

## Installment 6

Condensation on the inside of the first-class carriage window blurred the fields and cows on the ride into London. Didi had the carriage to herself which was perfect. She rubbed the moisture with her glove which did little to improve the view.

She went back to her society magazine. There was a picture of her sister, Dodo, dressed to the nines at a society event from earlier in the month. She loved fashion herself but did not have the expert eye of Dodo who always looked fabulous.

Since her sister was out of town, she had helped herself to an outfit from her wardrobe. She knew Dodo wouldn't mind—she was very generous that way. Motivated to look her best, Didi wished her sister's maid, Lizzie, was around, but had made do with an article she had cut out on make-up application and let her blonde, curly locks hang past her shoulders.

She glanced at her watch. She had tried not to get her hopes up about this date with Charlie, but if the state of her stomach was any indication, she had failed.

The train slowed and screeched to a stop, steam streaming past the foggy window. She fiddled with the handle, stepping down into the busy station filled with rushing people and smelling of oil and newspapers. Pushing through the crowds in wet coats, holding dripping umbrellas, she emerged onto the London street to sheets of rain.

Hailing a taxi, she tried to duck the rain drops and slid onto the black leather bench, shaking her head.

“Tony's” she told the driver.

The capital was not at its best in a rainstorm. The white buildings looked gray and the gray buildings looked grayer. But the soggy atmosphere could not dampen Didi's mood.

The restaurant was not far from the station, and she stepped out and made a dive for the porch. A sudden flash of nerves drenched her bloodstream like the skies above and she took a minute to compose herself. As she did so, she caught sight of Charlie in the middle of the restaurant, in animated conversation and looked to see his companion. She was a well-dressed girl in a tweed suit, her face hidden by a cloche hat.

Didi recoiled.

She had jumped to the conclusion that this would be an intimate date for two.

Should she run after the taxi and return to the station? Was she an idiot who could not read men's intentions at all?

She leaned against the wall hoping to remain invisible while she considered the situation, as rain bucketed from the sky.

She had nothing else to do.

It was time to check her disappointment and enjoy a leisurely lunch at one of the hottest restaurants in town.

As she took a deep breath for courage, a tall man rushed past her and into the restaurant, water dripping from the elbows and hems of his raincoat. Removing his hat, he started forward and stopped at Charlie's table, bending to kiss the girl on her cheek.

*Well, that changes things.*

Didi rolled her shoulders and was about to put her hand on the doorhandle when a couple jumped out of a cab and ran for the door. She stepped out of the way.

They were laughing as they removed sodden coats and closed up soaked umbrellas. Didi watched as the stocky man and peroxide blonde also made for Charlie's table. She saw him check his watch.

*It's a party!*

Without further hesitation, Didi pushed through the door just as Charlie looked up. His face glowed and she was more than glad she had stayed.

He stood quickly, almost knocking over his chair.

“Didi!”

She leaned in for him to kiss her cheek. His lips were warm and she could have sworn they lingered.

“Meet my friends,” he said gesturing to the others at the table who all nodded and smiled in welcome. “This is Lady Diantha Dorchester.”

“How do you do?” said Didi to the table at large, shaking hands with everyone.

“Here’s a chair by me,” said Charlie, pulling one from another table.

“Are you the sister of Dodo Dorchester?” asked the girl in the tweet suit.

“I am!”

“I don’t know her personally, I’ve just seen about her in the magazines.”

“Yes, she is becoming quite famous,” replied Didi.

“Did I hear that she is a bit of a gumshoe?” said one of the men.

“You did!” exclaimed Didi, happy to sing her sisters praises. “She has helped Scotland Yard in several cases.”

“Fascinating!” responded the chap.

“What shall we order?” said Charlie, artfully steering the conversation away from Dodo.

They all ordered something different and Charlie ordered a couple of bottles of wine. One thing her family had trained her for was social events and Didi fit into the group seamlessly as they waited for their food.

The night was lively, Charlie's friends outgoing and fun and Didi was happy that she had not run away.

As they emerged several hours later, the sky was dark but clear, the rain having washed the sky clean and bright. A sprinkle of stars winked.

They said goodbye to the others and Charlie suggested a walk by the river, taking her by the hand.

"I hope you didn't mind sharing me tonight," he said. "I already had this planned when we met at the birthday party and thought you would feel less pressure if we were in a group."

"I was surprised at first but they are lovely people." She was not about to confess that she had almost bolted.

"Your sister has fashion and crime. What's your thing? You used to like riding, didn't you?"

"I still do. Whenever I am home and the weather is good, I take my horse, Phillida, out. What about you?"

"Not much time for it to be honest. My university studies take up a great deal of time."

"I imagine. History, isn't it?"

"I am surprised you remembered," he said, his patrician profile lit up by the moon.

*I remember a lot about you.*

"I hated history at school," she said. "But I like the stories. Why don't they teach history as stories instead of dates?"

"No idea. I think a lot more children would like the subject if they taught it that way."

"What are your long-term goals?" They were by the water, the moon forming a celestial pathway across.

“I want to be a professor,” he said. “My brother is the heir and there’s not a lot of money to go around as it is, so I knew I’d have to make my own way. As an academic I get summers off to travel.”

“I love to travel,” she agreed. “What’s your favorite place?”

“Egypt,” he said without hesitation. “Fascinating place for history.”

“Never been,” she said, “The closest I’ve been is Greece. We go every year when there isn’t a war on.”

She felt his hand clench slightly around hers at the mention of the war.

After a moment of quiet he said, “I went on an archeology dig a couple of years ago. Nothing as famous as Tutankhamun or anything. Dirty job but amazing experience.”

Didi wrinkled her nose. “I think I’ll leave that kind of thing to the experts.”

“Name a place you would like to see before you die,” he said, his tone improved.

“New Zealand.”

“Really? Why?”

“My grandfather bought us a book when I was eight and I was enthralled by it. And it’s so far away it seems magical. How about you?”

“I’m interested in Central America. The Aztecs and such.”

All the while they were bantering back and forth, Didi was acutely aware of his hand in hers, the touch of his skin, the warmth. He had made no attempt to break the connection. So, when he slowed, her heart began to race. The mood was perfect; moonlight, water, stars, clear sky.

She turned and looked up at him, her eyes wide and willing. “Is that so?”

“Yes.” He peered into her face as if trying to read something and leaned forward. Didi closed her eyes.

They snapped open when she felt his lips on her cheek.

*Really!*

What would it take to make this man kiss her? A musical serenade?