

## Chapter 1

It was a good school, one of the best in London.

Miss Banks and her sister Emily believed that girls should be taught as thoroughly and as carefully as boys. They had bought three houses in a quiet square, a pleasant place with plane trees and well-behaved pigeons, and put up a brass plate saying: THE MAYFAIR ACADEMY FOR YOUNG LADIES – and they had prospered.

For while the sisters prized proper learning, they also prized good manners, thoughtfulness and care for others, and the girls learnt both algebra and needlework. Moreover, they took in children whose parents were abroad and needed somewhere to spend the holidays. Now, some thirty years later, in the autumn of 1910, the school had a waiting list, and those girls who went there knew how lucky they were.

All the same, there were times when they were very bored.

Miss Carlisle was giving a Geography lesson in the big classroom which faced the street. She was a good teacher, but even the best teachers have trouble trying to make the Rivers of Southern England seem unusual and exciting.

“Now can anyone tell me the exact source of the River Thames?” she asked.

She passed her eyes along the rows of desks, missed the plump Hermione, the worried-looking Daisy – and stopped by a girl in the front row.

“Don’t chew the end of your pigtail,” she was about to say, but she did not say it. For it was a day when this particular girl had a right to chew the curved ends of her single heavy plait of hair. Maia had seen the motor stop outside the door, had seen old Mr Murray in his velvet-collared coat go into the house. Mr Murray was Maia’s guardian and today, as everybody knew, he was bringing news about her future.

Maia raised her eyes to Miss Carlisle and struggled to concentrate. In the room full of fair and light brown heads, she stood out, with her pale triangular face, her widely spaced dark eyes. Her ears, laid bare by the heavy rope of black hair, gave her an unprotected look.

“The Thames rises in the Cotswold hills,” she began in her low, clear voice. “In a small hamlet. “ Only what small hamlet? She had no idea.

The door opened. Twenty heads turned.

“Would Maia Fielding come to Miss Banks’ room, please?” said the maid.

Maia rose to her feet. *Fear is the cause of all evil*, she told herself but she was afraid. Afraid of the future...afraid of the unknown. Afraid in the way someone who is alone in the world.

Miss Banks was sitting behind her desk; her sister, Miss Emily, stood beside her. Mr Murray was in a leather chair by a table, rustling papers. Mr Murray was Maia’s guardian, but he was also a lawyer and never forgot it. Things had to be done carefully and slowly and written down.

Maia looked around at the assembled faces. They looked cheerful but that could mean anything, and she bent down to pat Miss Banks’ spaniel, finding comfort in the feel of his round, warm head.

“Well, Maia, we have good news,” said Miss Banks. A frightening woman to many, now in her sixties, with an amazing bust which would have done splendidly on the prow of a sailing ship, she smiled at the girl standing in front of her. A clever child and a brave one, who had fought hard to overcome the devastating blow of her parents’ death in a train crash in Egypt two years earlier. The

staff knew how Maia had wept night after night under her pillow, trying not to wake her friends. If good fortune was to come her way, there was no one who deserved it more.

“We have found your relatives,” Miss Banks went on.

“And will they...” Maia began but she could not finish.

Mr Murray now took over. “They are willing to give you a home.”

Maia took a deep breath. A *home*. She had spent her holidays for the past two years in the school. Everyone was friendly and kind but a *home*...

“Not only that,” said Miss Emily, “but it turns out that the Carters have twin daughters about your age.” She smiled broadly and nodded as though she herself had arranged the birth of twins for Maia’s benefit.

Mr Murray patted a large folder on his knee. “As you know we have been searching for a long time for anyone related to your late father. We knew that there was a second cousin, a Mr Clifford Carter, but all efforts to trace him failed until two months ago, when we heard that he had emigrated six years earlier. He had left England with his family.”

“So where is he now?” Maia asked.

There was a moment of silence. It was as though the good news had now run out, and Mr Murray looked solemn and cleared his throat.

“He is living – the Carters are living – on the Amazon.”

“In South America. In Brazil,” put in Miss Banks.

### **Questions:**

1. What was the name of the school in the story?
2. Other than learning, what did the sisters believe was important for young ladies to learn?
3. How old was the school?
4. What were the names of the two sisters that were teachers in the school?
5. What is the name of the girl who is the main character in the story and why was she so concerned about the news Mr. Murray was going to deliver?
6. Describe what the girl looked like.
7. Who was Mr. Murray?
8. What had happened to Maia’s parents?
9. What news did Mr. Murray deliver to Maia?
10. Where were her relatives living?
11. What is the surname of Maia’s relatives?
12. How do you think Maia would feel about having to go and live there?

### **Extension:**

Write a short character description about Maia. What is she like? What has happened to her?