

Didi's story

Installment 4

Charlie Chadworth took Didi's hand and kissed her cheek in a cloud of woody cologne.

"Thanks for taking care of her," he said to Gerald with a wink, and swept Didi to the other side of the room leaving Gerald looking like a stranded goldfish, in the middle of the floor.

"Charlie, you have no idea how grateful I am!" she declared, not knowing whether the battering of her heart was relief at being rescued, or her attraction to Charlie. Probably both.

"I could see you were drowning." A delightful twinkle in his blazing blue eyes and a heart-stopping smile, transformed his handsome face from attractive to devastating. "Who was he?"

Didi gulped down her bubbling emotions. "Just someone from my past who is rather over eager." She glanced back as Gerald ambled from the floor, hands in his pockets, shoulders hunched. "Fueled with Dutch courage by too much whiskey."

"I can completely understand his eagerness," said Charlie, dipping his head and looking up at her through his wavy, chestnut hair.

Didi felt another jolt pass through her. Was he flirting?

The truth was, she had held a candle for Charlie for many years, but he could never see past Dodo. A cautious smile rolled across her face.

"Dodo here?" He stretched his neck looking around the crowded room.

Didi's hopes sunk faster than a pebble in a pond. "No. I'm here all alone."

"Good!"

Didi snapped her head up. "Good?"

"You haven't talked to her recently, I gather." His words held a dose of depression.

“We have been like ships that pass in the night for the last several months,” she replied.

“Why?”

“She and I were an item at the beginning of summer, but she called it off.” He huffed like a disappointed child. “Don’t mind admitting she broke my heart. Did she not mention it?”

Didi’s heart dropped. Why had no one told her? “Like I said, we’ve hardly seen each other.”

He dragged a hand across his disarming face, lifting his strong chin. “I don’t know why I expected her to.”

Disappointment dripped from him like rain from saturated leaves. She almost forgave him for bringing up her glamorous sister. Instead, she rearranged her expectations.

“Let’s go and get something to eat,” she suggested. “And you can tell me all about it.” At the very least it would save her from Gerald.

Pleasantly surprised when he took her hand to lead her through the sea of humanity, the wall she had erected to protect herself started to crumble. They arrived at the room with all the food and he pulled her in. It was still bustling but a few seats were now vacant.

“I’m starving!” he said. “How about you?”

Where smoked salmon was concerned, she could always find room for seconds. “Ravenous!” They each piled a plate high with goodies and Charlie found them a couple of chairs in a more secluded corner of the room.

“So?” She quirked a brow while stuffing her mouth with the smoky, smooth deliciousness.

Charlie winced and his eyes signaled embarrassment. “It was shocking manners to bring up my predicament with your sister. I’m over it.” His raw feelings as transparent as a picture window, any fool could tell he was not.

“I am positive she didn’t mean to hurt you,” said Didi, trying to soothe him. “She’s not like that.”

He rolled his broad shoulders. “Oh, I know. Wrong timing, I think.”

Didi was confused and tipped her head.

Running a finger across his top lip he said, “There was some other chap. A brooding policeman.”

What?!?!

Didi’s eyes bulged as memories of the prickly policeman who had headed the murder investigation at Farrington House, steamrolled into her mind. On reflection, there was an undeniable romantic tension between her older sister and Chief Inspector Blood, but it was so ridiculous to envisage it going anywhere that she had quite forgotten him.

Charlie wrinkled his nose. “She didn’t tell you?”

She felt her mouth gape open. “No, she did not!” Didi’s emotions slammed from disappointment to abject shock and back to wounded, rolling around in her chest like a bee caught in a bottle. Why had Dodo not confided in her?

She felt Charlie’s gaze on her.

“How scandalous!” she managed to say, swallowing her pride. “Do you know what happened?”

Charlie took a deep, tortured breath, his pain apparent in every movement of his jaw.

Didi threw her hands in the air almost knocking her plate to the ground. “How thoughtless of me! I shouldn’t have asked.”

He shifted in the chair. “Well, I opened the door.”

Her heart hiccupped as he flashed her a sad smile. “If you’d rather not, I completely understand.”

“No, it’s alright.” He took a sip of champagne. “I took Dodo to see the King and Queen at the Queen’s Race and there was a murder.”

“I heard about the murder...but not the other stuff.” She leaned forward, still hurt but eager to hear the tale.

“Blood was assigned to the case. They were both surprised, I think. Anyway, being thrown together was difficult and though she was incredibly kind to me, it was obvious she didn’t have the passion for me that she felt for him. It was inevitable, really.”

Passion for Chief Inspector Blood? This was earth shattering news! She really needed to pin her sister down for more details.

“Oh, Charlie!” she gasped. “I’m so sorry.” She reached out, touching his arm and he looked up at her as if he had forgotten she was there. “I’m convinced she feels ghastly about it all since she hasn’t told me a thing. I’m sure she’s still processing it all. Dodo has to do things in her own time.” And apparently without consulting her sister.

His brow crinkled like a sad puppy. “I thought she might have mentioned me.”

Clearly, he was far from over her sister and there was no chance for her when he was still in this state. But something her mother had said was beginning to make sense.

“If it makes you feel any better, she felt so awful she ran away to the depths of Devonshire.” The puzzle of that trip was starting to come together. “That alone tells me how ghastly she felt.”
~~Now was probably not the time to mention Rupert. (Do they know yet?)~~

“I suppose it should... but enough about me,” said Charlie with a brokenhearted expression that made Didi’s toes curl. “What are you up to?”

Didi plumped her hair with a palm. “Right now, not much, but I’ve been traveling extensively, which I suppose is why I didn’t know any of what you just shared. But my traveling is over until our yearly trip to Greece in February.” The wind howled outside and they both glanced out the window as a large branch hit the glass in a gust. “This winter weather is awful. It’s really cramping my style, if you must know. I’ve been bored to tears. That’s why I am here, alone.” She took a sip of the bubbly liquid. “I was supposed to come with a gaggle of pals but they all came down with the wretched flu.”

He lifted his head. “Bored? Me too. Term just ended and I have no immediate plans. Would you like to...maybe...do something? Together?”

The truth was that though this was actually wish-fulfillment of the best kind, she was less than enthusiastic about being a second-best replacement. If he wasn’t still damaged goods from the break-up, she might have been more enthusiastic. However, it was also true that it was November, the weather was bally awful, her sister was missing in action and it would be nice to have *something* to do.

“Why not?”