

## 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.

Maia lifted her head. "On the *Amazon*?" she said. "In the jungle, do you mean?"

"Not exactly. Mr Carter is a rubber planter. He has a house on the river not far from the city of Manaus. It is a perfectly civilized place. I have, of course, arranged for the consul out there to visit it. He knows the family and they are very respectable." There was a pause. "I thought you would wish me to make a regular payment to the Carters for your keep and your schooling. As you know, your father left you well-provided for."

"Yes, of course; I would like that; I would like to pay my share." But Maia was not thinking of her money. She was thinking of the Amazon. Of rivers full of leeches, of dark forests with hostile Indians with blowpipes, and nameless insects which burrowed into flesh.

How could she live there? And to give herself courage, she said, "What are they called?"

"Who?" The old man was still wondering about the arrangements he had made with Mr Carter. Had he offered too much for Maia's keep?

"The twins? What are the names of the twins?"

"Beatrice and Gwendolyn," said Emily. "They have written you a note."

And she handed Maia a single sheet of paper.

*Dear Maia*, the girls had written, *We hope you will come and live with us. We think it would be nice.* Maia saw them as she read: fair and curly-haired and pretty; everything she longed to be and wasn't. If they could live in the jungle, so could she!

"When do I go?" she asked.

"At the end of next month. It has all worked out very well because the Carters have engaged a new governess and she will travel out with you."

A governess...in the jungle... how strange it all sounded. But the letter from the girls had given her heart. They were looking forward to having her. They *wanted* her; surely it would be all right?

### **Comprehension 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 were the names of her cousins?
12. How do you think Maia would feel about having to go and live there?
13. How does Mr Murray describe Manaus?
14. When will Maia leave for Manaus?
15. What are Maia's first thoughts about the Amazon?
16. What does the word 'hostile' mean?
17. What does the phrase 'Maia's keep' mean?
18. Why did Maia think that she would be alright living in Manaus?

### **Extension:**

Write a character description about Maia. What is she like as a person? What do we know about her so far?