

TAYLOR & ROSE

Secret Agents

SPIES IN ST. PETERSBURG



KATHERINE WOODFINE

Illustrated by Karl James Mountford

Taylor and Rose Secret Agents

Katherine Woodfine
Spies in St. Petersburg

«HarperCollins»

Woodfine K.

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With Sophie still missing in action after their explosive mission in Paris, Lil decides to take matters into her own hands. On a new mission for the Secret Service Bureau, can Lil find Sophie in misty, mysterious St Petersburg? Can they uncover the identity of their true enemy and can they trust anyone – even the Bureau? It's time for Sophie and Lil to put their spy skills to the test. Read the first book in the TAYLOR AND ROSE SECRET AGENTS series: PERIL IN PARIS Don't miss The SINCLAIR'S MYSTERIES series: THE CLOCKWORK SPARROW THE JEWELLED MOTH THE PAINTED DRAGON THE MIDNIGHT PEACOCK Perfect for fans of Robin Stevens's Murder Most Unladylike series, Katherine Rundell and Emma Carroll.

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Illustrated by Karl James Mountford

EGMONT

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We bring stories to life

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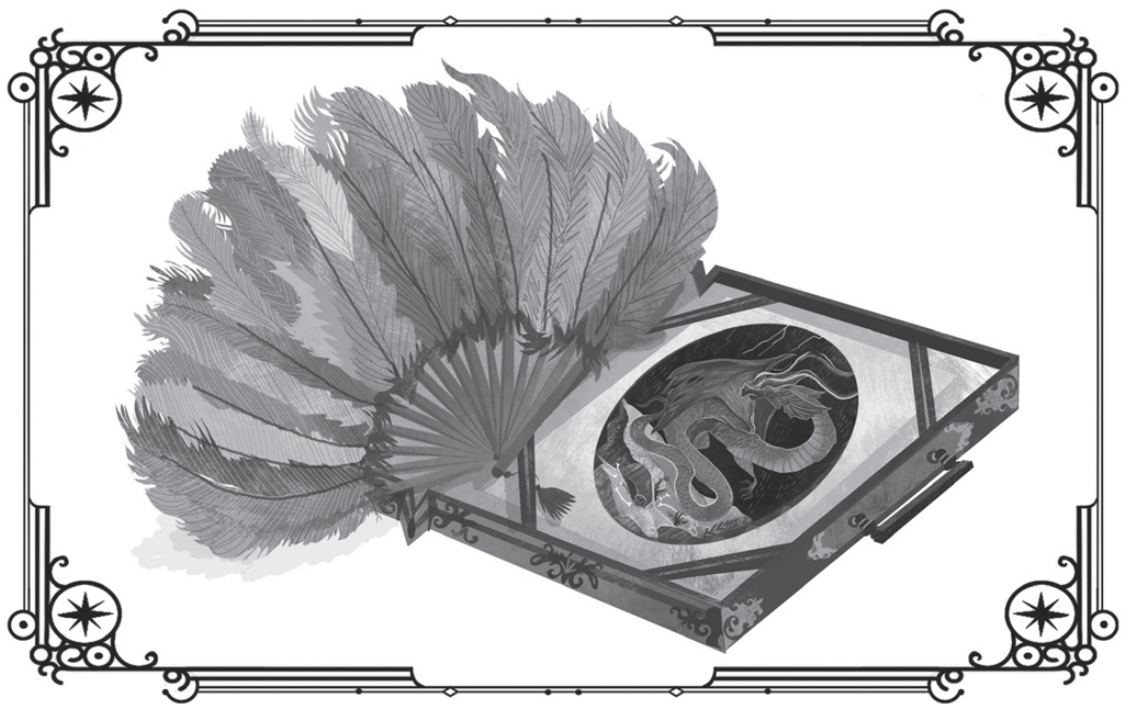
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For Louise, of course



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PART I

'Staying in one place is all very well – but there's nothing quite like the feeling of excitement I get when I see Papa bringing out the maps and railway timetables. Before I know it, he'll have our trunks fetched, and then he'll say: "Pack your things, Alice! We shall soon be on the move again!"'

– From the diary of Alice Grayson

No. 9029

A NORTON NEWSPAPER

One Half-Penny

19th September 1911

THE DAILY PICTURE

DEATH OF RUSSIAN PREMIER

VIOLENT REVOLUTIONARY GROUP SUSPECTED

It was reported today that the Russian Premier, Pyotr Stolypin, has died in Kiev. Premier Stolypin was shot by an assassin at Kiev's Imperial Theatre several nights ago, during a performance attended by

Tsar Nicholas II. The assassin is believed to have been part

of a violent revolutionary group, working to assassinate important Russian statesmen: there is speculation that the group had also planned to target the Tsar himself in their attack.

Over one hundred and fifty arrests have been made in Kiev following the shooting, and tensions look set to continue in the city with (continued p.5)



ON TOUR WITH THE CIRCUS OF MARVELS!



In the first instalment of a spectacular new series, our reporter Miss R. Russell extends a cordial invitation to you to join her on tour with the enchanting 'Circus of Marvels'. Miss Russell will be accompanying the 'world's greatest show' as they commence a Grand Tour, travelling from Europe to Russia, Japan, and on to the USA. She will share incredible tales from behind-the-scenes in the thrilling world of the circus, starring the likes of Mademoiselle Fleurette 'Queen of the Air' and famous equestrian performers The Fabulous Fanshawes (continued p.7)

INTERNATIONAL NEWS

Montreal bank robbers still at large - police have 'no leads' our Foreign Affairs reporter Mr R. Gleeson has the full story (p.19)

Tensions mount between Italy and Turkey (p.21)

AERIAL TOUR FINALE

Champion pilot Charlton is guest star at Sir Chester Norton's London reception to celebrate the finale of the Grand Aerial Tour of Europe (p.3)

CHAPTER ONE

Mayfair, London, England

‘Where will you be travelling this year, my dear?’ asked the lady in pink satin ruffles. ‘The Riviera, as usual?’

‘Yes, and then to St Moritz for winter sports,’ replied her friend in lace frills. ‘What about you?’

‘Oh, Charles is always so tiresome about wanting to attend shooting parties in the autumn,’ sighed the lady in pink. ‘Not at all my idea of fun! But I hope we shall go away in a month or two. I simply *long* for abroad!’

‘London is so dull once the Season has ended,’ agreed her companion, looking around the room with a disappointed air. ‘Everything interesting seems to happen somewhere else.’

It was true that the summer Season, with its grand entertainments, was over. Yet this quieter autumn gathering was still magnificent by most people’s standards. The long supper table was heaped with tempting delicacies, and silver bowls of fruit punch gleamed in the glittering light of the chandeliers. The ballroom was bathed in rich golden light, and outside the long windows, London was turning gold too. The leaves of the trees flamed yellow and orange, and a hundred little lights twinkled in the distance, as a soft blue twilight fell.

In the ballroom, a string quartet played an elegant waltz, and young ladies in white frocks danced gracefully with upright young gentlemen, whilst their mamas watched approvingly from the sidelines. At the edge of the dance floor, one of the sons of the house was being chivvied forward by his own mama.

‘Good heavens, Rupert! What *is* the matter with you?’ Lady Grenville pointed her fan in the direction of a young lady across the room. ‘Look – there’s Lady Cynthia, sitting all by herself! Can’t you go and ask her in to supper with you?’

But Rupert shrugged her off. He had no interest in his mother’s social gatherings, which he thought dull and old-fashioned. He didn’t want to dance with the prim debutantes, or to chat with their earnest dancing partners. Most of all, he did *not* want to sit and have supper with the sneering Lady Cynthia, under the beady eye of her chaperone. Muttering something gruff, he strode off to the refreshment table, helping himself to another cup of punch before retreating to a corner where he stood alone, pulling at his too-tight collar.

From across the room, a girl stood and watched him. Anyone who noticed her would probably think her just the same as the other young ladies present – a pretty girl of eighteen or so, who had no doubt made her ‘debut’ in society that summer. Yet a sharp-eyed observer might have noticed that there was something different about her. It was hard to pinpoint exactly what it was: perhaps her stylish white gown, perhaps her shining dark hair with the vivid spray of crimson roses pinned against it – or perhaps the bright gleam in her eyes, as she glanced around the room, as though she was seeing it more clearly than anyone else.

For a moment more, she watched Rupert fold his arms and sprawl back against the mantelpiece. Then she crossed the room towards him.

‘These balls are so dreadfully dull – don’t you think?’

Rupert turned in surprise. Wrapped up in his boredom, he hadn’t noticed her approaching. Now, she stood just behind him, leaning against the wall as though she was as bored as he was himself. He looked up at her – for she was taller than he was – and his eyes widened. Well-brought-up young ladies did not normally go wandering about the ballroom, starting up conversations with young men to whom they had not been properly introduced.

‘Oh yes . . . er . . . rather,’ he stuttered in reply.

‘I’d much rather go out on the town, wouldn’t you?’ She flipped her ostrich-feather fan open and began fanning herself lazily. ‘Perhaps to the Café Royal. Now *that’s* quite a place. You never know who is going to be there, or what is going to happen.’

‘Oh *rather!*’ said Rupert, more enthusiastically this time. He’d never actually been to the Café Royal himself, but he’d heard it was a wild and exciting sort of place – a thousand miles away from his mother’s sedate ballroom.

The girl let out a sigh. ‘If only we could escape! But I suppose we’ll have to put up with all *this* instead.’ She gestured dismissively towards the waltzing couples.

‘Would you . . . I mean . . . do you think that you might like to . . . ?’ Rupert found himself asking, looking awkwardly from her to the dance floor, and then back again.

‘To *dance?*’ The girl laughed, as though he’d made a joke. ‘Oh, good heavens, no, Mr Grenville! I don’t care for that kind of dancing. If it was a ragtime tune, now that would be different. But I know – why don’t you show me around the house instead?’ She flashed him a dazzling smile. ‘Perhaps we could find somewhere to sit and talk? That would be much better than a stuffy old waltz, wouldn’t it?’

‘Oh yes, *absolutely,*’ Rupert replied fervently. He didn’t think he’d ever seen this girl before, and he wanted very much to know her name, but somehow he felt embarrassed to ask the question – especially when she obviously knew who *he* was. Before he could say anything more, she had placed her hand on his arm, and they were going out of the ballroom and into the long hallway.

‘Your father has a simply wonderful art collection,’ she was saying. ‘I’m tremendously interested in art – aren’t you?’

‘Oh *rather!*’ said Rupert again, although the truth was he’d never given very much thought to his father’s art collection, besides the fact that it was worth a terrific lot of money. Sir Edwin Grenville was a wealthy merchant banker, and buying art was just one of the things he did as a matter of course – like dining at his club, or playing golf with his business associates.

‘Where does he keep the rest of his paintings? Perhaps you could show me?’

Rupert found himself blushing. Most of the debutantes he met were so polite and demure – it was hard to know how to respond to a girl who started conversations, and asked questions, and looked at him so directly with her large dark eyes. He opened the door to his father’s study, explaining: ‘Most of them are in here.’

The girl glanced quickly around, taking in the panelled walls hung with oil paintings in heavy gold frames. ‘What a lot there are,’ she observed. ‘Where did your father get them all?’

‘Oh, you know. Here and there,’ said Rupert, trying to sound confident – though honestly, he was not entirely sure. ‘Auctions and so on. He’s travelled abroad a lot for his work, and he always

seems to come back with something new. Actually, he said he'll take me with him on his next trip,' he couldn't resist adding, feeling a swell of pride at the thought.

'Oh, really? I'm fond of travelling myself. It's always thrilling to see new places and have adventures.'

Rupert felt rather surprised. 'I didn't think young ladies were allowed to do much of that sort of thing.'

'Didn't you?' She had turned to examine a painting more closely, now she turned back to him. 'It's not a bad selection. One or two nice pieces, I suppose,' she said, flipping her fan open once again.

'This isn't all of them, of course,' Rupert said hurriedly, keen not to disappoint. 'There are more paintings in the dining room – and some of the very special ones aren't on display.'

The girl's eyes brightened. 'Very special ones? Like what?' she asked.

'Well, he's got some Turner sketches,' said Rupert, remembering a name he knew.

But the girl wasn't impressed: 'Oh – *Turner*. I mean, they're wonderful of course, but I've seen dozens of them in galleries before.'

'Or there's a Benedetto Casselli,' Rupert added, knowing *that*, at least, was certain to be impressive. Still, he was unprepared for her awed reaction:

'A Benedetto Casselli? Not *really*? Now that's something! His work is terrifically rare.'

'It's a very important painting,' Rupert boasted.

'I say, how splendid. Will you show it to me?'

Rupert was struck by a sudden prickle of anxiety. He'd forgotten for a moment that the Casselli dragon painting was supposed to be a secret. His father kept it hidden away in his safe, rather than hanging on the wall with the rest – though he'd told Rupert and his older brother Oliver that it was the most valuable and important work in his entire collection. 'If anything should ever happen to me, you must make sure you take the utmost care of it,' he'd said in a very serious voice.

'I've never seen a Casselli painting before. They're supposed to be perfectly magnificent! It would be *such* a thrill to see it for myself,' the girl was saying.

Rupert frowned, battling with himself. He knew he'd said too much already, and he was about to try and explain that he couldn't show her – but the girl was still talking: 'And then – do you have a motor car? I've got rather a wicked idea! Why don't we slip away together, and drive into town to go to the Café Royal? We'd be able to have a bit of real fun that way – and I bet we could be back before anyone noticed we'd gone!'

All thoughts of the painting fled at once from Rupert's mind. 'I say . . . could we really? That *would* be a lark!' As a matter of fact, he didn't have a motor car himself, but his brother did, and Rupert was pretty sure he could drive it just as well as Oliver. He could already imagine how marvellous it would be to roll into town in the fine new motor, and then pull up at the door of the glamorous Café Royal with a beautiful young lady at his side . . . He felt ready to charge out of the door at once, but the girl laid a restraining hand on his arm.

'Don't forget the painting,' she said. '*Do* just let me have a quick peep before we go.'

'All right,' said Rupert, unable to resist. 'But it's supposed to be a secret – so you won't tell anyone about it, will you?'

The girl looked even more excited by the prospect of a secret painting. 'Of *course* I won't tell a soul,' she said breathlessly. 'How perfectly thrilling!'

Feeling rather excited himself now, Rupert hurried over to the large mahogany cabinet in the corner which housed his father's big metal safe. Luckily he knew the combination, and a moment later he had removed the leather folder stamped with the shape of the twisting golden dragon, which he knew contained the painting. He laid it on the desk and lifted the cover with awkward fingers. Beside him, the girl gave a gasp of admiration.

The painting was small – not much bigger than a notebook – and obviously very old. She leaned forward, her hand tightening on his sleeve, as she gazed at the sinuous shape of the dragon, painted

in a rich crimson. Its snaking form was shown against a background of a dark stormy sky, and piled at its feet were a heap of bones and what looked like a human skull.

Rupert had only seen the painting once before, and truth be told, he'd not been very keen on it – it was so small and dark, and so jolly sinister-looking – but it was clear the girl felt differently. For a moment or two, she said nothing and only stared.

‘Do you like it?’ asked Rupert at last.

‘Oh, Mr Grenville,’ she sighed. ‘It’s absolutely *marvellous*!’

‘Do call me Rupert,’ said Rupert at once, thinking how debonair that sounded.

‘*Rupert*, then. Gosh – I’ve never seen anything like it! Thanks awfully for showing it to me.’

Rupert hurried the painting back into its folder, and away into the safe as quickly as he could. He most certainly did not want his father to know that he'd been showing his secret painting to one of their guests – though it had all been worth it to see the glow of admiration in her eyes. ‘Shall we go, then?’ he said, offering her his arm.

But just then the door of the study was flung noisily open. A young man came bowling into the room, followed by another young man and two laughing young ladies, who all flung themselves down into the big leather armchairs.

‘Rupert, old chap! There you are. What are you doing back here? We’ve found your hiding place, old thing. Your mama’s in a frightful tizz looking for you. She’s dreadfully keen for you to dance with Lady Cynthia, you know. I say – who wants a brandy? You’ll take one, won’t you, Hugo? And one for you of course, old fellow.’

Rupert found a glass was being thrust into his hand. He turned to smile apologetically at the girl – but then stopped in surprise. ‘I say – wherever did she go?’

‘Where did who go, old fellow? Cheers, everyone – bottoms up!’

But Rupert didn’t join in the toast. He was still staring around him. To his astonishment, and intense disappointment, the beautiful young lady with red roses in her hair had vanished. He strode to the door, but outside the hallway was empty. It was as if she had never even been there. ‘And dash it all,’ he muttered. ‘I still don’t know her name!’

CHAPTER TWO

Secret Service Bureau HQ, London

Lilian Rose had quite a lot of unusual talents. She could perform a perfect double pirouette, sing various amusing comic songs whilst accompanying herself on the piano, and recite screeds of Shakespeare from memory. She was also not a bad burglar, when occasion required it – which in her line of work, it quite often did.

It had taken her just seconds to slip unnoticed out of Sir Edwin Grenville's study and into the darkened room opposite. Inside, she stood behind the door, peering through a crack as Rupert came out into the hall – looking all around him to see where she had got to – and then hurried off towards the ballroom.

She didn't have to wait very long before the others followed him. As soon as they had all gone, Lil opened the door, and slipped soundlessly across the hall. A moment later, she was back in the now-empty study. The mahogany cabinet was open, and she was expertly twirling the dial of the safe with her white-gloved fingertips. Really, poor old Rupert had made it far too easy for her – he hadn't even bothered to hide the combination.

Inside the safe, she found the leather folder stamped with the familiar symbol of the twisting gold dragon. She'd recognised it at once: after all, she'd seen a Casselli painting kept inside one just like it before, in circumstances she was not likely to forget. She grasped it and pulled it out – and then at last, the precious painting was in her hands.

Her skin prickled with the excitement and strangeness of it. She'd been hunting for *The Red Dragon* for a long time; it was hard to believe that the painting, which was supposed to have been destroyed centuries ago when a British ship was set upon by pirates, was really here, in this house in West London – and she had it at last! But she knew there was no time to hang about feeling pleased with herself. Quickly, she closed the safe and then the cabinet door: no sense in making it completely obvious that a burglary had taken place.

Silent in her satin slippers, she went back out into the long hallway. But before she could take another step, she realised that someone was approaching. Not Rupert but an older man with white hair and a bristling moustache, talking in a low voice to his companion, a middle-aged man in evening dress. Lil knew that the man with the white hair was Sir Edwin himself.

There was no time for her to get away, but Lil had done this kind of thing far too many times to panic. By the time Sir Edwin and his friend reached the study door, they saw nothing but a young lady examining her reflection in a looking glass, her fluffy ostrich-feather fan cast down on a polished table at her side.

She turned, as if startled, and bowed her head politely – her cheeks pink, as though she was embarrassed to have been caught preening before the mirror. Sir Edwin gave her an indulgent smile and said ‘Good evening’, before disappearing with his friend into the study.

The second the door had closed behind them, Lil lifted the fan, revealing beneath it the painting in its folder.

Really, you never knew when a fan was going to come in handy, she reflected, as she swiftly picked up the folder and darted away down the hall.

She’d already planned her route out of the house, and now she went swiftly through the green baize door that led to the servants’ quarters – knowing quite well that none of the grand party guests would follow her there. With the painting tucked under her arm, she went lightly down the stairs – past a busy kitchen full of steam and rattling saucepans, where Cook was yelling at someone about oysters, past the Butler’s pantry, past a confused-looking boot boy – and then out of the servants’ entrance and into the yard.

She’d stashed an old carpet bag amongst some bushes in the garden. Under cover of the shrubbery, she retrieved it, and a moment later the white evening gown was hidden beneath an ordinary brown coat, and the red roses by a plain brown felt hat. The painting was tucked inside the carpet bag, carefully cushioned by her fluffy fan. Now she was no debutante but an ordinary girl – perhaps a housemaid on her night off – walking briskly, but in no special hurry, down the street towards Park Lane where she could catch an omnibus.

Somewhere behind her, in the yard of Sir Edwin’s mansion, she heard the sound of running footsteps. A voice yelled out; electric torches were flashed into the darkness of the garden. So they already knew the painting was gone? That was rather interesting. Had Rupert cottoned on and raised the alarm – or had Sir Edwin opened his safe and noticed his painting was missing?

Just the same, she forced herself to stroll on towards the bus stop without speeding up. She didn’t even flinch when a motor car came roaring out of Sir Edwin’s driveway, rushing past her at top speed. She knew that hurrying would only make her look suspicious – and besides, there was not the smallest chance that Sir Edwin, or Rupert, or any of the party guests would make a connection between the elegant young lady in white and the ordinary girl in the brown coat, waiting for the omnibus with a shabby carpet bag at her side.

The omnibus rumbled up, and Lil hopped aboard. ‘Good evening,’ she said cheerfully to the conductor, casting a last glimpse over her shoulder at the bright golden lights of Sir Edwin’s mansion, before the omnibus carried her and the dragon painting safely away, into the London night.

Twelve hours later she was walking over the cobbles towards the headquarters of the Secret Service Bureau. Both the evening dress and the old brown coat had vanished, and she was dressed in her own clothes, but the carpet bag was still close at her side. A light rain was falling, but it was warm for September and Lil didn’t bother with an umbrella. She whistled a tune as she walked, making a passing gentleman, with bowler hat and newspaper, throw her a disapproving frown.

Lil did not care a bit for anyone’s disapproval. She was quite used to being thought unladylike. Besides, that morning, she felt more cheerful than she had since she’d returned from Paris three months ago. She’d spent ages tracking down *The Red Dragon* – and at last she’d found it. She’d discovered the painting; she’d removed it secretly from the Grenville house; and now she was on her way to deliver it to the Chief, who she knew would be jolly pleased with her. She hopped over a puddle and gave a beaming smile to a telegraph boy on a bicycle – who was so startled that he almost crashed into a lamp-post.

Her plan had worked awfully well, she reflected. She'd been spot on when she'd guessed that Rupert would be the best way of getting to the painting. She wondered whether he'd confessed to showing it to a mysterious young lady, whose name he didn't know. If so, she guessed he would be in rather hot water with his father this morning.

Poor old Rupert. He wasn't a bad sort, really. Doing this job was a peculiar thing sometimes: it did seem rotten, taking advantage of a fellow like that. Left to her own devices, Lil was really rather a straightforward sort of person. She'd have preferred to have marched up to Rupert, shaken his hand heartily and said: 'Hullo there, I hear you've got a rather important painting – I'm afraid I'm going to have to take it off your hands.' But of course, that sort of thing would not wash when you were working as an undercover spy.

It still felt odd thinking of herself as a *spy* at all. It seemed no time since she'd been in the classroom at school, scribbling notes to her chums or playing tricks on the mistresses instead of practising her ladylike deportment. Then a few dull months at home, followed by the blissful escape of running off to London to go on the stage. Although being an actress had been marvellous, of course, somehow it had never been all she'd dreamed. Perhaps it was because she always had to play such idiotic characters – weedy *ingénues* who wept or fainted away at the first sign of excitement. Or perhaps it was because the work she'd begun doing with Sophie had been so much more thrilling. Working with her best friend was tremendous fun, and detective work was always exciting. She'd soon discovered she loved undercover work: it was rather like acting, but without the footlights or greasepaint, the smoke and mirrors. She had to use all her charm, her instincts and her quick brain – and it satisfied her like nothing else.

Now, here she was: co-owner of Taylor & Rose, the detective agency she and Sophie had founded together. The agency had been in business just over two years, and their most important client was the Secret Service Bureau.

The Bureau was a top-secret government agency, responsible for intelligence work. Since Taylor & Rose had been hired by the Bureau, their lives – which had already been rather interesting – had become very interesting indeed. Earlier that year, Lil had been sent on an assignment to a royal castle, where she'd discovered a plot to kidnap the prince and princess of Arnovia, helped them escape, and then foiled a second kidnap attempt in Paris with Sophie's help. It had all been as exciting as the plot of a shilling shocker on a railway station bookstall.

Since she'd returned to London, things had been less thrilling – though still very busy. The Chief had put her to work investigating the dragon paintings by the artist Benedetto Casselli, which they now knew contained clues to the location of a mysterious hidden weapon. The shadowy secret society known as the *Fraternitas Draconum* were trying to find the weapon and use it to kick start a war in Europe – and they must do all they could to prevent them.

Lil knew that Sophie was just as intent on stopping the *Fraternitas* as she was. It had been Sophie who had encouraged them to form the Loyal Order of Lions, to oppose the *Fraternitas* and their schemes. The Order had no official leader, but if they had, it would certainly have been Sophie. Lil smiled to herself, thinking that whilst a small, politely spoken seventeen-year-old girl might not be most people's idea of a strong leader, Sophie would have surprised them. She was unshakeable in her determination to stop the *Fraternitas*.

Of course, that wasn't so surprising when you knew Sophie's history. Not only had the *Fraternitas* put her in mortal danger more than once, they had also been responsible for the deaths of Sophie's parents. It was because of them that she had been left all alone in the world.

Lil couldn't imagine what it would feel like to be so alone. She'd never experienced a loss like Sophie's. She'd spent her whole life surrounded by people: Mother and Father, of course, even if they never did know quite what to make of her; her bossy older brother Jack, who she loved and who infuriated her in equal measure; and dozens of friends. She'd always found it easy to make friends

wherever she went – at school, in the theatre, and now even with a prince and princess. But she'd never had a friend who understood her like Sophie did.

It had been three months since she'd waved her off on the airfield in Paris. Three months since she'd been back in London, without her. Three months of missing her – a horrid feeling, like a stomach ache. It seemed so wrong that she wasn't here: pacing up and down the office they shared, thinking out an assignment; leafing through the newspapers she read every day; or chatting over tea and cakes at Lyons Corner House, where they talked about everything from their latest cases, to the merits of a new hat.

But Lil knew Sophie was where she needed to be – following the trail of a stolen notebook, which contained vital information about the dragon paintings and the secret weapon. She'd be back in London soon enough, and they'd be together again. Until then, Lil would do everything she could to help with the investigation.

Inside the building, she told the concierge she was here to see 'Mr Clarke', and then ran up the stairs, through a door marked with a small card reading: *CLARKE & SONS SHIPPING AGENTS*. A few minutes later, she was in the Chief's office, laying the painting before him.

'Well! Miss Rose, you have outdone yourself!' exclaimed C, with a delighted chuckle. 'Sit down and make yourself comfortable while I admire it. My word – *The Red Dragon* at last. So full of malevolence – really, quite horrifying!'

Lil took the chair opposite his desk, glancing around her as she always did when she was in C's office. There were so many intriguing things to look at – the enormous gramophone in the corner, currently booming out a Glinka opera, the big map studded with pins and coloured flags, and the elaborate ink stand, filled with the bright green ink that the Chief always used.

'Carruthers!' C called out.

Almost at once, the office door banged open and C's secretary came in. Captain Carruthers was a tall thin young man, with horn-rimmed spectacles and a rather sour expression.

'Ah, Carruthers – you'll like this!' the Chief went on genially. 'Look what clever Miss Rose has delivered to us! Isn't she splendid? Now then – if you would take it, see it's wrapped properly, and put it into the safe? Very good – careful with it now, there's a good fellow!'

Carruthers threw Lil a glance that suggested he thought her anything but splendid, nodded to the Chief, picked up the painting and stalked back out of the room. As usual, C did not seem to notice his assistant's bad temper: he was busy rummaging amongst one of the tottering piles of paper on his desk. After a moment, he found the document he was looking for, and set it before him with a flourish.

C placed a large green-ink tick beside the words '*The Red Dragon*' and scribbled beside it '*found in the possession of Sir E. Grenville*'.

'So Sir Edwin must be a member of the *Fraternitas Draconum*,' said Lil.

'It would seem so,' said the Chief. 'What about the other fellow – the man you saw him with. Was he anyone you recognised?'

Lil shook her head. 'I'm afraid not.' There hadn't been much to distinguish him – just a smart, middle-aged man with grey hair. 'But I did wonder if Sir Edwin was going to show him the painting. That might have been how he discovered it was missing so soon. Which would suggest that the other man is *Fraternitas* too, wouldn't it?'

'Very likely,' said the Chief, scribbling this down. 'This is most pleasing, Miss Rose. You've done an admirable job for us. Now, if you will see Captain Carruthers on your way out, I'd appreciate it if you could give him a description of the second man. Also the location of Grenville's safe, and the combination of course. You never know when that might come in handy! Then off you go and enjoy a well earned rest.'

A rest? 'Don't you need me to do anything else?' Lil asked, her eyes flicking to the other paintings on the Chief's list, marked '*under investigation*' or even more tantalisingly, '*unknown*'.

But the Chief just smiled blandly and said: 'Nothing for the moment, Miss Rose. You'll hear from us again as soon as we have a new assignment for you.'

Lil got to her feet, but before she left she had to ask the same question she always asked whenever she came to the Bureau – even though she knew she wasn't really supposed to. 'Have you heard anything from Sophie lately? Is she all right?'



The Chief gave her a kindly smile. 'Miss Taylor? Of course, my dear. Nothing to worry about on that score. Now then – run along. Good day!'

Lil left the Chief humming along to his music. She suspected he thought it was sentimental and a little silly, the way she asked about Sophie; and yet she always felt reassured to hear that all was well. She knew she shouldn't expect to get letters or messages from Sophie while she was travelling undercover – after all, she herself hadn't been allowed to send any when she'd been in Arnovia – but it was good to know she was all right and that her assignment was going according to plan.

Outside the Chief's office door, she found not Carruthers, but instead Captain Harry Forsyth – tall, bronzed and handsome. Forsyth was one of the top agents of the Secret Service Bureau, and it wasn't long since he and Lil had been on assignment together in Paris and Arnovia. Now he gave her a charming smile: 'Oh hello, old girl! Didn't realise it was you in there with the Chief. Ripping to see you, as always!'

'Hello, Forsyth,' said Lil cheerfully. 'Isn't Carruthers back yet?' For once, the secretary's desk was empty.

'Not in the least idea, I'm afraid. I s'pose he must have popped out on some errand or other. Well, I'd simply love to chat, but I mustn't keep the old man waiting!' He gave her a quick wink, then swaggered forward into C's office, without knocking. Inside, Lil heard the Chief say warmly: 'Ah, Forsyth! In you come – I've a great deal to acquaint you with!'

For a moment, Lil lingered by the door. She knew that the Chief took Forsyth into his confidence, sharing with him many details of the confidential operations of the Bureau. She and

Sophie, on the other hand, were kept at arm's length, knowing nothing of the Bureau's bigger plans beyond their own assignments. It was frustrating when she knew that she was just as smart and dedicated as Forsyth – who as a matter of fact had spent most of their last assignment in Paris enjoying the city's night spots. Now, she wondered if she might catch a few words of their conversation, but she could hear nothing except the vague buzz of voices, and the hum of the gramophone. She gave up and wandered to the window: Carruthers would surely be back at any moment, and if he returned to find her listening at the Chief's door, she knew he would be simply unbearable about it.

She flopped down into Carruthers' chair to wait for him, glancing around at his typewriter, his notebooks, and the stubs of pencils that littered his desk. She helped herself to a biscuit from his tin, and then leaned back, putting her feet up on his desk in the style of Carruthers' usual pose. 'Oh, it's you,' she practised saying, in what she thought was rather a good imitation of his sardonic manner.

As she did so, she noticed something interesting. On the wall, just beside Carruthers' chair, there was a small air vent with a slatted metal cover – except three of the screws that should have held the cover in place were missing. Experimentally, she gave it a little push: at once the cover smoothly pivoted to the side. To her amazement, she realised that through the open vent, she could now hear, quite clearly, Forsyth and the Chief talking in the next room.

Well! Lil grinned as she settled back more comfortably in Carruthers' chair. How jolly intriguing! Perhaps like herself, Carruthers did not care to be excluded from important conversations and had found his own way to listen in.

The Chief was saying: 'I've had a message from our man in Hamburg. His report is ready.'

'That's the fellow known as Ace?' Forsyth asked. There was the flick of pages, as though he was looking at some paperwork. 'The one who sent all that information on shipbuilding that Admiral Stevens was so keen on?'

'That's the one. He's one of our most valuable overseas agents. But he's got some concerns about getting the report out of Germany. A couple of Ziegler's spies have been sniffing around.'

Lil listened intently, as she absent-mindedly crunched another of Carruthers' biscuits. She knew she shouldn't be eavesdropping, but she was fascinated. She'd had no idea the Bureau had agents stationed in the German Empire – although now she saw that if the German spymaster Ziegler had agents gathering intelligence in Britain, then of course the Chief would want his own agents doing the same in Germany.

'I can't risk losing Ace. You know that our top priority is to give the government advance warning when war breaks out – and I'm relying on Ace and his counterparts elsewhere in Germany for that information,' C was saying.

'But we don't know for certain that there will be a war, do we, sir?' asked Forsyth.

'Of course we don't know for certain. But there's no doubt that war is hanging over Europe like a shadow. It will only take the smallest action to inflame it – one spark to ignite the dynamite.' The Chief paused for a moment and sighed. 'The consequences of a modern European war would be unthinkable, so I hope very much that spark will never come. But if it does, we must be prepared, and for that, we will need Ace. I can't risk him being caught by Ziegler – and yet, Stevens does want that report . . .'

'Ought I to go out there, sir?' suggested Forsyth eagerly. 'We could arrange a handover. I could travel to Hamburg in disguise, collect the report and smuggle it out of the country.'

'I'm afraid your assignment here must take priority for now, Captain. But just the same, you're right – I believe I'll have to send someone to collect it.'

'What about Brooks? He's a sharp fellow.'

'No good – he's on assignment too. If only the Ministry would see fit to increase our budget, so we could recruit some more agents. We are stretched in ten different directions at present!' He paused, and then said thoughtfully: 'No, I rather think I shall give this assignment to Miss Rose.'

‘*Miss Rose!*’ Forsyth’s tone was incredulous. ‘But sir – are you sure that’s wise? I know she’s a fine girl, but surely she isn’t up to this kind of assignment?’

Lil almost choked on her biscuit. But through her rage, she was gratified to hear the Chief reply: ‘Don’t let the skirts and petticoats mislead you, Forsyth. Miss Rose is quite as competent as most of the young men I have on my books. What’s more, there are obvious advantages to operating female agents – for one thing, they are far less likely to be suspected. Besides, this will be perfectly straightforward. All she’ll have to do is collect the report and transport it safely back to London. She has a talent for undercover work, and we can easily concoct a good cover story for her. Yes – my mind is made up. Miss Rose shall go to Germany.’

Germany! For a moment, Lil was distracted – and rather excited. But her new assignment was forgotten at once when she heard Forsyth say: ‘And what about Miss Taylor? Any news?’

‘Nothing.’

‘You’re sure she made it to St Petersburg?’

‘It would seem so. She successfully tracked the Count von Wilderstein there – and she was communicating regularly until she crossed the border. But since she arrived in Russia, we haven’t heard a word from her. It’s been well over a month now.’ The Chief paused for a moment, and then went on: ‘I’m afraid there can be no doubt about it, Forsyth. Miss Taylor has disappeared.’

CHAPTER THREE

Secret Service Bureau HQ, London

Lil's breath caught in her throat and she dropped the biscuit she was holding, not noticing the crumbs that scattered across Carruthers' desk.

Dimly, she heard Forsyth say: 'Oh, surely not, sir. Perhaps she's just being careful – maintaining her cover. After all, the Russian secret police are no joke.'

'That's precisely what concerns me,' the Chief replied. 'It's true that if the *Okhrana* are watching her, she may be keeping a low profile. But even with that in mind, she should have been in touch by now. There are arrangements in place for her to write privately by diplomatic bag, via the Embassy.' The Chief tapped his pen against the desk in time to the music. 'I must say, I don't like it. Von Wilderstein may be dangerous. And St Petersburg is volatile at present. With the assassination of the Russian minister, there's bound to be trouble stirred up.'

Lil's heart was pounding. Sophie had *disappeared* – in Russia? The Chief had just told her that Sophie was fine – that there was nothing for her to worry about. But he had lied. He hadn't heard from Sophie for over a month – she was missing in St Petersburg, all the way on the other side of Europe.

'Of course, we don't want to ruffle the Russians' feathers,' she could hear him saying. 'The diplomatic situation is tricky. Officially we have no business sending spies into Russia. They are, after all, our allies. If she's been caught – well, I suspect the government will want to deny any association with her.'

'Will you send someone to look for her?' asked Forsyth.

'I've no agents I can spare to go all the way to St Petersburg at present. Besides, I have my orders – and the Ministry are very clear that Germany must remain our priority. They are interested in the *Fraternitas* and this weapon, of course – in fact, I may say, they are *very* interested. But it's not their most pressing concern. So I'm afraid Miss Taylor will have to fend for herself, for now at any rate. Don't let on to Miss Rose, Forsyth. I don't want her distracted from the Hamburg mission.'

'Of course not, sir,' said Forsyth, sounding as though nothing could be further from his mind than confiding in Lil.

As he spoke, Lil realised the other door was opening. At once she let the cover swing back into place, concealing the air vent – but it was already too late. Captain Carruthers was standing before her, his hands on his hips and a smirk on his face.

‘Making yourself quite at home, I see? And listening in on private conversations too?’

‘I was intrigued by your invention. Just seeing how it works,’ Lil flashed back at once. ‘Does the Chief know you’ve been eavesdropping on all his secret meetings?’

‘Ha!’ Carruthers scoffed. ‘I’m his *secretary*. Do you really think he keeps anything from me?’ He flung an arm out, gesturing to the row of locked filing cabinets. ‘I see every letter, every telegram, every dossier. There isn’t anything that happens in this office that I don’t know about.’ He looked at her rather smugly. Of course: he must know that Sophie was missing, Lil realised. Was there anyone at the Bureau who didn’t already know, except for her?

Lil was not someone who lost her temper very often, but now she did. ‘Well, I hope you have a jolly nice time with your letters and reports and your secret spy hole, and your *biscuits*,’ she retorted. ‘Tucked away nice and safe – while we’re out in the field, doing the real work.’

Carruthers turned red, and she knew she had hit a nerve. He was envious of the Bureau agents who worked ‘in the field’ and resented having to stay behind to organise files and type the Chief’s letters. Of course, it wasn’t really his fault that he was a secretary instead of a field-agent; and whilst he might be a prickly sort of fellow, it wasn’t exactly cricket to imply he was a coward. She expected him to say something spiteful in reply, but instead he just growled: ‘Get out of my chair.’

He was even more bad-tempered than usual as he took down the description of the grey-haired man, and the particulars of Sir Edwin’s safe. But Lil did not pay him much attention: her mind was far away, racing with thoughts about Sophie and St Petersburg. Vague images of the Tsar, and snow, and Russian ballet, and Cossacks on horseback danced about in her head. She could not even begin to imagine Sophie into the picture. Could she really have fallen foul of the Russian secret police that the Chief had talked about? Or worse still, could she have been caught by the Count and the *Fraternitas Draconum*?

A wave of cold dread swept over her. She was barely aware of walking home: she didn’t notice the turning leaves as she tramped through the square garden, nor the omnibuses hissing by on the wet road, nor the woman with the basket of flowers on the corner, who called out to her: ‘A sprig of white heather, miss, for luck?’ Instead she only heard the Chief’s voice, over and over again, like one of his own gramophone records, stuck in a loop. *The diplomatic situation is a tricky one . . . If she’s been caught . . . the government will want to deny any association with her . . . I’ve no agents I can spare to go to all the way to St Petersburg . . . Miss Taylor will have to fend for herself.*

It didn’t take long to reach home. She’d given up her old lodging-house room when she’d gone to Arnovia and when she’d come back to London three months ago, Jack had suggested she should come and room with him in the big, shabby Bloomsbury townhouse he shared with some of his fellow art students. Lil and Jack now lived in a set of rooms on the first floor, and just above them were their friends, Leo and Tilly. The house was a friendly, come-and-go-as-you-like sort of place, which suited Lil down to the ground. There were always the sounds of feet on the stairs, laughter, and spontaneous celebrations when someone sold a painting or passed an examination. There was always someone around to chat – and Lil loved chatting.

But today she felt in no mood to talk to anyone. She needed to be by herself to think: she thumped straight up the stairs and into her own rooms, shutting the door behind her to drown out the cheerful voices of the others.

The sitting room she and Jack shared was, as always, extremely untidy. The wallpaper was peeling in places, and the bare floorboards were only partly covered by worn but gaily coloured mats. Two threadbare armchairs, loaded with paisley-print rugs and colourful cushions, were drawn close to the fireplace. The mantelpiece was a jumble of flowerpots, photographs and party invitations; a playbill for a new show at the Fortune Theatre; and a coloured card advertising an exhibition at the Royal Academy.

Lil took off her hat, and tossed it on to the table, which was scattered with books and papers, along with the remains of Jack’s breakfast – or possibly his supper – a willow-patterned plate scattered

with crumbs and an empty cup. Beside it were several tubes of paint and a jam jar of paintbrushes. Jack said the light in the sitting room was good, and often painted here: there were always pictures pinned up unframed, or canvases propped against the wall. Just now there was an easel by the window, showing a half-finished portrait of a girl reading a book. Jack was experimenting with a new semi-abstract style, so the girl had bright yellow hands and a smudgy blue face – but even so, Lil knew that she was meant to be Sophie. She gazed at it for a few seconds, and then flopped down in one of the armchairs, leaning her head back against the cushion. ‘Oh, bother it all,’ she muttered aloud.

Sophie had disappeared in St Petersburg. No one had heard from her for over a month. She had followed the Count von Wilderstein there – but what could he be doing in Russia? In Arnovia, the Count had always seemed a harmless fellow, more interested in tinkering with aeroplanes than anything else. But now Lil knew the truth: he’d conspired in a secret plot to kidnap the Crown Prince, so that he himself could become King, and he was working for the *Fraternitas*. That meant he must be extremely dangerous.

Miss Taylor must fend for herself, she heard the Chief say again. His voice boomed in her head – suddenly steely, not in the least bit kind. She had asked about Sophie and he had lied to her. *Nothing to worry about*, he had said. He’d told Forsyth not to tell her the truth, simply because he didn’t want her ‘distracted’ from another mission. And how readily Forsyth had agreed!

In a rush, she thought of everything she and Sophie had done for the Bureau. A few hours ago, she’d felt full of pride in their work – now she only felt stupid. The Chief didn’t really care about them: they were simply useful to him. *There are obvious advantages to operating female agents*. It was all very well while they were doing what he wanted – but if something went wrong, he would simply wash his hands of them. *Miss Taylor must fend for herself*.

Anger bubbled up inside her, and all at once, she was seized with a furious desire to march straight back to the Bureau, to fling open the Chief’s door, to tell both him and Forsyth exactly what she thought of them. But she knew that rushing about yelling was not the way to go. She had to be clever about this, she told herself. She had to think as clearly and sharply as Sophie herself would do.

But even as she tried to think, she pictured Sophie – trapped in some far-off police cell, or captured by the Count – and her anger flared all over again. Furious tears rushed into her eyes, quite as if she was one of those idiotic *ingénues* she had always loathed. *Tears won’t help anything*, she remembered her old headmistress instructing the girls. *They will only make your eyes red and puffy*. ‘Don’t cry, you absolute donkey,’ she muttered to herself. ‘Think!’

Just then, she heard a knock on the door. She looked up, surprised. Jack was out at art school – and anyway, he would never have knocked. The other occupants of the house were not much given to knocking either: it was the kind of place where people just barged in. She got up, wiping her eyes on her sleeve, and went to answer it. Standing just outside the door, holding a small bunch of flowers and grinning at her, was Joe.

For a moment she felt completely confused – and then all at once, she remembered. Of course – they’d made plans to go and see the matinee at the Alhambra, and have tea. She’d thought it was just a casual arrangement – two pals out for an afternoon – but now here Joe was, looking rather handsome in what she knew was his best suit, with his curly hair carefully smoothed.

‘Oh gosh,’ she said. ‘I think you’d better come in.’

It didn’t take long to pour out the story. Joe was a good listener: he didn’t interrupt, sitting beside her as she talked, his eyes fixed seriously on her face. When she told him what the Chief had said about Sophie, he looked astonished – and then very worried indeed. She knew Joe was very fond of Sophie: in a funny way, the two of them were rather alike, both alone in the world without any family of their own. But now Sophie was *really* alone – far away from all her friends, missing on the other side of Europe.

‘I’m so furious I don’t know what to do,’ she finished up. ‘How can the Chief think of just leaving her there? She could be in any kind of trouble!’

‘I’ll admit, it doesn’t look good,’ said Joe, thinking hard. ‘But don’t despair. We don’t *know* something bad has happened. Perhaps her messages just haven’t been getting through?’

‘But what if something awful *has* happened to her?’ They had no way of knowing, Lil realised – and that was the very worst thing of all.

Rather as though he wasn’t sure what else to do, Joe put an arm around her shoulders. For a moment, she felt taken aback. Joe had never really hugged her before – she hadn’t thought of him as the hugging kind. She knew he’d always been a bit sweet on her, but he’d never done anything *about* it – and besides, she’d never wanted anything more than just to be good chums. But now that Joe’s arm was around her, and her head was against his shoulder; now that his hand had closed over hers – warm and rather rough – her heart began to beat a little faster.

‘She’ll be all right,’ he said gently.

‘We don’t know that. We can’t possibly be sure.’

‘She’s *Sophie*. She’s tough.’

‘But she’s all alone. We have to do something to help – or at least try and find out what’s happened!’

‘Well, maybe you need to go back and talk to the Chief. Admit what you heard and tell him he’s got to help you get in touch with her. There must be someone in St Petersburg who could help track her down – or you never know, perhaps he’d even let *you* go out there and look for her?’

But Lil just shook her head. After what he’d said, she was certain there was no way the Chief would agree to send her all the way to Russia to look for Sophie. Besides, she didn’t feel she could ever trust him again, after he’d lied to her face like that. ‘He won’t. Not when he needs me to go to Germany to pick up his stupid report,’ she muttered angrily.

‘Well then, while you’re in Hamburg, the rest of us will start investigating from here. There’s got to be something we can do, some way we can find her . . .’ Joe began.

Hamburg! Lil jumped suddenly upright. ‘Joe – that’s it! You’re a genius!’

Joe looked astonished – and a little disappointed that Lil was no longer snuggled against his shoulder. ‘What d’you mean?’ he asked warily.

But Lil was already on her feet, rummaging through books until she unearthed her copy of *Cook’s Continental Guide*. ‘Look!’ she exclaimed, thrusting it under his nose, her finger jabbing at a map showing Hamburg, in the north of the German Empire. ‘I’m supposed to go to Hamburg. Well, Hamburg is halfway to St Petersburg – don’t you see?’ She stared at him in excitement. ‘What if I agree to the Chief’s mission, then use it as a cover for a secret mission of my own? I can *say* I’m going to Hamburg, but actually I’ll travel on to St Petersburg – and I’ll find Sophie myself.’

Joe frowned. ‘But if you did that, then you’d be disobeying your orders from the Chief, wouldn’t you? And he’s not just an ordinary client. These are orders from the government.’

Lil shrugged that off at once. ‘I don’t care about the Chief and his silly old orders. If I did what he wanted, I’d be leaving Sophie in the lurch – and I jolly well won’t do that.’

‘You could get yourself into an awful lot of trouble,’ Joe protested. ‘Not only yourself – but Taylor & Rose too.’

Lil paused for a moment, and then grabbed her hat decisively from the table. ‘Without Sophie there *is* no Taylor & Rose,’ she said crisply. ‘Come on. Let’s go and find the others. If I’m going to do this, I’m going to need everyone’s help.’

CHAPTER FOUR

Secret Service Bureau HQ, London

Lil didn't feel quite so confident as she made her way back to the Bureau the following morning. She'd spent all of the previous afternoon at Taylor & Rose talking with the others, but to her surprise and disappointment they'd shared Joe's uncertainty about her plan.

'Of course we're all worried about Sophie,' said Tilly, Taylor & Rose's resident technical expert, in pragmatic tones. 'Terribly worried. But you can't just rush off. We have to think it through.'

'We don't know anything about what she's doing in St Petersburg, or where you could look for her,' added Mei, who worked as their receptionist. 'And it's a very big city, isn't it? How would you even begin to find her?'

'I'm a detective, aren't I?' Lil protested. 'I'd *investigate*.'

She'd been sure that Billy at least would be on her side: she knew how devoted he was to Sophie. But to her annoyance, he agreed with Tilly and Mei. 'It's awful to think of Sophie being missing – and I agree we've got to do whatever we can to find her. But Lil, just think: if you abandon the mission the Chief has planned for you, then you'll be going against the Bureau and putting us at odds with the government. Directly disobeying the Chief's orders like that – well, it just doesn't sound like a terribly good idea.'

'I don't have to *abandon the mission*,' argued Lil. 'I can still do what the Chief wants. I could collect the report on my way to St Petersburg – or on my way home, perhaps. I'll simply be *extending* the assignment, that's all. Anyway, does anyone have any better ideas? Because I'm not going to leave Sophie all by herself in Russia and this is the only way of trying to rescue her that I can come up with.'

In the end it had been Joe who had said: 'Well, I reckon we should at least look into it. Work out how Lil would get to St Petersburg from Hamburg and what's possible.'

They'd all agreed on that and had spent the rest of the afternoon poring over maps and the *Bradshaw's Railway Guide*. Then the telephone had rung, summoning Lil to see the Chief the next morning to receive her new assignment. And now she was here once more – hurrying past Carruthers at his desk, and through into C's office, her heart thumping in her chest. Inside, everything was exactly the same as usual – the gramophone playing, the rain pattering gently against the window – and yet it didn't *feel* the same at all.

'Ah, Miss Rose,' said the Chief. 'Come in and sit down. I have a new assignment for you.'

It took all of Lil's acting skills to keep her face calm and attentive as he laid out his plans, explaining that she would be travelling to Hamburg to collect a report from one of his agents there. 'You'll travel undercover of course, posing as a tourist visiting the city. The papers you'll need are being prepared. Once you arrive, you'll see a few sights for appearance's sake – old churches, a museum, that kind of thing – and then proceed to the agreed rendezvous point where you'll collect the report. Then you simply need to bring it back here. There will be the usual border checks, but we've prepared rather a clever little suitcase with a hidden compartment, which will easily get round *those*.'

'And what exactly is this report?' asked Lil, trying to keep her voice light.

'No need for you to worry about that,' said the Chief breezily. 'Just know that Admiral Stevens will be very grateful to get hold of it – very grateful indeed.' He paused for a moment, and his tone became more serious. 'However, there is one other thing that I wanted to speak to you about . . .'

Lil leaned forward eagerly. Was he going to tell her the truth about Sophie at last? Perhaps she had misjudged him – perhaps he did have a plan to help her, after all?

'The Hamburg assignment is a straightforward one, and I know you're perfectly capable of handling it alone. However, I'd like to ask someone else to accompany you.'

Blow, thought Lil. Was he planning to send Forsyth with her again? If they were travelling together, it would spoil everything.

'Carruthers!' called out the Chief. A moment later, Carruthers appeared through the door, looking as sulky as ever.

'Now then, old fellow. I have exciting news! I've decided that you're to go on your first field assignment – what do you think of that? Miss Rose, Captain Carruthers is going to accompany you to Hamburg!' he announced, with the air of a magician pulling a white rabbit from a top hat.

Lil gaped at him '*He's* coming with me?' she said incredulously – even as Carruthers himself burst out, 'You mean to say that my first field assignment is going to be with *her*'?

'That's right. Now, Carruthers here hasn't had much chance to get field experience. That's through no fault of his own – he's always needed here. But it's really too bad to keep him shut up with all these dossiers forever. He must have the chance to see what it's like out in the field. That's what you've been wanting, isn't it, old chap? And this assignment should be just the ticket. So, Miss Rose, you'll be heading up the mission – and Captain, you'll be there to follow along and learn. See how it works, get a feel for the fieldwork side of things.'

Carruthers' face was a picture of disgust. Meanwhile, Lil's heart had sunk to her boots. Having Forsyth with her would have been tricky enough – but with Carruthers shadowing her, no doubt furious at the very idea of learning from her, it would be almost impossible to follow through with her plan. However would she manage to break away to St Petersburg now? 'Er – wouldn't it be better for the Captain to learn from Forsyth, or one of the other agents?' she asked, rather desperately. 'You know . . . someone a bit more experienced?'

'Please don't underestimate yourself, Miss Rose,' said C sternly. 'Your work for the Bureau has been exemplary. There will be a great deal the Captain can learn from you – I know he will be most interested to see how you approach an undercover assignment. Won't you, Captain?' He gave Carruthers a sharp look.

'Yes, sir,' mumbled Carruthers.

'Now, I've arranged things so you'll be travelling as brother and sister.'

'*Brother and sister*'? repeated Carruthers, more appalled than ever.

'Yes – that will make things straightforward. No eyebrows raised about unmarried girls racketing about Europe with young men, or anything like that,' said the Chief briskly. 'Tickets have been booked for you on tomorrow's boat to Ostend, and from there you'll take the train to Cologne, and change for Hamburg. Accommodation is arranged at a small guest house. You'll visit two or three tourist spots, and then collect the report and bring it back here to me.' He sat back in his chair, obviously well pleased with his plan.

Carruthers was scarlet with indignation, but as ever, the Chief didn't seem to notice. 'I'm sure you'll want to go and talk it over,' he said amiably. 'Here's the details of the rendezvous point for you, Miss Rose. Commit them to memory and then burn the paper, if you please.' He slid a document across the desk towards her. 'I'll expect you both back here by the end of the week with the report,' he finished. 'Good hunting!'

Lil got to her feet. Her mind was in a whirl, but all the same, she managed to ask the most important question. She wanted to give the Chief one more chance to tell her the truth. 'I was wondering . . . I know that yesterday you said Sophie was fine, but have you heard anything from her lately? Any letters – or telegrams?' she prompted. 'It's been quite a while now that she's been away, hasn't it?'

'Hmmm?' The Chief looked up, already preoccupied by the paperwork on his desk. 'Oh yes, well these things can sometimes take a while, you know.'

He gave her an avuncular smile – but to Lil it was no longer reassuring. Instead, it seemed more like a mask, concealing an expression that was cold and blank. She followed Carruthers hurriedly out of the room.

'Well, isn't this just *brilliant*,' Carruthers was muttering under his breath, banging things about on his desk. 'For my first field assignment! Good lord!'

But Lil wasn't listening. One thing was very clear to her. Whatever the Chief's orders were, whatever the others thought, and even with Carruthers joining her on the assignment, there was not in the least chance she was going tamely to Hamburg and back again. She was going to St Petersburg to find Sophie – and that was that.



PART II

'Last week we arrived in Russia, and I scarcely know what to write about it. I have visited a dozen different countries, but I really think St Petersburg is the most extraordinary place I have ever seen. I feel as though I have stepped into a fairy tale.'

– From the diary of Alice Grayson

CHAPTER FIVE

A Very Long Way from Piccadilly Circus

At the same time that Lil was preparing to attend Sir Edwin's ball on the other side of Europe, in the warm kitchen of a tall, pink house beside a narrow canal, Vera Ivanovna Orlov was telling stories to her grandchildren.

'Once upon a time, there was a cross old Tsar, who lived in a palace surrounded by a beautiful orchard,' she began. 'Amongst all the trees in the orchard was one that was very special: a wonderful apple tree, which grew magical golden apples – the Tsar's pride and joy. But one night, the Firebird appeared. It swooped down from the sky and ate the golden apples from the Tsar's tree. The Tsar was furious: how dare a mere bird help itself to his golden apples? He summoned his three daughters, and commanded them to catch the Firebird, and see it punished for its insolence. But the youngest princess, who was also the cleverest –'

'Wait! You're telling it wrong, *Babushka!*' protested Luka, aged seven. 'The story is supposed to be about the Tsar's three *sons*. And it's the youngest *prince* who is the cleverest.'

Vera tutted, from where she was stirring a steaming pan at the stove. 'Who's telling this story – me or you?' she demanded, pausing to rap the fingers of six-year-old Elena with her wooden spoon, before they could creep any closer to the contents of her mixing bowl. '*Me*. And *I* say it was daughters. So . . . *as I was saying*. The youngest princess, who was also the cleverest and the bravest . . .'

Sophie grinned to herself as she passed the kitchen, with its smells of smoke and spice. She caught the fragrance of honey and nutmeg and sniffed appreciatively, guessing that Vera was baking a batch of her famous biscuits. They'd eat them later, accompanied by lots of black tea from the samovar, served with spoonfuls of jam.

'*Do svidaniya!*' she called through the kitchen door, waving goodbye to Vera and the children, before she went out of the house, on to the Ulitsa Zelenaya.

Bells were chiming out across the city as she crossed a little bridge over the misty canal. She'd never known a city with as many bells as St Petersburg: the silvery chime of the little bells blending in harmony with the deep, resonant toll of the larger ones. The air felt chilly against her face after the snug warmth of the house, and her breath puffed out in little clouds. It might still be September, but the weather was already beginning to turn. By the end of October, Vera had told her, the temperature

would fall below zero, and the canal would begin to freeze. Now, Sophie could already feel the cold swish of the wind blowing up from the river, and she pulled her coat more closely around her, as she turned on to the Nevsky.

The Nevsky Prospekt was St Petersburg's grandest street, lined with elegant buildings that gave it the air of a London avenue, or a Paris boulevard. At night it glittered with new electric lights: now, in the morning, it was alive with the rattle of tram cars, the clatter of horse's hooves and the fanfare of motor horns. In the distance Sophie could hear the faint smoky hum of the mills and shipyards and ironworks – but the Nevsky was far from their smog. Here were palaces like birthday cakes, in a rainbow of ice-cream-coloured stucco. Here were the windows of magnificent shops, with their displays of feathered hats and furred capes, sugar-dusted chocolates and candied cherries. French boutiques offered Parisian gowns and gloves; the Eliseyev Emporium exhibited bon bons and cakes elaborate enough for a Viennese coffee house; and at the Magasin Anglais, Russian aristocrats could purchase Pears soap, Scottish tweeds and lavender water imported from England. Everywhere signs read *English spoken* or *Ici on parle Français*.

There were always many languages to be heard on the Nevsky. Sophie's ears hummed with Russian and French, English and Polish, Yiddish and German. At this time of day, it seemed all of St Petersburg must be here: fashionable ladies and gentlemen, taking in the shops; green-capped students with books under their arms, hurrying to the public library; a swagger of young officers, jostling a clerk in a cheap overcoat into the gutter; a gaggle of sightseers, gawping at the bright window displays. There was plenty for tourists to see here: Sophie knew all the sights now. There was the grand Mikhailovsky Palace, whose sumptuous halls housed the Russian Museum, and there was the dramatic sweep of the Kazan Cathedral, with its rows of magnificent columns. There was the elegant Hotel Europa – the best hotel in St Petersburg – and just beyond it, an enchanting glimpse of the glittering fairy-tale domes of the Church of the Savior on Spilled Blood. There was the glass-roofed bazaar, designed to look like an exquisite Paris arcade, and twinkling in the distance, the golden spire of the Admiralty Tower.

It was splendid – and yet, Sophie knew that if the sightseers were to venture the full length of the long street, they would find it changed entirely. By the time they reached its opposite end, the magical grandeur would have melted away like a dream. The shops and palaces would be replaced by ramshackle tenements; the elegant people by ordinary working folk in old shawls and big aprons, or muddy sheepskins; an old man selling roasted pumpkin seeds from a brazier, and beggars huddling out of the cold.

Just like London, St Petersburg had two different faces – and during the six weeks she had been here, Sophie had made it her business to get to know them both. She knew most English people in the city stayed away from its darker corners, remaining safe in their own comfortable circle – socialising at the New English Club, shopping at the Magasin Anglais, and barely understanding a word of Russian. But Sophie wanted to know the real St Petersburg. She'd spent hours walking around the city streets until her feet ached; and had persuaded Vera's son, Mitya, to begin teaching her to speak Russian herself.

Today however, no Russian would be required. Sophie's destination was on the most splendid section of the Nevsky. Beneath the sign of the Imperial Eagle, gold letters spelled out in both English and French: *Rivière's Jewellery & Fine Goods*. Some of the sightseers had paused to admire the sumptuous façade, and to peep into the arched windows, through which it was possible to glimpse St Petersburg's elite, lingering over glass-fronted cabinets. Inside them, a treasure trove of exquisite objects glittered like a fairy hoard.

Rivière's was a maker of marvels and dreams. There were twinkling crystal flowers fit for an enchanted garden; tiny jewelled scent bottles, no bigger than Sophie's thumb; and little gold tea sets that the Tsar's daughters used for their tea parties. There were jewel boxes no bigger than a bird's egg, and diamond brooches that glittered like frost. There were miniature animals, carved from precious

stones, which Nakamura said made him think of the Japanese sculptures called *netsuke* – a carnelian fox with eyes of rubies, a crystal rabbit, a jade frog with a single pearl in its mouth.

But what Rivière's was really famous for was its music boxes. Each year, Monsieur Rivière himself designed a new music box for the Tsar to give to his children at the New Year festivities. Each music box was extraordinary – from a silver-gilt castle, with jewelled flags flying, to a moving carousel, complete with golden horses. Keen to follow the Imperial family in everything, St Petersburg's wealthy flocked to Rivière's to purchase music boxes of their own. Sophie's favourites were all in the shape of birds – a green parrot in a gilded cage, a wonderful peacock with a jewelled tail, and a magnificent golden firebird, decorated with gleaming rubies. They reminded her very much of a music box which had been made here in this very shop: the Clockwork Sparrow.

In a strange way, she thought, as she made her way behind the shop towards the staff entrance, it was the Clockwork Sparrow that had brought her here. It had certainly helped her get this job at Rivière's: when she'd explained she had worked at Sinclair's, London's finest department store, for the famous Mr Edward Sinclair, himself a great collector of Rivière's objects, and when she had talked of his marvellous Clockwork Sparrow, she had been hired almost at once. Of course, it helped that she spoke French – the language of St Petersburg's aristocrats, who considered Russian the language of the peasants. And being English was a distinct advantage too: for in Russia, her new colleague Irina had explained to her, any English person was automatically considered someone of importance – even a 'milord' or 'milady'.

Now, she pushed open the door and went through into the workshop at the back of the shop. No one even glanced up at her – except for Boris, one of the master jewellers, and Vera's husband – who gave her a quick, kindly smile from where he was already hard at work examining some technical drawings that were spread out on the workbench before him.

Sophie was quite used to that. In Rivière's workshop, there was always a feeling of intense concentration in the air. The only sounds to be heard were the scrape of a stool on the floor, the clink of a delicate jeweller's instrument, or the occasional brief mutter in any one of a dozen languages – for Rivière's artisans came from all over Europe. With protective smocks over their clothing, the jewellers bent low over their workbenches, holding tiny paintbrushes or magnifiers in their hands – whilst behind them, polished wooden shelves stretched from floor to ceiling, each filled with miniature objects, glinting with precious stones or bright with enamel designs.

Sophie slipped quietly past, towards the cloakroom. She found herself thinking, as she often did, of how strange it was that the Clockwork Sparrow had been made here in this very room. How peculiar it was that so much could have come from something so small – a tiny mechanical bird she could hold in the palm of her hand! For if the Clockwork Sparrow had never existed and been stolen, she might never have discovered her talent for detective work; Taylor & Rose might never have existed; she might never have known about the Baron and his secret society, the *Fraternitas Draconum*. And of course, if it were not for the *Fraternitas* she wouldn't be in St Petersburg at all.

She'd come here on the trail of a notebook which the *Fraternitas* had stolen: a most important notebook that contained research about the sinister society itself, but more significantly, information about a powerful secret weapon they had hidden away centuries ago. They had concealed clues to the weapon's location in Benedetto Casselli's dragon paintings, so that future members of the society could find it. The notebook contained information about how the clues in the paintings could be 'decoded' to locate the weapon: but if the *Fraternitas* were to get hold of it, Sophie knew they would use it to help spark off a terrible war in Europe. It was down to her to get the notebook – and prevent them.

Somewhere, she mused, as she went into the cloakroom to hang up her coat and tidy her hair, in some other world, there was no Clockwork Sparrow. In that world, there was a Sophie who had never come here, who didn't think at all about things like secret weapons, or wars, or shadowy societies.

Perhaps that Sophie was still selling hats at Sinclair's, gazing out of the window at Piccadilly Circus, and looking forward to going out to tea with Lil.

It was a cosy thought, yet at the same time it made her feel strangely uncomfortable. Her old life seemed small and restricted – a little box into which she would no longer be able to contain herself. Now, she was a thousand miles from London and Piccadilly Circus. And yet at the same time, Rivière's was oddly like Sinclair's, she mused, as she went through into the shop, where sales assistants in white gloves moved quietly to and fro. There was the same sumptuously thick carpet; the same richly polished wood and velvet; the same aroma of beeswax, and perfume, and luxury. The Russian countesses admiring jewels could so easily be London ladies, excited about a new Paris hat.

The shop manager gave her a quick nod, gesturing towards a group gathered around a display of diamond bracelets. Sophie went over to them at once: '*Bonjour, mesdames,*' she began. 'May I be of any help?'

But even as she showed them the bracelets, Sophie kept a sharp eye out. There was someone she was looking for amidst the silk top hats and frothy ostrich feathers – one person she wanted to see, more than anyone else.

He wasn't the kind of person anyone else would have paid any attention to. He looked like an ordinary old man, with an unkempt beard. He wore a shabby overcoat with the collar turned up, and his hat pulled low. He wasn't like the other gentlemen who came to Rivière's: the haughty young aristocrats; the Tsar's officers with their gleaming gold braid; the wealthy merchants in fur-lined coats. And yet he visited the shop almost every day. Once there, he would shuffle his way slowly around, before coming to rest, in silent contemplation, before a cabinet of enamelled opera glasses and jewelled lorgnettes. It was always the same display that held him transfixed – and as he looked at it, Sophie looked at him.

The beard, the hat and the collar did not fool her in the least. She knew that this was no ordinary, shabby, harmless old man. In fact, the man who was gazing at the opera glasses was the reason she was here in St Petersburg – and he was someone very dangerous indeed.

CHAPTER SIX

Rivière's, The Nevsky Prospekt, St Petersburg

'I don't understand why you waste time on him,' Irina muttered, as she and Sophie stood together behind the counter, some distance away from where the old man was peering at a gilded magnifying glass. 'He's never going to buy anything! He's obviously got no money – just look at the state of his overcoat!'

'I know,' said Sophie, with a shrug. 'I suppose I feel sorry for him.'

Irina tutted disapprovingly. '*Alice!* I know you haven't been here very long, but you have to understand! If you want to earn a commission, you can't start *feeling sorry* for people. You have to choose your customers with care.' She cast her eye around the shop. 'Look – see him, for example? That young fellow, with the gold trim on his coat. He's got money burning a hole in his pocket, I can tell. See how he wants to impress his lady friend? I recognise her – she's a dancer from the Mariinsky. *He's* the one you want to go for.'

She raised her eyes at Sophie, encouraging her, but Sophie just smiled. 'He's all yours,' she said sweetly.

Irina shrugged. 'Your loss. I bet you fifty kopeks I can get him to buy that gold *bonbonnière*.'

She strolled off in the direction of the young man, and Sophie grinned after her. She was fond of Irina, whose easy confidence sometimes reminded her a little of Lil. But the truth was, she wasn't concerned with earning a commission. The small attaché case, carefully hidden under her bed in her room at Vera's, contained more money than Irina would earn in a year, courtesy of the Secret Service Bureau.

Sophie wasn't here to earn money. She was here for the old man in the shabby overcoat.

'May I help you? Would you like to take a closer look at the opera glasses?'

He looked up and smiled at her, a little embarrassed. 'You must think I am mad,' he said, in fluent French – though Sophie could detect the traces of a German accent. 'Almost every day I come here, and every time you are kind enough to show these to me.'

'Not at all. It's my job,' said Sophie pleasantly, as she unlocked the cabinet with one of the small keys that hung on her belt. 'We have many customers who come back to look at their favourite items. There is one lady who likes to try on a particular diamond tiara every week!' she added, with a smile.

The old man smiled back, but his eyes were already fixed on the pearl and ruby opera glasses she was showing him. 'Fascinating,' he murmured, extending a careful fingertip to touch the gold filigree. 'Such perfect craftsmanship!'

'Is there anything else you would care to look at today, Herr Schmidt?'

Sophie knew that the man's name wasn't 'Herr Schmidt', any more than her own was 'Mademoiselle Alice Grayson'. She'd decided to use her mother's name as her *alias* – her false name – while she was travelling undercover. It seemed rather appropriate, as she knew her mother had visited St Petersburg as a young girl: she'd read all about it in the old diaries that she had inherited.

For a brief moment, she wondered why the man standing before her had chosen 'Herr Schmidt' as his own alias. Perhaps he simply thought that with such an ordinary German name, no one could possibly guess that he was no harmless old man, but in fact the Count Rudolf von Wilderstein – disgraced cousin of the King of Arnovia, and husband of the notorious Countess von Wilderstein, hiding under a false identity in St Petersburg.

When Sophie had left Paris in Captain Nakamura's aeroplane, she'd never expected she'd end up following the Count all the way to Russia. She'd hoped she would be able to catch up with him at the next stage of the air race, and seize back the stolen notebook he was carrying: the notebook containing the all-important information about the secret weapon. But catching up with the Count had not been as easy as she'd hoped. After the dramatic arrest of the Countess in Paris, he and his plane had disappeared from the race, as though they had vanished into thin air.

It had been Nakamura who had explained that it would not be possible for the Count to disappear altogether – not if he continued to travel by plane, at any rate. After all, there were not very many airfields where a pilot could stop to refuel, or to fix the endless problems which Sophie had learned affected aeroplanes at every stage of a journey. And so, at each stage of the air race, while Nakamura had traded stories with the other pilots, or made essential repairs to his plane, Sophie had talked to the mechanics to learn what she could of the Count's whereabouts. As the weeks passed and they made their way across Europe, telegrams had zigzagged back and forth to the Bureau in London, and with their help, she'd pieced together the Count's route. At first he'd roughly followed the path of the air race, taking advantage of the free passage across borders offered to the pilots. He'd travelled out of France to Belgium, and then to the Netherlands, where they'd almost caught up with him, missing him at the airfield by barely an hour. After that they'd lost him for a while, before getting a tip-off that he had landed at an airfield in Sweden.

'He must be in a great hurry,' Nakamura had said, as they studied the route that Sophie had pencilled on the map. 'He's barely stopped to rest for more than an hour at a time – and flying is tiring. I would think it dangerous to fly so long without a proper break.'



‘I think he’s trying to put as much distance as possible between himself and Arnovia,’ Sophie had observed. ‘He must know he’s wanted by the authorities, for plotting against the King.’

‘So what will we do now?’ Nakamura had asked. ‘There are only two more stops: Milan, and then Zurich. The air race will be finished in a few days. After that, would you like to go in pursuit of the Count and the notebook?’

Sophie had looked up at him, pleased and surprised. She’d assumed that Nakamura would go back to Japan as soon as the air race was over – but now here he was, proposing that they keep following the Count.

‘I’d like that very much, if you really would be willing. But I just wish I knew for sure that he still *has* the notebook.’ It was far too precious to be sent by post, but there was always the risk that the Count had handed it to some fellow on an airfield somewhere, who’d been entrusted with seeing it safely into the hands of the *Fraternitas*. ‘If he hasn’t, then all I’ve done will be for nothing.’

Nakamura had been looking down at the map, as though already working out their route. He'd glanced up and raised his eyebrows at Sophie. 'Well . . . there's only one way to find out,' he'd said simply.

And Nakamura had been right. She'd come so far already: there was no sense in giving up. By the time they'd arrived in Milan, her sources were reporting that the Count had left Sweden for St Petersburg, in Russia, where he'd made arrangements to store his plane – suggesting he planned to stay there for a little while at least. A telegram to the Chief had ensured papers were ready for them to collect in Zurich, which would eventually allow them to travel over the border to Russia.

Once they'd arrived in St Petersburg, Sophie had put her detective skills to work, eventually tracking down the Count's aeroplane, stored in a farm shed not far from the airfield. From there she'd worked hard to locate the man himself, who she learned had taken a room in one of the city's dingier hotels, under the name of 'Herr Schmidt'.

'I bet he's meeting someone from the *Fraternitas* here to hand over the notebook,' she'd said to Nakamura that evening, over a Russian dinner of unfamiliar, strangely fragranced dishes. 'He can't have given it to them yet.'

'How can you be sure?' Nakamura had asked.

'If he had, they'd have paid him well for it – and that hotel doesn't look like the sort of place that a member of a Royal family would stay, if they had money.'

For the next two days, she'd watched the Count's hotel but there had been no sign of him. She'd barely been able to bring herself to stay away for a few hours' sleep, she'd been so determined not to miss her chance. At last, her persistence had been rewarded: she'd glimpsed the Count slipping out of the hotel, and hurrying along the street. Was he going to meet his *Fraternitas* contact at last?

But no meeting had taken place. Instead, Sophie had tracked him to a bank on the Nevsky, where after a short conversation with a clerk, he'd passed a small parcel wrapped in brown paper over the counter. Afterwards, she'd followed him to Wolff's, where he'd bought an Arnovian newspaper; to a café where he'd sat at a table in the darkest corner, and furtively eaten a large pastry, topped with chocolate and cream; and finally, strangest of all, to Rivière's, the city's most magnificent jeweller, where he'd lingered outside for a while, as if trying to pluck up the courage to venture in.

He'd spoken to no one but the cake-shop waitress and the bank clerk. He'd walked with his head down and his collar turned up against the wind. Sophie knew he'd been a military man, who had won medals for his bravery, but he hadn't looked brave, nor in the least like someone who until recently had hoped to rule a country. Instead, he'd looked only lonely, tired – and afraid.

'He's hiding,' she'd said to Nakamura. 'He's worried about being caught, even here.'

'What about the notebook?'

Sophie had leaned her chin in her hands. 'I'm pretty sure the notebook is what was inside that brown paper parcel. It looked to me as though he was putting it into a safe deposit box at the bank, which is rather interesting.'

'Why?' Nakamura had asked. 'I would think that was a very sensible thing to do.'

'Oh, of course. It's absolutely sensible. In a bank vault it's safe – there's no risk of someone like me trying to steal it. But I don't believe he'd have put the notebook into the bank if he was expecting to hand it over to the *Fraternitas* immediately. He must be expecting to wait for at least a few days.' She couldn't help thinking that was rather strange. She knew how important the notebook was to the *Fraternitas*, and how much they wanted the information it contained. Why would they delay collecting it from the Count?

What's more, how was *she* to get hold of it now? If the Count had kept it in his hotel room, or even in his pocket, she'd have had a chance at stealing it. But locked away in a bank vault? That would be impossible. She'd have to wait for the Count to withdraw it from the bank to give it to his *Fraternitas* contact before she'd have her chance.

She'd kept a careful watch on the Count, but even after a week had passed he hadn't returned to withdraw the notebook. It had been time for a new strategy, so she had come to Rivière's.

Now, under the twinkle of the crystal chandelier, the Count was saying to her: 'You must get quite used to these treasures, being surrounded by them every day.'

'Oh, I don't believe I could ever get used to them!' Sophie replied. 'I have my own special favourites too.'

She'd intended to point to one of the bird music boxes, but a sudden instinct made her point instead towards a silver box with a delicate enamel painting of a London scene on its lid – the river and the spires of Westminster.

The Count turned to examine it. 'A lovely English scene. You are English, are you not, *mademoiselle*?'

Sophie felt triumphant. She'd been talking to the Count at Rivière's for several days – but this was the first time he'd asked her a question about herself. 'Yes, from London,' she replied casually. 'This reminds me of home, which seems very far away. You're far from home too, aren't you?'

She said it as lightly as she could, turning slightly away to close the door of the cabinet, so the Count could not see her face. She dared to add: 'From Arnovia, I think?'

Even though she wasn't looking at him, she felt the Count stiffen. There was a moment of tense silence, in which she locked the cabinet door and then turned to him with an expression of perfect innocence.

'You know Arnovia?' he asked, in a hoarse voice.

'Oh no, not really. I've never been there. But I met a couple of Arnovians once, and I remember what they sounded like.' No lie in that. She *had* met some Arnovians once, if you counted those brief moments on the airfield in Paris, when she and Lil had rescued Crown Prince Alex with Princess Anna's help. 'I believe it's a lovely place,' she added.

Relaxing now, the Count nodded. 'It is,' he agreed, wistfully. 'The mountains are beautiful. And Elffburg, the capital – it is a perfect little city. There's nowhere else like it.'

'You must miss it very much,' said Sophie. 'I know I miss London.'

But the Count only nodded briefly, as if realising he'd stayed longer than he should have. 'I've taken up too much of your time, *mademoiselle*. Thank you for showing me the opera glasses.'

Sophie smiled in her friendliest manner. 'Come again. It's been a pleasure to talk with a fellow exile.'

The Count looked at her sharply. 'Exile?' he repeated.

Her face remained innocent as she replied: 'Yes – it almost feels like that, doesn't it, when you're far from home? Come again and tell me more about Arnovia. Perhaps I'll go there one day. I'd like to see Elffburg – and I hear they have the most wonderful cakes!'

The Count's face broke into an unexpected smile. 'Indeed they do! The cake shops here are not bad – but I have found only one *pâtisserie*, in the Summer Gardens, that does real Arnovian-style pastries.'

'I'll have to try it,' said Sophie.

The Count bowed a polite farewell, and shuffled away – past Irina, who was taking the gold *bonbonnière* to be wrapped for her customer.

Sophie watched him go, disappearing into the crowds on the Nevsky. It might not have seemed like much of an exchange, but for her it was important. It was a small but significant step towards completing her mission – and she was beginning to think that her plan for getting back the stolen notebook might just work.

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