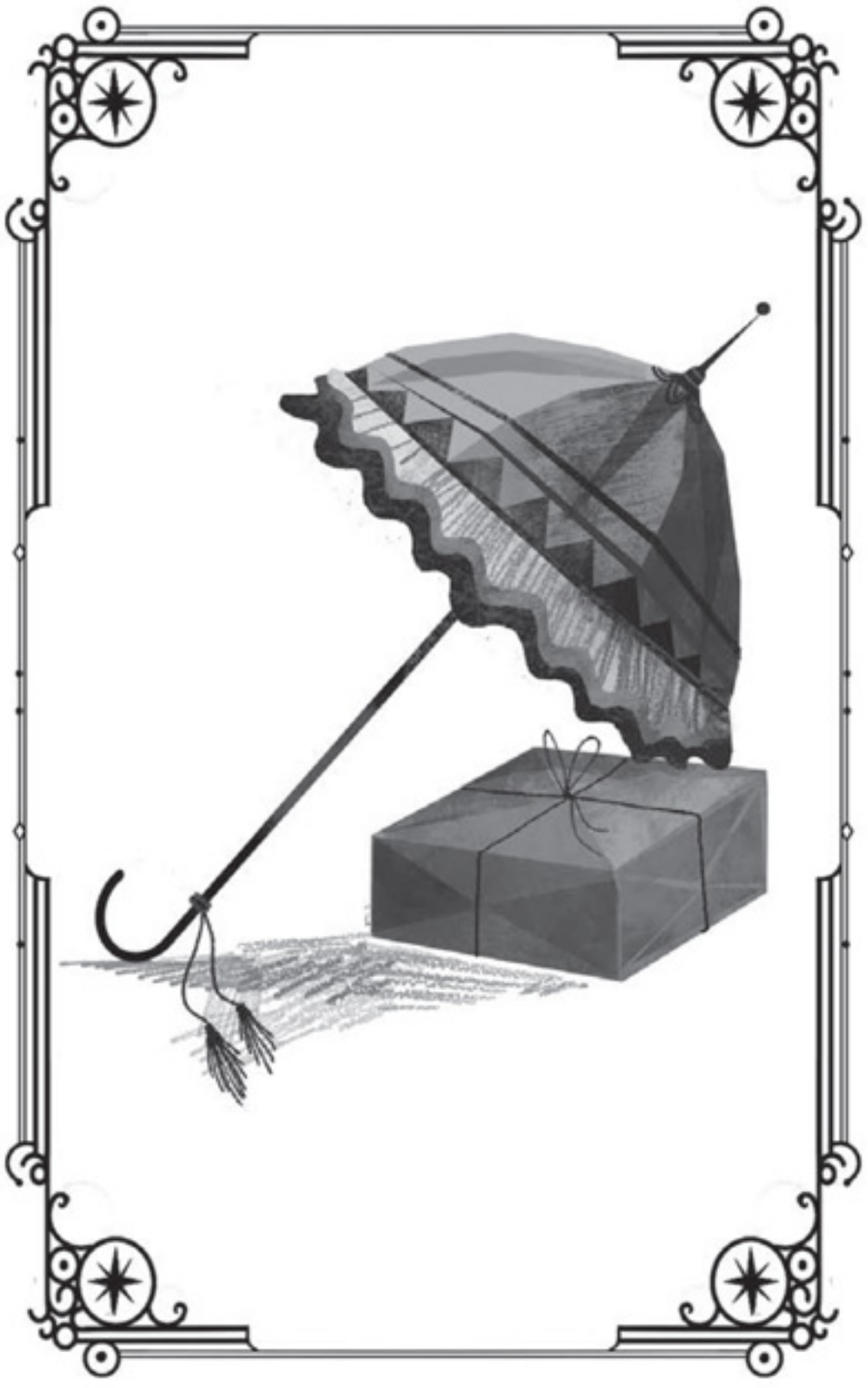
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To all the readers who asked
for more of Sophie and Lil


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SWEDEN
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ATLANTIC OCEAN
NORTH SEA
BALTIC SEA
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PART I

'Arnovia is as pretty as a picture postcard. It feels rather like we have gone back in time to another century. We arrived yesterday by train, travelling through a tunnel that cuts through the mountains: Papa told me it is the longest railway tunnel in Europe.

Arnovia itself is a tiny country, sandwiched in between Germany, Switzerland and Austria-Hungary. We are staying in the capital, Elffburg, on the banks of the River Elff, in lodgings close to the Royal Palace. This morning we saw the Royal Family drive out in their carriage – quite a spectacle!

Papa says that his business here will be complete in three days, and then he has promised me a trip into Arnovia's wild countryside. Until then I believe I shall be perfectly happy trying all the cakes in the city's wonderful cake shops, which are as famous as the glorious mountains I can see in the distance . . .'

– From the diary of Alice Grayson

NO8921 NORTON NEWSPAPERS ONE HALF-PENNY

THE DAILY PICTURE

10th June 1911

FIRST GRAND AERIAL TOUR OF EUROPE ANNOUNCED

LONDON prepares for Coronation celebrations.

Preparations are well on the way as the entire capital are gearing up for the grand day in our Royal history. Gladis May Berkshop of East Clapham speaks of the excitement 'We're planing a street party, with lots of cake & songs we're all very much looking forward to celebrating our new King.' Continues p5.



PILOTS PREPARING FOR RACE

Norton Newspapers are proud to announce the inaugural GRAND AERIAL TOUR OF EUROPE - an air race in ten stages, with a prize of £10,000. Sir Chester Norton is personally offering this astonishing prize for the pilot who completes the race in first place. Our correspondent Miss R. Russell reports from Paris, where the race will commence *(continued p 4)*

INTERNATIONAL NEWS

British scholar killed in Paris burglary -

Mysterious death of scholar. FULL investigation to be carried out by officials. More details on this tragic news continues on page 12.

INTERNATIONAL NEWS: Tensions mount in Arnovia - Unsurprisingly the frictions in Arnovia are coming to a boil. Continue reading the full report on page 10, by our own foreign affairs reporter Harriet Popham.

Worth appointed new Commissioner of Scotland Yard - p 19

Meet the Season's loveliest debutantes! - p 25

CHAPTER ONE

Wilderstein Castle, Arnovia

Anna knew that there was something strange about the new governess.

She'd had the odd feeling that something wasn't quite right about Miss Carter from the first day she'd arrived in the schoolroom. She'd been dressed exactly as you'd expect a governess to be: spectacles, sensible shoes, hair in a neat bun. But as she'd glanced around, taking them all in – the Countess, her pouchy face patched scarlet with rouge and white with powder, the Count with his bristling moustache and his head as pink and shiny as a boiled ham, and of course, herself and Alex – Anna had thought at once that she didn't really seem like a governess at all.

To begin with, Miss Carter was young and pretty. Their last governess had seemed at least a hundred years old. She'd had grey hair and a bonnet with a drooping black feather in it, and Alex had made up stories about how she was really a wicked witch, who lived in a cottage in the

woods and kidnapped little children. But Miss Carter did not look like a witch, or not that kind of witch, anyway. Her clothes were neat and plain, but there was a sort of glamour about her. Her voice was smooth as cream as she held out a hand in the English way and said: 'You must be Princess Anna. How do you do?'

Anna winced as she shook hands. Miss Carter had begun all wrong: she ought to have addressed Anna as 'Your Highness' but, more importantly, she ought to have greeted Alex first. Anna might be the eldest, but royal etiquette dictated that Alex came first in everything. The Countess pursed her lips, already displeased, but of course Alex didn't care a bit, he just smiled and shook Miss Carter's hand too. The new governess smiled back at him, and for a brief, flashing moment, she seemed somehow familiar. Then the moment was gone and Miss Carter was a stranger again, smiling a rather too-wide, too-white smile. It was a Cheshire Cat grin, all sugar and charm, whilst her dark eyes flitted about the room as though she was looking for something.

'Rather a peculiar choice, isn't she?' Anna overheard the Count say to the Countess later. They were in their private sitting room, but his voice rumbled out of the open window, on to the terrace where Anna could hear every word.

'Hmmm,' said the Countess. It was amazing how she could fill such a small sound with so much disapproval,

Anna thought. 'You know what Leopold is like. But she does at least come with solid *academic* qualifications.' There was the rustling of paper – that must be the letter that Grandfather had sent about Miss Carter. 'He says that she speaks German, French and Italian. And she knows all the best English schools. I suppose he thinks she will help to *prepare* Alexander.'

The Count grunted in reluctant agreement, but her words made Anna feel cold inside. Alex was eleven now, and she knew that very soon he would be sent away to boarding school in England. Going away to school was what boys in their family always did: it was what their father had done, and Grandfather before him, and no doubt *his* father and grandfather before that. The Countess said that English schools were the best, and of course Alex must have the best of everything. For he was the Crown Prince of Arnovia, next in line to the throne after Grandfather, and that meant that one day he would be King.

Anna, on the other hand, would not be going away to school. Not to England, nor to anywhere else for that matter. Although she was thirteen – two whole years older than Alex – in Arnovia, girls could not inherit the throne. It was always the eldest *boy* who was Crown Prince, and heir to the kingdom. Anna was a princess, but a princess's education was not considered to be very important. When Alex went away to school, she would be left here. Left *behind*, she thought now, with nothing but more coaching from the

Countess in deportment and etiquette, to prepare her for a future of attending balls and making polite conversation, which was all that anyone expected of a princess.

That was what the Countess meant now, when she said: 'Leopold says that the governess is musical, and can dance. That could be useful to Anna.'

'But she's so young!' protested the Count. 'She must be scarcely out of the schoolroom herself!'

The pages rustled again, and then the Countess said: 'Well perhaps that is no bad thing, Rudolf.' Her voice was as precise as the tick of the ancient clock that had been passed down from generations of long-ago Wildersteins. 'Considering everything, a *young* girl may be easier to manage . . .' Then her voice dropped lower, and Anna could hear no more.

She walked slowly back along the terrace, taking care that her feet did not make more than the quietest scrunching sound on the gravel. Anna knew that princesses were not supposed to listen in at windows, or to eavesdrop on private conversations, or to do what Alex affectionately called *sticking their noses where they didn't belong*. If she were caught by the Countess, Anna knew she would be sentenced to even more time sitting at the hard back-board, embroidering the crest of the Royal House of Wilderstein on yet another handkerchief. There were few things Anna hated more than embroidery; and worse still, while she sewed, she'd have to listen to one of the Countess's lectures

about their family's proud history. Though, of course, the Countess didn't think the lecture was a punishment. In fact, she probably thought she was giving Anna a delightful treat.

'The Royal House of Wilderstein has a most distinguished heritage,' she would begin grandly. Her jewellery would tinkle as she moved to and fro in a waft of lavender water and scented face-powder, the train of her brocade gown trailing across the floor. 'Our family dates back to 1314, with the heroic King Otto the Wise of Arnovia . . .' Anna had heard the lectures so many times she thought she could probably quote them in her sleep.

Family history and tradition were impossible to escape here. In the ballroom, generations of her own ancestors seemed to watch her from the oil paintings that hung on the walls. There was King Otto the Wise himself, shown in a dramatic battle scene, brandishing his sword aloft. There was the Count, in full military dress, wearing a helmet with spikes on it and holding a sabre. There was the Countess as a young woman, in a vast, fearsomely ruffled gown.

Anna's own face was amongst them too. On Alex's last birthday, Grandfather had sent a photographer to the castle to take portraits of each of them, which now hung side by side in small oval frames. But they were not very good pictures; somehow the photographer had managed to make them both look even smaller and paler than they actually were. Alex did not look at all like a future King:

instead he was mouse-like, blinking short-sighted dark eyes, a rogue tuft of hair sticking up at the back of his head. As for herself, while princesses in fairy tales were usually radiantly beautiful, she was anything but. Instead she looked uncomfortable in the formal black velvet frock with the stiff collar that the Countess liked, her hair hanging straight and smooth over her shoulders, very dark against the white of her cheeks.

Their photographs hung beside the vast framed portrait of their mother and father, which was surrounded by sombre black curtains. Until Anna was four, the children had lived with their parents and Grandfather in the Royal Palace in Elffburg – but then their parents had died.

Assassination was the proper word for what had happened to them. It hissed like a snake, tracing along her spine.

An *assassination*, Grandfather said, was when someone – often a royal someone – was murdered in a sudden or secret way, for political reasons. In this case, some people who opposed the monarchy had thrown a bomb at their parents' carriage when they had been travelling home from the opera. They had both been killed at once.

The assassination had caused an uproar, with riots on the city streets. The children had been whisked away to safety in the mountains, under the careful supervision of the King's cousin, the Count von Wilderstein and his wife, the Countess. Even when the danger had passed, they had remained at Wilderstein Castle. The air was supposed

to be healthier for Alex, who had asthma and suffered from fits of wheezing. 'Up here, I know you are safe,' said Grandfather.

His eyes were heavy when he talked about their parents, his voice husky and sad. People whispered about what had happened in hushed voices, saying it was *a terrible tragedy*. But the truth was that Anna and Alex didn't really miss their mother and father because they couldn't really remember them. Anna sometimes stood and looked at their portrait, but even when she searched her memory, willing herself to conjure them to life in her mind, she couldn't. They were strangers: just paint and canvas. No more than an old portrait in a tarnished gold frame.

Grandfather, on the other hand, was very real indeed. He spent most of his time in Elffburg, busy with his royal duties, but once or twice a year, he'd arrange for them to visit him. These trips seemed to Anna to belong to a different world, in which she wore a white dress with a green sash and Alex a smart uniform. Grandfather would take them out on official visits all around the city: they'd go to the huge old cathedral dedicated to St Anna, the patron saint of Arnovia for whom Anna herself was named. They'd take a boat trip along the River Elff, or drive in the royal carriage down the narrow streets of colourful houses, where the warm smell of chocolate would drift from the open door of a little *konditorei* selling delicious cakes. In Elffburg the sky always seemed to be blue, and wherever

they went, people smiled and waved the green-and-white Arnovian flag; officials bowed low; the head *konditor* rushed out to present them with the speciality of the house. It was wonderful and strange, like being in a dream.

Anna sometimes let herself imagine what it would be like if they lived in Elffburg with Grandfather all the time. But she knew that wouldn't happen, at least not until they were quite grown up. Grandfather was much too busy to have time for them; he preferred to keep them here, in the mountains, under the Countess's watchful eye.

At least he visited them often. Whenever he came, he'd bring presents – boxes of chocolates tied with ribbons, or sometimes things for them to read. For Alex, he'd bring magazines about theatre stars, or programmes from the latest production at Arnovia's Royal Theatre. For Anna, he'd bring storybooks, most especially English school stories. Ever since she'd read *The Fortunes of Beryl*, a splendid story about a girl who travelled from South America to England, to go to a wonderful boarding school, she'd been entranced by these kinds of books. She might not be able to go away to school herself, but at least she could get lost in marvellous tales of bold schoolgirls who played hockey and tennis, and had all kinds of thrilling adventures, which usually ended in them becoming Head Girl, or at the very least the heroine of the Fourth Form.

The Countess did not really approve of Anna's storybooks, which she considered unsuitable reading for

a princess; nor of Alex's magazines, which she said were 'inappropriate' and 'frivolous'. Unlike the Countess though, the new governess didn't seem to mind in the least what they read. She'd grinned at the sight of *The Fortunes of Beryl* and Anna had even seen her flicking through Alex's theatre magazines herself, once or twice, when she thought that nobody else was watching. It was almost as though Miss Carter didn't really care about what was appropriate for a princess and the future King of Arnovia, Anna thought with a frown.

What was even more puzzling, although she was supposed to be preparing Alex for school, she didn't seem to care very much about lessons either. She had a habit of letting them slide: 'That's enough arithmetic for one day,' she'd say, pushing the textbook away as if she was as bored of it as they were. Instead, she'd let them act out plays, which Alex loved more than anything else. She helped them rehearse some scenes from Shakespeare's *The Tempest* to perform for the Count and Countess, even making them costumes – sticking silver-paper stars on to an old curtain so that Alex could dress as the magician, Prospero, and carefully cutting wings out of cardboard for Anna to wear to play the part of his magical servant, Ariel. She seemed to understand what acting meant to Alex, who was quite different when he was performing, or making up a story. He could roar and rant as the mighty Prospero in a way he never could as his ordinary, timid self.

Other times she'd read aloud, or play games with them – Hide-and-Seek, or Stuck-in-the-Mud, or their favourite, Murder in the Dark. She played just as enthusiastically as Alex and Anna did themselves: when it was her turn to be 'murdered' she died with such horrifying groans and moans that even Alex was impressed.

It ought to have been fun, but there was something about it all that made Anna feel uneasy. She didn't like the way that Miss Carter always seemed to be *there*. Their previous governesses had been attentive, but Miss Carter never left them alone for so much as a moment. For Anna, who was used to being able to slip about the castle by herself, it felt stifling to have the governess always with them, suggesting she read them a story or that they all played a jolly game. After all, Anna was thirteen years old, not a child to be coddled and amused.

Alex, on the other hand, seemed to relish Miss Carter's company. He spent hours listening to her talk about the school he'd be going to in the autumn. 'My brother went to the same school, and he told me all about it,' she'd begin, before embarking on complicated explanations of what the boys ate, their games, their lessons and the pranks they played on the schoolmasters. Alex hung on to every word whilst Anna fidgeted resentfully beside him. It was bad enough that Alex would get to go away and live in the wonderful world of school she'd read about – that enchanted realm of satchels and swimming baths,

and delightful unknown things like 'chemistry labs' and 'gymnasiums' – without having to hear every detail of his new life, before he was even gone.

'I don't know why you're being so funny about her,' Alex said, on a rare moment when they were alone. They were in the castle grounds, throwing a ball for the Count's dog, a rather sorrowful-looking long-haired dachshund that Alex had nicknamed Würstchen, because he was exactly the same shape as the fat sausages the Count always ate for breakfast. 'I thought you loved all that boarding-school stuff. Besides, I think Miss Carter's marvellous. She's by far the best governess we've ever had.'

Now he was even starting to *sound* like her, thought Anna irritably. Couldn't he see that there was something odd about the way Miss Carter was always hanging around them? And what kind of governess didn't care about lessons? The only time she ever made them do any work was when the Countess appeared in the schoolroom – then suddenly it was all grammar and arithmetic and history dates. But as soon as the door had closed, she'd be back to acting out plays.

Alone with Miss Carter in the schoolroom, Anna studied the governess carefully from behind her copy of *The School by the Sea*. The two heroines, Mops and Jean, were having a most thrilling adventure in the middle of the night, but somehow she couldn't fix her attention on their exploits. Why was Miss Carter working so hard to make

them like her? Why did she sometimes have that odd, wary look on her face, like a fox on the prowl?

Just then, there was a sharp tap on the school-room door and Miss Carter sat upright, suddenly alert. But it was only Karl, one of the footmen.

'A telegram for you, Miss Carter,' he announced, offering her a silver tray. Karl was one of the children's great friends, and he paused to flash Anna a quick grin before performing a bow, and withdrawing politely again.

Miss Carter had already ripped open the envelope. As she glanced at the telegram, Anna saw a frown flit over her face, but then she said cheerfully: 'Oh, how nice – a message from an old friend.' She got to her feet, pushing the telegram into her pocket and out of sight before Anna could see it. 'Excuse me for a moment – I'm going to go and telephone through a reply.'

'Is everything all right?' Anna asked at once.

'Oh, yes, of course – quite all right,' said Miss Carter blithely. But she went out of the room in a hurry, so distracted that she forgot the spectacles she always wore for reading and writing, leaving them lying beside Anna on the table. Without really thinking about what she was doing, Anna picked up the governess's spectacles and tried them on. As soon as she did so, she realised something very surprising.

They were not real spectacles.

The lenses were quite plain, ordinary glass.

She dropped the spectacles back on to the table as though they had burned her fingers. Why would a person wear pretend spectacles – spectacles that clearly they did not really need? It was as though Miss Carter were wearing a disguise, or a costume. As though she were merely *dressing up* as a governess, and acting the part.

The thought electrified her, as though a flash of something had run through her. Now she was quite sure of it. There was something very strange about the new governess, and Anna was determined that she would find out exactly what it was.