

Kirby Larson

AUDACITY JONES

STEALS THE



SHOW

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* BOOK 2 *
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A Somber Ceremony

Audacity Jones peered around the corner, examining the great hallway of Miss Maisie's School for Wayward Girls with utmost care.

"Is the coast clear?" asked someone standing behind her.

"Clear?" echoed the three small voices belonging to the triplets.

Audacity scouted left and right. Not a kid-leather boot nor starched pinafore to be seen in either direction. The dozen other Wayward Girls were no doubt hard at work on the morning lesson.

Thinking of that lesson, Audacity—Audie to her friends—could not help but remember that it was Tuesday. Pastry day. Would that mean éclairs? Brioche? Or the delicacy from Beatrice's hometown, the *canelé*? One of those petite vanilla rum cakes could make the heartiest of souls swoon. Audie sighed. If this was *canelé* day . . . she inhaled sharply, putting an end to such self-indulgent thoughts. There were matters at hand far more significant than creations of pure sweet cream butter, and brown sugar, and—

Audie's confectioned daydream came to an abrupt end with the sudden meeting of an elbow and the delicate space between her ninth and tenth ribs. She turned.

"Sorry, chum." Bimmy's expression was most apologetic. "I didn't mean to bump you."

"No harm done." Audie was instantly forgiving—she needed a reminder to focus upon the task at hand. She checked the hallway once again; still empty.

On tiptoe, Audie led her comrades to their secret spot, a cozy little cubby below the old servants' stairs. Bimmy followed Audie, and three blonde shadows trailed Bimmy. A casual observer might blink thrice in astonishment but, no, said observer would not be hallucinating. On fairy-light feet tripped three petite and identical children, so alike they appeared to be cut out with the same cookie cutter. The first blue-eyed blonde with porcelain skin was Violet, the second Lilac, and the last and smallest (but not the youngest; that was Lilac by four minutes) Lavender.

Bimmy and the triplets were Audie's closest friends at the School for Wayward Girls. Since Bimmy's arrival four years back, the five had been constant companions. As a matter of fact, the quintet had not spent one single day apart until Audie's recent misadventure with the Commodore. Alas, dear reader, there is not sufficient time to further describe those events; I leave it to you to consult a previous volume recounting Audacity Jones's first foray into the rescue business.

Like a pinafores centipede, the five girls moved as one across the worn cabbage roses of the hallway runner. They paced twenty steps south, twelve steps west, and three north until they reached the

three-quarter door, nearly hidden from view by an overgrown philodendron. Audie, first to reach it, turned the knob and allowed her friends to enter before closing it with a quiet snick.

They settled themselves in a somber circle. From her starched apron pocket—in addition to many other aspects of their daily life, the Waywards' wardrobes had greatly improved since Beatrice's arrival—Audie withdrew a candle nubbin. From the opposite pocket, she produced a match and a flint. With great care, she placed the candle in the center of the circle. With equal care, she struck the match, whose sulfur fumes caused all the girls to cough. Candle lit, she extinguished the match with her breath.

"It is time," she intoned. She reached her right hand out for Bimmy and her left for Violet. Or it might have been Lavender; it was dark in spite of the guttering candle. "As you know, Cypher will arrive on the morrow. And I will venture away with him."

At this, a tear trickled down Lilac's right cheek. Though she knew her friend to be quite capable, she could not contain her worries. After all, Audie's last outing with Cypher, though exhilarating, had proved treacherous. Lilac sniffled.

"No need to fret." Audie handed Lilac a starched handkerchief. She smiled fondly at the triplets, who had been placed in Miss Maisie's care, and thus in Audie's, as infants.

Audie herself had arrived at Miss Maisie's some five years prior. Unlike the sixteen other girls at the School for Wayward Girls, she was not wayward but orphaned; her guardian uncle could not be bothered to discern the difference. He had merely driven Audie to the town of Swayzee, to the school that he'd seen advertised in the *Indianapolis News*. There he presented Miss Maisie with his niece

and a tidy sum before striding off without one backward glance at the waif who'd been under his roof less than a fortnight.

Even at the tender age of six, Audie had been resourceful. In the pockets of her little pink pinafore she had stashed a chunk of cheese and two biscuits against possible hunger. And what foresight! She had scarcely been at the School one hour when she offended Miss Maisie with a request to be shown their schoolbooks. That resulted in her first trip of many to the Punishment Room. And it was through one of the room's narrow leaded glass windows that Miniver squeezed for the first time. The chocolate-striped kitten was delighted to share that bit of cheese, an action that had sealed the bond of friendship between Min and Audie.

At the present moment, Min, no longer a kitten, fitted herself through a gap in the old servants' stairs. She padded on white paws around the perimeter of the girls' circle, sniffing. Reconnaissance complete, she leapt onto Audie's lap.

Audie allowed Min to settle before continuing. "Though Cypher has assured us this assignment will be nothing but run-of-the-mill, Beatrice has advised that I not go alone." Here, Audie omitted a significant detail: Since the recent communication from Cypher, her ear had been buzzing to beat the band. You, dear reader, might imagine a buzzing ear a mere inconvenience. But in Audie's case, it was a warning. That buzzing ear had alerted her many times to potential dangers, including her parents' ill-advised and ill-fated safari in the Dutch East Indies.

Audie smiled at her bosom friend. "And Bimmy has agreed to accompany me."

Bimmy returned the smile, though it did not completely cover her true feelings. She would, of course, be Audie's willing companion no matter the destination. But there seemed to be more to Audie's invitation than met the eye. Bimmy scolded herself for such thoughts; if Audie was holding something in reserve, keeping a secret, there was an impeccable reason for doing so. "It's an honor, of course," she said.

Lilac could restrain herself no longer. A tear dribbled down her left cheek.

"Oh, don't be such a milksop," scolded Violet.

"It's not as if they'll encounter the likes of the Commodore again," soothed Lavender.

Lilac dabbed at her eyes. "But I will miss them so."

That one had acknowledged aloud a truth held in common by all unhinged the older-by-seconds sisters. They began to sniffle as well.

"Now, now." Audie, anticipating such a turn of events—the triplets were exceedingly prone to waterworks—had well provisioned her pockets; she was nothing if not prepared. "It sounds as if we will be gone a week at most." She dispensed two additional handkerchiefs. "And you'll be so occupied with those croissant orders for Sharp's General Store that you won't even notice we're gone."

"No matter how busy we are," snuffled Lavender, "we will always notice when you are g-g-gone." The atmosphere at Miss Maisie's School for Wayward Girls had deflated like a day-old balloon after Audie departed on her previous adventure. And now Bimmy would be gone, to boot.