

“Fliss,” said Derek, “Mr. Fitzwilliam has been trying to help me locate, um, my father. My real father.”

I felt a bit tippy for a moment, as if the floor were slanting downhill suddenly. “Oh, Derek, shouldn’t you ask first at home? It might upset everyone,” I said.

“Really? I don’t see any reason for a foster boy not to search for his real father. And that’s just what we’re working on, isn’t it, Derek? It takes time. We’re doing our best, Flissy. Am I right about your nickname?” said Mr. Fitzwilliam, frowning at his housekeeper, who stood suddenly in the doorway. He shook his head at her quietly. She was staring at me. I think she was deaf, because Mr. Fitzwilliam used sign language to tell her something. Then she quickly turned and left the room.

Perhaps it was because the wind picked up from the south suddenly and started rattling and battling against the far windows, making great washes of rain stream all over the glass, but I began to feel just a bit more uneasy. One of my feet was ever so cold and the other one was quite toasty, and whenever that happened, it meant I was feeling nervous about something.

Mr. Fitzwilliam sat back and eyed me. “So your mother is away, I hear.”

“Yes,” I said. “Far away.”

“But where?” said Mr. Fitzwilliam. “Have you any notion about it at all?”

“Not at all,” I said, looking down.

“I find myself fascinated by your mother. What’s her name?”

“Winnie,” I said.

“Yes, I’m fascinated by Winnie. I understand she is very beautiful and yet I’m curious about someone who could leave her child on the coast of Maine and go back into the war in Europe, and for what reason?”

“Well, I couldn’t say, really. I think she went back because she loves roses and she wanted to be in London when they bloom,” I said. Then I rolled my eyes round the room, wondering how my answer had fared. Had it fallen on its face or had it slipped along unnoticed?

“Ah, of course. I should have thought of that. Roses, yes. Well, I hear she’s magnificent,” he whispered.

“From whom?” I said. I often liked to use the word *whom* in its proper place. But whenever I used it, Derek always went to pieces laughing over it.

“Oh, I hear things. People saying this and people saying that. Take another cookie. You too, Derek,” he said. “I hope you will tell me more about your mother. I do know she mails things to the Bathburn house. I hear she’s as lovely as a butterfly. Just as pretty and delicate as a swallowtail. I have more cookies and lots of time. I’m very interested.”

“Derek, we might be too busy to sit and talk. Perhaps we should head back before it storms,” I said, frowning and trying to smile at the same time.