



Chapter Twelve

'Stay!' said Finn to his dog. 'Stay and guard the hut.'

The dog looked at him with despairing eyes and howled briefly.

'You heard me,' said Finn. 'Stay!'

Another howl; then the dog turned and threw himself down in front of the hut.

'Will he really stay?' asked Clovis.

'Of course. I won't be long.' Finn was going to settle Clovis into his hiding place in the museum and then slip back to the lagoon.

It was already almost dark, but Finn knew the waterways which led to Manaus like the back of his hand. He was going to take Clovis in the canoe by the same route as he had taken Maia. There was plenty of time; Sergei's party did not start for another couple of hours — and it was not till the party was in full swing that Maia was going to start working on the twins.

Finn had darkened his hair again; he wore his headband and a circlet of beads round his arm. Clovis was dressed in the cap and uniform of the cadets of St Joseph's school in Manaus. Finn's father had tried to send him there, but after the first week Finn had come home and told Bernard that if he wanted Finn to go back, he would have to handcuff him and drag him there by the hair.

If anyone caught a glimpse of them in the back-streets of Manaus as they made their way to the museum, they would think it was a boy from the college being taken back to school by his Indian servant.

'Right; I think we've got everything: the keys, a lamp, your satchel, the money so you can get to your foster mother. No, wait. There's something else.' Finn felt in his pocket. 'Here, I want you to have this.' And he handed him Bernard Taverner's watch on its silver chain.

Clovis stared, turned it over. 'I can't take this. It's your father's, isn't it?'

'Yes. But if you're going to be me, you'd better have it,' said Finn, and turned away quickly for it was far harder than he had expected, giving away the watch he had seen so often in his father's hands.

They pushed the canoe off and Finn began to paddle out of the lagoon. The dog howled again, but he did not move, and then they were through the rushes and on their way.

It was a silent journey. If they had to speak they did it in whispers. Finn stopped where he had dropped Maia the first time they met, and tied the canoe up to a tree. He would make his way back as soon as Clovis was safe in the hiding place.

They waited for half an hour, till it was entirely dark. There was no moon, and no street lighting, in the small lanes along which Finn led Clovis.

As they came to the back door of the museum, they heard the sound of dance music coming from the Keminskys' house.

The party had begun.

This time Maia did not feel like Cinderella. She was going to the party as well as the twins, and as she dressed she almost forgot the job that faced her when she reached Sergei's house. Her dress was new, the last one the matron of the school in London had bought with her before she went away, and it was very pretty. A dark blue, rustling silk cut like an Elizabethan dress, with a very full skirt and a row of tiny pearl buttons on the bodice. Minty had brushed out her waist-length hair and left it loose, and the twins, when they saw her, did not look pleased.

'You're too skinny to wear a low neckline.'

'And your hair will get into a mess.'

'Shall I plait it again?' Maia asked Miss Minton, and her governess pursed up her mouth and said, 'No.'

The twins were dressed in their favourite party pink; rather a fleshy pink, which was perhaps a pity because their short necks coming out of a double row of ruffles made them look a little like those hams one sees on butchers' slabs near Christmas. They wore several bracelets, so that they tinkled as they walked, and they had had an accident with their mother's scent. Beatrice had taken some and sprinkled it behind her ears and then Gwendolyn had tried to take it from her and the stopper had come off, so that both of them smelled violently of 'Passion in the Night'.

Mrs Carter did not mean to stay behind in the bungalow. She had invited herself to play bridge in the club in Manaus. Mr Carter came out to say goodbye, holding a small box containing the eye of a murderer who had been hanged in Pentonville prison. It had arrived that morning and excited him very much.

'Very nice,' he said absently, looking at Maia's dress, and was glared at by his wife. 'The twins too... very fetching,' — and he hurried back into his study.

It was nine o'clock before the Carters' cab drew up at the Keminskys' house. There were Chinese lanterns strung between the trees; the air smelled of orange blossom; music streamed from the windows.

Maia had never been in such a sumptuous house. The walls were hung with rich tapestries and paintings of Russian saints framed in gold. Tubs of white lilies and crimson poinsettias were massed on the sides of the staircase; hundreds of wax candles glittered in the crystal chandeliers.

Sergei and Olga now came running out to greet them.

'You look like a beautiful wave with your dress and your hair,' said Olga, touching the blue silk, and Sergei said she must hurry because they were going to play a polonaise next. 'And we're good at polonaises, aren't we?'

Then the count and countess came out of the drawing room to greet them. The count looked like a picture from a book about the Russian steppes, with a high-necked embroidered blouse, wise, dark eyes and a black beard. The countess was a beautiful, untidy woman who wore a priceless emerald pendant slightly askew over her dress and enfolded Maia in a warm embrace.

'The children have told me so much about you,' she said, and held out her arms to the twins, who backed away. The twins did not get hugged. They always made that clear from the start.

Mademoiselle Lille came to lead Miss Minton away, and soon the party was in full swing.

Afterwards Maia thought what a wonderful evening it would have been if she had been just an ordinary guest with nothing to do except enjoy herself. The Keminskys were the most amazing hosts — rose-water was served to the dancers in crystal goblets; in the dining room the food laid out on a white damask cloth was like food in a fairy tale; Russian piroshkis, rare Brazilian fruits, a three-tiered cake for Olga's birthday — and the count had found proper gypsies to play for them.

But she was working to a timetable. Clovis would be safe in the museum by ten o'clock. The crows were already back in the Pension Maria. Between ten and dawn the following morning, when the Bishop pulled up her anchors, she had to betray Clovis' hiding place to the twins.

And she had to make sure that they would act.

If only everyone hadn't been so nice to her, whisking her off to dance, to drink lemonade or go into the garden. Not just Sergei and Olga and Netta, everyone.

But at least it wasn't difficult to keep track of the twins. If she couldn't see them in their flesh-pink dresses or hear the tinkle of their bracelets, she could smell them, for they still moved in a cloud of their mother's 'Passion of the Night'.

Ten o'clock struck on the big grandfather clock in the hall. Time to begin.

Maia excused herself from the next dance and went to the big window which looked out towards the docks.

The twins, who were not dancing, watched her.

Maia came back, circled the floor once with a Brazilian boy, then stopped and went back to the window.

The twins were still watching her. Oh please, let Clovis be right, she prayed.

For the third time she returned to the window, and yes, Clovis was right. The twins followed her.

'What are you looking at?'

Maia swung round, startled. 'Nothing... I mean... I just wondered when the Bishop is sailing. It is tomorrow morning? They haven't put it off?'

'Yes, it is. Why do you want to know?'

'I don't really... I just wondered. Mr Low and Mr Trapwood are going to be on her, aren't they? They're definitely going back to England?'

The twins exchanged glances.

'What does it matter to you?'

'It doesn't.' Maia was beginning to look very flustered and guilty. 'It doesn't at all.'

She made her way slowly to the door and left the room, allowing herself only one anxious glance at the twins. Don't keep turning round, Clovis had said; don't overdo it.

Beatrice and Gwendolyn were now definitely suspicious. 'Do you think she knows where the Taverner boy is after all?'

'If she doesn't, why is she so jumpy?'

'There's still time for the reward.'

'I'm not going to let her out of my sight,' said Beatrice.

'And I'm not either,' said Gwendolyn.

Maia had paused on the landing. The Keminskys had placed an icon there; a Holy Picture with a lamp burning underneath.

The picture was of St Theodosius, a very thin saint with huge black eyes. Maia had never prayed to a Russian saint before, but as she heard the twins coming, she fell to her knees.

'Please,' she gabbled aloud. 'Please keep him safe. Please don't let the crows find his hiding place before they sail. Please.'

The twins had stopped on the stairs to listen. Now, as Maia got to her feet, they followed her downstairs and into an empty cloakroom where the children had left their outdoor things when they arrived.

Careful not to look back, Maia went to her sponge bag. As well as her hairbrush and her shoes, she had hidden a packet of nuts and a sandwich wrapped in greaseproof paper. She took them out.

'Who are they for?'

Beatrice had come up behind her. Now she wrenched her arm back and Maia dropped the nuts.

'You'd better tell us.'

'No one... For me.' Maia was getting more and more flustered.

'Don't be silly. The house is full of food. You were going to give them to someone, weren't you? The boy you're hiding.'

'No. No. Oh please...'

Beatrice had taken Maia's arm and was twisting it.

'You're hurting me. Stop it.'

There wasn't any need to act now. Beatrice was really hurting her. And now Gwendolyn took her other arm and jerked it back.

'Let me go!'

'Not till you tell us where he is. Not till you admit you know.'

Real tears came to Maia's eyes as the twins, one on either side, yanked her arms still further back.

'It's only... oh please... You don't want him to be caught — he doesn't want to go back to England. He's only a boy and he's so afraid.'

The twins gave grunts of satisfaction. They had caught her out!

Two more savage yanks, then Gwendolyn took hold of a handful of Maia's hair and twisted it away from her scalp.

'Quick, where is he? If you don't tell us we'll really hurt you.'

'And scratch your face, so that your precious Sergei won't want to look at you again.'

Maia gulped, sniffed. It wasn't difficult; the twins, when in an evil mood, were surprisingly strong.

'If I tell you will you let me go?'

'Yes. Unless you lie to us.'

'He's in the museum... in the Natural History Museum, but please, please don't give him away! He's not a criminal and—'

'Whereabouts in the museum?'

The door was thrown open and Sergei stood there. 'What are you doing? How dare you! Let her go!'

The twins dropped Maia's arms. Then they ran out past Sergei, leaving him alone with Maia.

'They're fiends, those girls!' he said, putting an arm round Maia. 'What was it about?'

'I can't tell you, Sergei, but it's all right, trust me. It really is all right.'

'I'll kill them,' muttered Sergei through clenched teeth. 'I'll really kill them.'

But when he came to look for the twins, they were nowhere to be seen.