

## Installment 2

Didi had opted not to hire a lady's maid.

She had followed the Qualification of Women Act, which passed in 1918, with interest when she was 14. The Act allowed women to be elected to Parliament, and those over 30 with property, to vote. And though she would not describe herself as a suffragette, she did maintain an interest in the movement as they pushed for the right for all women over 21 to vote.

On her seventeenth birthday, her mother had introduced the topic of finding her a lady's maid, but she had refused the offer explaining that she sensed that the world was changing. It had caused quite a stir at the time. But in the aftermath of WWI, Didi could see that people were beginning to question the old ways and the ancient hierarchies, and she could envision a time when such things as lady's maids would be relics of the past. She remembered that the very idea had made her mother shudder.

Besides, Didi liked her independence and privacy and she had simpler tastes than her sister who was creative and engrossed with fashion. Furthermore, where Dodo's hair was straight and cut into a chic bob that needed maintenance under the hands of a professional, her own hair was naturally curly and easy to style. Her sister had given her lessons on how to apply make-up both subtly for day wear and more dramatically for evening.

Moreover, when she really needed help for a special occasion, she borrowed Lizzie, who she loved to pieces, from Dodo.

She was rather wishing Lizzie was home to help her look her best for the evening shindig. She had placed a pearl headband around her head and was trying to tuck her golden curls inside to make a roll but it wasn't working out just how she wanted. She ripped it off and started again.

She had invited four girlfriends to accompany her to the party but one by one they had called to say they were ill. A bad case of the flu was going around, and they had each caught it with its accompanying shivers and fever. She had toyed with the idea of not going to the birthday party, but she hadn't had any real fun for ages and so decided to go alone. There was bound to be someone she knew.

She caught her curls in her fingers again and tucked them into the headband. Fortunately, this time she succeeded in forming the nice round bump she was hoping for. Adding some dangly pearl earrings and a dash of fuchsia lipstick she stood before the mirror. She had borrowed one of Dodo's Renée Dubois dresses—what Dodo didn't know wouldn't hurt her. It hovered over her hips, hinting at their shape without clinging, and then draped to her

ankles, floating above her shoes which she had also borrowed. A soft, boat neckline was the perfect background for a string of long pearls that hung down to her middle. A little rush of excited anticipation prickled her stomach.

Arriving fashionably late, Poppy Weatherington's great house in the heart of Surrey, was throbbing with music. Light spilled onto the mossy, stone steps as the front door opened to reveal throngs of young people dressed in their finery.

After someone took her coat, Didi was obliged to turn sideways to slip through the vestibule in search of food and wine. Stepping on toes amidst heartfelt apologies, she spotted an open doorway and sidled through. It was, in fact, a large, formal dining room with pendulous chandeliers hanging over an enormous, oak table groaning under huge pyramids of seafood and vol-au-vents, and enormous platters of oysters, muscles and smoked salmon.

She grabbed a delicate, china plate from a tall pile on the sideboard and swiped a champagne flute from a passing waiter. Peeling off several layers of the smoked salmon, she laid a thin wafer on her tongue and sighed. Heavenly. Oysters she would skip, but smoked salmon, never!

Sipping the fizzy, golden champagne, she wrinkled her nose as the bubbles tickled. Filling her plate with more decadent delicacies, she scanned the large room for any familiar faces. The place was simply bursting with people but no one she recognized. Most of the crowd was made up of young men in animated conversations about sports.

Slithering out, she made her way down a wide hallway toward the rapid beat of the live music, knocking into people as she held fast to her plate and slender glass. Halfway, double doors opened onto a busy ballroom where dozens of energetic couples danced the *Charleston* and as she squeezed in and stood by the doorframe, she found herself tapping her toes.

Popping a vol-au-vent into her mouth and washing it down with a couple of gulps of champagne, she scoured the crowded room for a free chair.

Nothing.

Grasping her plate, she shuffled along the edge of the dance floor, hoping to spot an acquaintance. The music changed to the *Black Bottom*, inducing another wave of dancers to engage. At last, she found a spot and slid into the vacant seat with the speed of a child playing musical chairs.

With time to breathe, she saw that the music was supplied by an eight-piece band, and a singer wearing enough make-up to sink a ship and a dress so tight it looked as if it had been painted on. In spite of her appearance, she had an amazing voice.

"Hello!" said a voice beside her.

Didi jumped. Turning to her left she recognized a girl from school.

"Juniper! It's been an age!" She air-kissed the girl who had been in her fifth-form class. Unfortunately, Juniper had not changed at all and was still plagued with pimply skin and thick glasses. A blunt fringe across her vast brow was the only improvement. When they were younger, Juniper's lack of confidence had caused her to be shy and retiring. If Dodo were here, she would wrangle an appointment for her at a salon in London and take her clothes shopping.

"You look fabulous!" commented Juniper, proving that she had matured out of her shy stage. "I always did envy you at school."

"Did you?" asked Didi with genuine surprise. "I don't know why. I was always hopeless at maths and science, and you were a whizz."

"But in the real world, those things don't really matter, do they?" said the girl with a sad smile, her muddy hazel eyes magnified by the strong lenses.

"No, I suppose not." Didi panicked that the conversation was going south fast and cast about for something jolly to say. "Have you had any adventures since we left school?"

Juniper pushed the frames up her freckled nose. "Not really. Mummy is always searching for someone who will take me off her hands. I am the last one left at home, you see."

Didi felt desperate. After that comment, the conversation seemed irredeemable.