I'll Be Seeing You

by Marblez

Summary

Sequel to 'There's A Long, Long Trail' set during World War Two.
Prologue

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Prologue

September 1939

“This morning the British Ambassador in Berlin handed the German Government a final note stating that, unless we heard from them by 11 o’clock that they were prepared at once to withdraw their troops from Poland, a state of war would exist between us.”

Listening to the Prime Ministers broadcast fifty-one-year-old Thomas Barrow felt the cold sensation of dread growing within his stomach, his arm tightening about his eleven-year-old namesake who was snuggled into his left side. On his other side, their thighs pressed tightly together, sat his partner of twenty-two years; forty-seven-year-old Edward Courtenay. He too had his eleven-year-old namesake snuggled against his side, the younger twin trembling almost violently as he listened to the words being broadcast to the nation with wide eyes.

Their hands moved of their own accord, each of them instinctively knowing where the other would be despite their individual sight impairments, until their fingers were linked together.

“I have to tell you now that no such undertaking has been received, and that consequently this country is at war with Germany.”

“Oh My God…” Sybil Branson, the forty-four-year-old mistress of the charming 1930s semi-detached house they were all gathered inside the front room of, gasped loudly. “Not again.”

She was sat with her youngest daughter, fourteen-year-old Eilis and her eldest son, sixteen-year-old Bobby in the window seat, her arms wrapped tightly around the two children who had taken after their father in terms of their looks; light brown hair, blue eyes and fair skin.

“You can imagine what a bitter blow it is to me that all my long struggle to win peace has failed. Yet I cannot believe that there is anything more or anything different that I could have done and that would have been more successful.”

“So that’s it then,” her husband, the forty-five-year-old journalist and former chauffeur sighed, bracing his hands on the mantelpiece as he hung his head between his arms. “War.”

Aoife, the eldest of the six Branson siblings at twenty, moved across the room to place her hand comfortingly on her beloved fathers shoulder, squeezing it gently. Her appearance was a true blend of her parents whilst nineteen-year-old Violet, perched on the footstool beside the large wireless set, was the spitting image of her mother right down to her gravelly voice.

“Up to the very last it would have been quite possible to have arranged a peaceful and honourable
settlement between Germany and Poland, but Hitler would not have it. He had evidently made up his mind to attack Poland whatever happened, and although he now says he put forward reasonable proposals which were rejected by the Poles, that is not a true statement. The proposals were never shown to the Poles, nor to us, and, although they were announced in a German broadcast on Thursday night, Hitler did not wait to hear comments on them, but ordered his troops to cross the Polish frontier.”

“Uncle Thomas?”

Turning his head so that his one good eye could meet the wide blue orbs of the boy now clutching at his jackets he offered Tommy what he hope was a reassuring smile, releasing his hold of Edwards hand so that he could push a lock of brown hair off of Tommy’s forehead.

He loved all of the Branson children equally, more than he had ever expected he would, but he had to admit to having a special fondness for the twins; he and Edward had helped bring them into the world on the kitchen floor of this very house after Sybil had gone into early labour during a snowstorm so horrific that the ambulances couldn’t run whilst home alone.

“Will you have to fight in this war like you did in the last one?”

His soft question, accompanied by a series of soft clicking sounds as he fiddled with Thomas’ prosthetic hand, a habit he’d had since he was a baby, earned a multitude of reactions; Tom let out a pained sound at the mention of anyone having to fight in this war, Edward sucked in a sharp gasp of air as his now free hand moved to clench hold of Thomas’ knee, Eddy let out a soft whimper as he was squeezed even tighter to Edwards side by the blind man and Sybil let out a whimper of her own as she clutched her children to her, tears in her eyes.

“His action shows convincingly that there is no chance of expecting that this man will ever give up his practice of using force to gain his will. He can only be stopped by force.”

“No,” Thomas finally responded, his own eyes damp. “No, it won’t be me fighting this time.”

It’ll be you, he thought, knowing full well that every other adult in the room was having exactly the same thoughts that he was, if this war goes on long enough it will be all of you.

“We and France are today, in fulfilment of our obligations, going to the aid of Poland, who is so bravely resisting this wicked and unprovoked attack on her people. We have a clear conscience. We have done all that any country could do to establish peace. The situation in which no word given by Germany's ruler could be trusted and no people or country could feel themselves safe has become intolerable. And now that we have resolved to finish it, I know that you will all play your part with calmness and courage. At such a moment as this the assurances of support that we have received from the Empire are a source of profound encouragement to us. The Government have made plans under which it will be possible to carry on the work of the nation in the days of stress and strain that may be ahead.”

Unlike some men and women of their generation the four of them had never kept secrets from the children, answering their questions when they’d asked them. Admittedly most of them had been directed at Thomas and Edward when each of them had grown old enough to realise that something must have happened to them to leave them with their many scars.

Thus the Branson children, even Tommy and Eddie, knew all about the true horrors of war.

“But these plans need your help. You may be taking your part in the fighting services or as a volunteer in one of the branches of Civil Defence. If so you will report for duty in accordance with
“Sybil, I don’t want you and the children here when things start heating up,” Tom uttered, turning to face his wife with such a serious expression on his face that Thomas feared the vein on the side of his forehead might actually pop. His children let out small sounds of protest, particularly the twins. “I know you’ll want to be here in the thick of it but I can’t…”

“No, I agree,” Sybil surprised them all given that she had never given anything up without a fight for the past twenty-odd years. “I’ll give Mama a ring once the broadcast is over so that we can begin making arrangements for us to join them at Downton. Nursing experience will be needed everywhere, not just here in London, so my skills shan’t be going to waste. And perhaps, once we’ve seen how things are going to be we shall be able to return to London.”

“You may be engaged in work essential to the prosecution of war for the maintenance of the life of the people - in factories, in transport, in public utility concerns, or in the supply of other necessaries of life. If so, it is of vital importance that you should carry on with your jobs.”

“I don’t want yo run and hide in the country,” Aoife announced firmly, squaring off against her parents. “I’ve been thinking, ever since the rumours about this war started up, that I’d like to my bit and now that it is here I am determined to do so. I don’t know what I shall do, exactly, but I do know that it won’t include me leaving London any time in the near future.”

Thomas chuckled, drawing the families attention across to him as he explain,

“You sound just like your mother did when they tried to stop her from working as a nurse.”

Aoife smiled over at him, taking it as the compliment he had meant it to be.

“Thank you, Uncle Thomas.”

“I suppose we didn’t stand a chance,” Tom chuckled sadly, glancing across at his wife who shook her head, offering him a wry smile. “It doesn’t matter which one of us you children take after, does it? Neither of us have ever comforted to the traditional rules of society or even common sense. Very well, Aoife; you’re almost twenty-one, that means you’re old enough to make your own well-informed decisions. We won’t force you to leave London.”

“I can’t leave London either,” Violet pointed out, her tone firm but not petulant or rude. She was simply stating a fact. “We’ve begun making uniforms at the factory. That means I’m one of those people the PM just referred to; engaged in work essential to the prosecution of war. We’ll lose all the men in the factory soon enough so they’ll need us more than ever.”

The fact that Violet had found work as a seamstress in a clothing factory once she’d finished at the Girls Grammar School rather than going on the Ladies College as her older sister had done was still something of a sore spot with her family. Tom thought she deserved better whilst Sybil worried that she had chosen the job so as to purposefully distance herself from the privileged side of the family and would one day come to regret it. Aoife, with her qualifications from the Ladies College, had just recently begun working as a journalist at her Aunt Edith’s successful magazine, following in her fathers footsteps although rather than searching out important stories she was happy to be assigned the endless society functions.

“Now may God bless you all. May He defend the right. It is the evil things that we shall be fighting against - brute force, bad faith, injustice, oppression and persecution - and against them I am certain that the right will prevail.”
“Uncle Edward?” Eddie spoke up, drawing everyone’s attention to him as he shifted so that he was sitting upright rather than snuggling into the blind man’s side as he had been up to then. Edward hummed softly, encouraging him to continue as he placed his hand on the boys trembling back. “Will you and Uncle Thomas be coming to Granny and Donks with us?”

“No, Eddie, Uncle Thomas and I will be staying here…”

“At least for the time being,” Thomas interjected. “They might decide that visually impaired people such as ourselves would be better off out of the cities, depending on what happens.”

“…and even if we are to leave London we wouldn’t want to impose on your grandparents.”

Oh, Sybil could probably talk her parents round to the idea of housing them for the duration of the war but they’d have to keep up the pretence of Master/Servant all the time whereas in London they only had to keep the act up when they were in public; when they were at home or here with the Branson’s they were free to be as affectionate as they wanted to be.

No.

He couldn’t do that himself and he couldn’t do that to Edward.

“But you will come and visit us, won’t you?”

“Of course,” Edward hurried to reassure his namesake, pulling him back into his side, the eleven-year-old boy clutching at his shirt with both hands. “As soon as you’re settled in.”

Thomas ran his hand over his face, feeling the need for a cigarette but unwilling to smoke with Tommy curled up to him.

He was afraid.

The Great War had taken so much, not only from him but from all that it had touched.

What would this new war do to those he loved?

~ * ~

A/N So…that happened. I couldn’t stop thinking about the world I’d created for them and my evil brain started planning out this story and that I could write some of my other stuff before I got this out and…voila! Looks like I will be expanding on the Appendices after all. X
Chapter One

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Chapter One

September, 1940

“Edward? Cheese Omelette or Potato Jane?”

His partner, who was sat in his favourite chair by the open window in their living room enjoying the feel of the sun and wind on his face as he listened to Elgar’s Variations on an Original Theme, Op. 36 on their wireless set, smiled across the room at him as he answered,

“Fresh eggs or powdered eggs?”

“Powdered.”

Edward pulled a face, causing Thomas to chuckle as he announced cheerfully,

“Potato Jane it is, then.”

Returning the kitchen which he had steadily transformed over the years that they’d been living at 47b Whitehaven Mansions so that it was designed to suit his specific requirements.

He only had one hand after all; his latest prosthetic was much more comfortable that his original one had been, the straps softer and the limb lighter, but the fingers were locked in place so it was less adaptable. He had a hook, an alternative that his doctor had thought might be useful, but he hated the thing and hadn’t used it more than twice since he’d got it.

Getting used to rationing had been a challenge for the couple as both of them had a taste for fine food, even when it’s being prepared at home rather than eaten out at a restaurant; it was always difficult for them to eat out as when they were in public Thomas had to play the part of Edward’s manservant. To begin with when they’d moved to London they’d hired a chef to cook for them but had quickly grown tired of having to keep up their act within their own home and so Thomas had, somewhat begrudgingly, taken a course in cordon bleu cooking designed for servants or people looking to go into service. That in itself had been something of a challenge as they’d never had to teach anyone with only one hand before.

He hadn’t cooked anything worthy of his cordon bleu training since rationing had begun.

As he began preparing the ingredients the music changed, transitioning bluntly from Elgar to the familiar sounds of Tchaikovsky’s ‘Swan Lake’, a piece which he knew to be a favourite of Edward’s. They had even attended the ballet despite the fact that Edward couldn’t see the performance, could only listen to the music while Thomas struggled to explain the dancing.
Once the ingredients had been prepared he retrieved a rectangular fireproof dish from the cupboard and set about creating the simple meal he’d learned from a pamphlet which had accompanied their ration books; he began with a layer of sliced potatoes, then added some chopped leek, sliced carrot, breadcrumbs, grated cheese and a sprinkling of salt and pepper. Working as quickly as he could he filled the dish with alternate layers and finished it off with a final layer of cheese and breadcrumbs. The final step of the meal’s preparation was to pour half a pint of milk over the top, measuring it out carefully so as not to waste even an ounce of their precious weekly ration; Edward could drink tea without milk but Thomas couldn’t.

“It’ll be about forty-five minutes,” he called out to his lover as he carefully placed the dish into the pre-heated oven, something that he could do one handed. He would need Edward to help him get the dish out once it was hot, guiding his lover’s towel covered hands into the oven to pick up the dish as he couldn’t get a good enough grip with only one hand when it was protected by a towel. “Would you like a cup of tea? I can put the kettle on if you want.”

“No, I’m alright at the moment,” Edward responded, smiling as the wind ruffled his hair. Both of them had started going grey once they’d hit their thirties, first at their temples but it had spread relatively quickly through Thomas’s dark hair and now that he’d reached his fifties he was beginning to transition from grey to white. Edward’s hair had stayed a rather attractive dark grey colour well into his forties but was now starting to lighten as well as growing rather thin on the crown of his head. It was somewhat petty but Thomas was proud of the fact that as light as his hair had become he hadn’t lost any on top. “Did Sybil tell you that she’s thinking of bringing the children back to London as no bombs have fallen yet?”

The papers had been calling it a Phoney War for months due to the fact that for the first eight months after war had been declared there was an eight month period of activity. Of course this hadn’t been strictly true, the war at sea was in full effect, but everyone had been too focused on Poland and Germany to really notice. The Phoney War had officially ended when the Nazi’s had begun their attack on France and it’s people back in May but due to the fact that London and Great Britain as a whole had thus far remained unscathed people were beginning to believe that their fears about the war were unfounded. Thomas wasn’t so sure.

“Yes,” Thomas sighed, moving across to sit down on their stylish sofa, a generous gift from Tom and Sybil one Christmas, where his current book lay on one of the plump cushions, the bookmark sticking out from the top. Before discovering the works of Agatha Christie he’d never been one for reading, finding the exercise time consuming and unrewarding, but now he had a standing order at their local bookshop to receive a first publication of all of her works as soon as they were brought out. Currently he was nearing the conclusion of ‘Sad Cypress’, the author’s latest novel featuring her infamous detective, Hercule Poirot. “She mentioned it when we spoke on the phone earlier. I can understand where she’s coming from, there haven’t been any attacks on the city like we were warned there would be, but I got the feeling that she has something of an ulterior motive about wanting to come back to London. I don’t think she’s enjoying being under her father’s roof again; the Earl’s never approved of the way she and Tom have raised their children to be modern, clever and free.”

Edward chuckled,

“Yes, they’re not exactly your typical aristocrat’s grandchildren.”

“Unlike their cousins,” Thomas added, picking up his book and carefully opening it to the marked page. His collection of Agatha Christie’s works had its own bookcase in the corner of their living room and once he had finished this latest novel it would join the rest of them. “Perfect examples of future Lords and Ladies, all of them. Now, let’s see if my suspicions about who the killer is are correct. I still think that Doctor Lord is being far too helpful…”
“It’s not the Doctor,” Edward countered with a fond smile, angling himself more towards Thomas than the window. “He’s obviously in love with Elinor so why would he frame her for murder? It doesn’t make sense. I think it’s one of the nurses or perhaps the housekeeper.”

The annoying thing was that, thus far, Thomas hadn’t been able to guess the killer correctly in any of her novels whilst Edward had correctly guessed most of them whilst Thomas read them aloud to him as was his habit with all books that he read. Edward wasn’t as big a fan of murder mystery novels as he was but he’d happily listen to them so long as Thomas read the occasional piece of classic literature to him; he’d read the works of Jane Austen and Charles Dickens to his partner so many times over the years that he honestly knew them by heart.

They read together, finishing the book and discovering that Edward was indeed right about who the killer was, and worked together to get their dinner out of the oven, Thomas dishing it up evenly between the two plates which he then placed on the kitchen table; they only ate at the dining room table on special occasions or when they had the Branson family over.

It was as they were washing the dishes, anther task which required them to work together, that their pleasant Saturday came to an abrupt end with the distinct wail of an air raid siren.

And thus began one of the longest nights of their lives, second only to the nights spent on the Western Front during the Great War. According to the papers in the days following 350 bombers attacked London, protected by 650 fighters, on what was to be known as “Black Saturday” and whilst they mostly targeted the docks 400 civilians were killed in one night.

Thomas and Edward, who had been assigned places in the public shelter at the end of their road after they’d refused to be evacuated as part of the national scheme, had been unable to make it out of their building before the bombs had begun to fall due to the fact that they were a half-blind man leading a blind man and had ultimately taken shelter under the stairs.

They had sat, cuddled close together, and listened to the explosions.

Some distant.

Some worryingly close by.

“I never thought I’d have to hear that sound again,” Edward gasped after a particularly loud explosion which actually made the ground shake, followed by the distinct staccato of anti-aircraft fire. Thomas tightened his arms around his lover. “I…I don’t know if I can stand it…”

Thomas knew exactly what he meant.

Every single explosion was bringing back a collection of memories that he’d rather forget.

“How could they let this happen, Thomas?”

“I don’t know.”

He grimaced as he felt a phantom pain in his left hand, the hand that he been lost to an explosion twenty-four years ago, just as a particularly close explosion caused Edward to turn in his arms with a panicked whimper so that he could press his face against Thomas’s neck.

“The worlds gone mad,” Edward gasped, tears falling down his cheeks. “Completely mad.”

And he was right.
As soon as the “All Clear” had sounded the following morning, finally signalling an end to the bombing raid, they had returned to their flat to discover that their windows had been blown in when the building opposite theirs had been hit, the paper they’d stuck to it doing nothing to stop the panes from breaking into shards of all shapes and sizes. Thomas had set about sweeping up the debris, grimacing as he thought how difficult it was going to be to get the glass replaced as one of the panes was curved to follow the design of the building, whilst Edward had called Tom from the telephone in the study to check up on him and the girls.

Tom had apparently spent the early part of the raid out with his camera, documenting the horrific night for the article he would inevitably end up writing about it, before abandoning his camera in order to offer assistance to the overwhelmed firefighters and ARP wardens.

They had been dismayed to learn that poor Aoife had been home alone when the siren had sounded and had spent the night in the families Anderson Shelter in their back garden. She had put on a brave act when she’d spoken to her honorary uncle on the phone but even then he’d been able to tell that she’d been understandably shaken by the terrifying ordeal.

Violet, it turned out, had just been finishing a spot of overtime at the factory and had been carried by the crowd into the nearest tube station where she was uncomfortable but safe.

When the air raid siren sounded the following evening it took them by surprise once more, as it did the night after that but after a week of nightly raids they began heading to the air raid shelter before the piercing alarm had even been raised, so predictable did it become.

“Are you two alright in the public shelter?” Tom asked on the day that would mark the tenth day in a row that London was personally attacked by the enemy as he joined the couple for afternoon tea. “I’ve heard some less than things about them whilst covering these raids…”

“As long as we get there in time to get one of the benches to sit on it’s not too bad,” Edward offered, trailing his fingertips across the table-top until he encountered his saucer. Using a series of movements he’d perfected over the years he found the delicate handle of his tea cup, lifted it to his lips and took a sip of the strong tea Tom had made. “Although the lack of private facilities can sometimes lead to a rather uncomfortable night on top of everything.”

Thomas grunted in agreement around his mouthful of cheese and cucumber sandwich.

“There have been instances of those brick built public shelters collapsing under the weight of a falling building,” Aoife added from where she was sat in her father’s favourite armchair darning her favourite pair of stockings. “It’s because they’re above ground, or so they say.”

“They certainly shake enough for me to believe that,” Thomas muttered, brushing a couple of crumbs off of his lapel before taking a sip of his own tea. “If it weren’t so far to walk I’d take Edward and myself down the tube station like Violet does. I’d feel safer underground.”

They stayed at their friends long enough that there was no point in them heading back to their flat only to leave almost immediately in order to make it to the public shelter in time and so instead they joined the Branson’s for dinner before experiencing the “comforts” of a private Anderson shelter for the first time. Since first building the shelter in his back garden, a task which had taken him almost an entire weekend due to the size of the hole he had been required to dig in order to leave only the curved section exposed, Tom had taken the time to cover the curved top with a thick layer of the topsoil and grass he had removed.

“They say the soil will reinforce it even more,” Tom explained as Aoife ducked into the shelter first, carrying the suitcase containing the valuables that they hadn’t sent to Sybil at Downton Abbey. The
sirens had yet to sound but the hour was fast approaching. “It’s a little damp, as you’d expect, but we’ve bought extra blankets for the bunks so it’s not too bad.”

“That smell…” Edward gasped as he was led into the shelter by Thomas. “It’s so familiar…”

“It’s the smell of our war,” Thomas all but choked out, gently guiding his lover down onto the single bed whilst Aoife climbed onto the top bunk of the simply designed set of beds opposite. Once Edward was safely down he rubbed at his nose with the side of his first finger, trying to dispel the smell which was bringing forth almost as many memories of the war as the explosions did every night. “Mud. Damp. A little cordite. Sweat. It’s our France.”

“I’ll just go do a last check on the house and lock up,” Tom announced, his expression one of guilt and pain as he took in his friends reactions. “Then we’ll get the stove on and have a fry up; Aoife managed to get some sausages and bacon this morning. I won’t ask where from…”

“I told you, Da, I got them from the butcher with the rest of our rations,” she protested with a roll of her eyes as she opened up her magazine. “It was the butcher that offered to give me more than we’re meant to have. I certainly didn’t ask for them. Would you rather I have refused and we were left giving Uncle Edward and Uncle Thomas spam and potato fritters?”

Thomas snorted.

“I know I’d never turn down extra sausages or bacon,” he chuckled, shaking off his moment of melancholy as he took the time to study the interior of the Anderson shelter. The floor was made of wooden duckboards, similar to those that had lined the trenches in France, and a series of wooden steps had been built to allow them easy access in and out of the small entrance. Between the single bed that he and Edward were sat on and the seemingly homemade bunk beds opposite sat a small beside table, upon which rested a surprisingly elegant oil lamp and a small clock. At the foot of the bunk beds a battered old bookshelf had been squeezed into the limited space available and was filled with everything that they could possibly need; the bottom shelf was filled entirely with books whilst on the top shelf a stack of magazines sat. Between the two sources of reading materials were a basket of knitting, a torch, a pile of board games including *Snakes and Ladders*, *Sorry* and *Monopoly*, no less than four decks of cards and a chessboard with the pieces kept safely in a small box. At the foot of the single bed was a locked cupboard, probably for the families valuables, on top of which sat a small camping stove. “What do you do about ventilation for the stove?”

“Look up,” Aoife instructed. Frowning Thomas obeyed, finally noticing a wooden box which seemed to protrude from the curved metal of the ceiling directly above the stove. The base of the wooden box appeared to be latched shut. “We put that in last week when we finally admitted the raids weren’t going to be ending any time soon. It’s just some piping Da found on the scrap heap and turned into a chimney of sorts. There’s a cover over the top to stop the light showing, with gaps in the side to allow the smoke out. And it lets fresh air in.”

“Ingenious,” Thomas complimented. “Edward? Do you want to lie down?”

Edward flinched, instantly warning Thomas that whilst he had been able to drag his mind away from his memories of the last war his lover had not been so fortunate. Thankful that they were with someone who had been brought up to understand that, whilst technically illegal, their relationship wasn’t something to be afraid of or disgusted by he used his good hand to turn Edward’s face towards his, moving to gently press their foreheads together.

“Edward?”

“…Thomas?” Edward mumbled, his breath mingling with Thomas’ own. “What…?”
“We’re in the Anderson shelter with Aoife,” Thomas explained softly, stroking his thumb over the lightly stubbled skin of his partner’s jaw in a soothing manner. “In London.”

“I thought…I don’t know what I thought…”

“I know. It reminded me of France as well,” Thomas apologised, resting his prosthetic hand on Edward’s thigh and a moment later the blind man’s hands moved to clutch at the wooden appendage. “It’s the smell of damp, nothing more. We’re not back in France.”

“I’m sorry…”

“No, I’m sorry.” Thomas countered firmly. “I didn’t realise you hadn’t followed us when we changed the subject. You have nothing to apologise for. Now, would you like to lie down?”

“Will you be my pillow?” Edward enquired hopefully. “I need…I need to know you’re there.”

“Of course.”

Thomas pulled away from his lover, smiling up at the concerned looking Aoife briefly before he moved to sit at the head of the small bunk, moving the pillow so that it would act as a cushion between his back and the corrugated metal. Once he was in place he gently helped Edward turn on the narrow bunk so that when he laid his body down his feet hung off of the far end and his head came to rest on Thomas’ cloth covered thigh. Edward sighed in relief.

“Thank you.”

Tom returned mere moments before the air raid siren sounded, prompting them all to let out a sigh of disappointment, before they began their fry up. The sausages and bacon were crackling away in the pan by the time the first explosion of the night sounded and Thomas couldn’t help but chuckle at how odd those two things sounded together. In no time at all they had each been given a sausage and slice of bacon each, one of each being saved for Violet to have cold later on, as well as a thick slice of bread soaked in the fat which had been left in the pan and they feasted on their delicious food as London burned for another night.

Despite the memories the smell of the Anderson shelter dredged up both Thomas and Edward preferred the night they had spent with the Branson’s to the nights they had spent in the overly crowded public shelter and so, with Tom’s passionate agreement, had begun spending their nights at the Branson’s, returning to their flat once the All Clear had sounded.

In the end London was attacked for fifty-seven days in a row.

And then on the fifty-eighth day, as the people of London prepared to suffer through another terrible night of bombing, the sirens remained silent; the Luftwaffe didn’t come.

“I almost wish they had come,” Thomas muttered, his voice filled with frustration as he squirmed on the bed they shared in the Branson’s spare room shortly after the clock had chimed midnight. “I can’t settle. I feel like my skin is crawling with ants. I’m so…tense…”

Edward rolled towards him, wrapping his arms around his partner’s softening waist.

“Then let me help you to react, my love,” the blind man, so at home in the darkness of the bedroom that he was for one at an advantage over his lover, murmured as he slid one of his hands down the softness of Thomas’ belly to play with the drawstring of his striped pyjama bottoms, pulling at the ends of the bow to loosen it. “If the bastards do come tonight then they shall find us far too preoccupied to worry about their silly attempts to break our spirit.”
Tilting his head back towards his lover as the other man pressed himself against his back Thomas sought out Edward’s lips with his own, allowing his eyes to flutter shut as a hand slipped inside his pyjama bottoms, fingertips stroking lightly across the crease of his thighs.

When Edward took him in hand Thomas couldn’t hold back his gasp of pleasure, separating their lips as he sucked in a lungful of air as his lover used years of experience to excite him.

As they kissed and touched the sheets were kicked off of their entwined bodies, allowing them the freedom they needed to remove their pyjama’s so that they could become one.

And afterwards, exhausted, well-sated and safe in the arms of his love, Thomas slept.

The following morning the couple had dressed in the clothes they had brought in their overnight case, packed around their important documents and valuables, and made their way down to join the three members of the Branson family for breakfast. After the first couple of times they’d spent the night with them in the Anderson Shelter, causing them to share their evening meal and breakfast with them, they had begun putting some of their rations towards the meals and Thomas had even added himself to the families cooking rota.

As soon as they emerged into the kitchen he noticed that something was different; Tom was looking steadfastly at his newspaper whilst the girls shared a look and began giggling loudly.

He arched an eyebrow towards them,

“…what’s amused you two so much?”

“We just never realised that Uncle Thomas could be so…” Aoife began, trailing off as she shared another look with her younger sister who concluded with a cheeky smile. “…loud.”

Thomas felt his cheeks burst into flames as he realised what the girls meant.

Edward, in comparison, blanched and turned almost grey as his face snapped towards them.

Tom, as any father would when hearing their daughters speak of such things, gagged loudly before shooting Thomas an apologetic look; whether he was apologising for his daughter’s reactions or his own Thomas didn’t know. He knew that Tom had absolutely no problem with their love, he’d seen them kiss countless times, but this was a little bit more than that.

And the girls, well the girls positively cackled.

“I’m not sure that this is a suitable conversation for the breakfast table,” Thomas eventually managed to utter, fixing his gaze upon them. “Or for polite young ladies like yourselves.”

“We know all about sex, Uncle Thomas; mother was a nurse, don’t forget, and she told us everything we could want to know so that she knew we wouldn’t do anything stupid like some of our friends have,” Violet announced, causing her father to gag even louder than he had before which caused his daughters to roll their eyes towards him. “Don’t worry, Da, neither of us are stupid enough to do something so…well…stupid that could ruin our lives.”

“Although it’s not like you could talk if we did,” Aoife added, almost challengingly. “Given that Ma told us you two lay together before you were married and whilst you were still employed by grandfather as their chauffeur. Actually when you think about it the Crawley sisters, as they were then, aren’t particularly good role models to give us if you want us to remain pure until marriage; Aunt Mary slept with a Turkish gentleman she’d only known for a couple of days, Aunt Edith had an illegitimate daughter and Ma, well, you know about Ma because you were the other person who
took part in ruining her reputation.”

“This is definitely not a suitable conversation for the breakfast table,” Thomas reiterated his earlier statement, taking Edwards hand from where it was tucked into his elbow and placing it on the back of the nearest chair at the kitchen table. “Let’s change the subject. Edward?”

Edward, settling into the chair, opened his mouth speak, paused, and then admitted,

“I’m sorry but I can’t think of anything else to talk about. My minds all…”

“I know exactly what you mean,” Tom muttered, placing the breading he had been toasting underneath the grill of their oven into the toast rack. “So instead let’s eat. Violet, fetch the jam and marmalade from the pantry. Aoife, the bowls for the porridge which is on the stove. And Thomas, would you mind sorting out the tea whilst I get the rest of this bread toasted?”

It was unusual for breakfast to pass without a single shred of conversation but that day they managed it, the girls still giggling intermittently, and afterwards, as they were leaving the house, Edward offered Tom an apology for exposing his daughters to their private activities.

“Nonsense,” Tom responded immediately. “I’m not upset that you felt comfortable enough in our home to do…that. I just wish my daughters weren’t quite as forward as their mother.”

“I’m sorry, Tom, but you never had a hope in hell of that happening,” Thomas snorted, automatically reaching out to steady Edward as his partner stepped down off of the slightly raised doorstep, conscious of the fact that the path was little bit uneven. “I don’t know if we’ll be imposing on you tonight. It’ll depend on Hitler, I suppose. I’ll telephone you later.”

“Of course. The two of you are always welcome, you know that.”

After saying their usual friendly goodbyes they parted ways, the couple taking their usual route home via the park. Although Edward was perfectly capable of navigating this route with only his walking stick to aid him Thomas would occasionally take the other man by the elbow, seemingly to guide him but in reality just to give him an excuse to touch his partner.

Entering their building Thomas nodded towards the porter, Arnold Jeffries, who had been working there since long before the couple had moved into their flat and who probably should have retired by now before pressing the button to call the lift down to them; the couple would only use the lift when they were tired, preferring to take the stairs otherwise.

“What shall we do today, Thomas?” Edward enquired once they were inside the lift, taking advantage of the privacy to link his fingers with his lovers. “I quite fancy a walk by the river.”

“I’ve got a couple of bits on mending to do but they won’t take too long.”

As it always did the lift bounced twice as it came to a halt, something that always startled newcomers and visitors to the building, and Thomas pulled the metal gates out of the way so as to allow them to step out onto their floor. They passed old Horace Granger, their neighbour, on their way to their front door and a soft instruction from Thomas allowed Edward to politely return the older gentleman’s nod of greeting. It was a moved they had perfected over the years in order to stop people giving Edward dirty looks in the streets for not responding to the non-verbal greetings that were all too common within polite society.

Using his key Thomas unlocked their front door, pushing it open and automatically reaching down to scoop up the two envelope’s that were resting on the matt before they could be trodden on. A quick glance confirmed that, as per usual, both were addressed to Edward.
“How many letters today, Thomas?” Edward enquired as he placed his walking stick in the special holder placed beside the hat and coat rack near the front door before making his way into their flat. He was so familiar with the layout that he could move with complete confidence, a hand only reaching out at the last second to find the edge of a chair or the handle of a door. It warmed Thomas’ heart to see him so confident, given how unsure he had been back when he and Sybil were first trying to teach him. “Anything interesting?”

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“Perhaps,” Thomas murmured, picking up the letter opener from the desk in the study before following Edward into their sitting room. He placed their suitcase on the floor by the door, he’d deal with it later, and followed his lover to sit close together on the sofa. “One of the addresses is handwritten. The other is printed and will, I suspect, be the telephone bill.”

“Open that one last then,” Edward advised, leaning comfortably against Thomas whilst the other man carefully opened the letter with the handwritten address, holding it in place on his thigh with his prosthetic as he wielded the letter opener with his right hand. “Well?”

Thomas set the letter opener and suspected bill down on the seat on his unburdened side and set about carefully removing the letter from the envelope and unfolding it, actually flinching with surprise when he caught sight of the name signed at the bottom of the page.

“It’s from your mother.”

“My mother?” Edward repeated with a frown. “I haven’t missed a birthday have I?”

Typically the Courtenay’s only communicated with letters, simple, impartial letters which were exchanged on birthdays and anniversaries so as to keep up the appearance of being a loving family. And as far as visits were concerned Edward was permitted to return to the estate that would have been his had life not turned out differently annually at Christmas.

“No, we’ve got them marked on the calendar for a reason,” Thomas responded, thinking of the dates that he had to mark each year to make sure that they didn’t miss any and cause offence. They’d only missed one letter once. Never again. “Well, let’s see what she says…”

His gaze returned to top of the page so that he could begin reading aloud,

“Dearest Edward,

I have spoken to Jack about you coming to stay with use for the remainder of the war.

You cannot stay in London any longer, not with those terrible attacks continuing.

I cannot fathom how you are coping without your eyesight at such a dangerous time.

Your room has been opened up so we shall expect you within the week.

With Love,

Mother.”

Neither of them spoke for a long moment, absorbing the information they’d just received, before Edward began to laugh ruefully. It was so like his mother, to take it upon herself to make all of the arrangements in what she believed to be his best interest and to expect him to obediently go along with all of them. And without a single mention of Thomas, of course.

“I’ll telephone my mother later and refuse her kind offer…”
“Perhaps…” Thomas trailed off, frowning as his brain caught up with his mouth. Both of them had been adamant that they stay in London, that they wouldn’t be scared away by the likes of Hitler and his Luftwaffe…but now…now that he had experienced fifty-seven bombing raids he couldn’t help but think that the Government had been right to send the vulnerable people out of the city; he’d read somewhere that 1.5 million people had been moved. They weren’t all from London, of course, as other major cities had also been evacuated although a vast majority were. According to the article, if his memory served him right, that figure had broken down into 827,000 children of school age, 524,000 mothers and children under the age of five, 13,000 pregnant women, 70,000 disabled people and over 103,000 teachers and other 'helpers' to help look after those displaced by the war. He and Edward had been contacted about being evacuated but had declined the offer. “Perhaps we should leave…”

“I though you wanted to stay in London?”

“That was before I realised how difficult it would be,” Thomas sighed, the defeat leaving a bitter taste in the back of his throat. “And we can’t keep imposing on Tom and the girls. I know they don’t mind but they’ve got enough to worry about without adding us to the mix.”

“Quite,” his lover agreed softly, sinking back into the cushions placed strategically on the sofa, pulling Thomas back with him by his arm. “But…to live with Jack? And my parents?”

“Edward, I would live with my parents if it meant that I can keep you safe.”

Edward smiled sadly, placing his hand high up on Thomas’ thigh. They had spoken at length about Thomas’ parents over their years together so the statement made his feelings plain.

“Well, then,” he sighed, resting his head on his lover’s shoulder. “That’s that, then.”

And so, after another week of horrific bombing raids, they packed their things into three suitcases and asked Tom to drive them to the train station. It was busy, hordes of uniformed men and women preparing the travel the length and breadth of the country, either on leave or on their way to their postings. There were civilians too, some leaving London just as they were, others travelling for business, some even for pleasure like the young couple who were already in the compartment when Thomas and Edward climbed inside. Judging by the make-shift confetti, made of hole-punch paper clippings, in their hair they were happy newlyweds.

“Thomas, I’ll put the cases up for you whilst you get Edward settled,” Tom offered firmly, putting the two cases he had carried onto the seat before reaching out for the one Thomas had been carrying. Edward hadn’t been able to carry one, not with one arm holding onto Thomas’ elbow and the other using his walking stick so that people would give them a wide enough berth. Tom smiled down at the happy young couple. “Can I put this one above you?”

“Of course,” the young bride agreed, smiling up at the three men. She was a pretty girl if a little bit plump around her middle. “We’ve managed to fit both of our cases above Adam.”

“Thank you.”

Edward would have been happy to travel in third class, the journey not too long really, but because of the fact that they were taking more luggage than they normally did when visiting his family they had decided to splash out on first class tickets. This meant that they would be in a compartment which before the war would have seated six at the most but now would probably be expected to seat anything up to ten depending on the size of the person.

Overcrowding on trains was always a problem nowadays.
Placing the hand which had been tucked into his elbow on the seat beside the external door of the train Thomas stepped back so that Edward could turn around and sit himself down. In doing so the newlyweds, who had been watching them with obvious curiosity, were finally given a look at the scars around his vacant eyes and the young bride let out a startled gasp.

“My apologies,” Edward murmured, smiling in her direction even as Thomas sent a glare in her direction as he moved out of the way to allow Tom to place the other two case on the luggage rack above where he and Edward would be sitting side by side on the plush blue seat. Once he was done Thomas took his own seat and shot the young bride a look that dared her to react to his scars which were only partially concealed by his hair. “I was blinded during the Great War and Thomas, my aide, was partially blinded. We’ve finally conceded defeat and are going to spend the remainder of the war with my family in the countryside.”

“I’m so sorry, I didn’t mean to…”

“Army?” the groom spoke up for the first time. Edward nodded, angling his face towards the owner of the voice. “My father fell at Passchendaele. I’m enlisting after our honeymoon.”

Thomas didn’t miss the way his young bride winced at that.

“Honeymoon?”

“We were married this morning,” the bride explained, linking her arm through her husbands and gazing lovingly at him. “We’re honeymooning at the seaside. I’ve never been, you see.”

“Congratulations,” Edward murmured sincerely. “You’ll enjoy the seaside.”

Nothing was said about the young man’s intentions following his honeymoon.

“I’d best get going. Need to get into the office before the deadline hits for the article I’ve been working on,” Tom announced apologetically, slipping his hand into Edwards and giving it a shake before taking Thomas’ when the other man offered it. They shared a smile. “Give us a ring once you’ve got settled in otherwise the girls will worry. And let Sybil know, too.”

“Thank you, Tom, for today and for helping us out these last couple of months.”

“No need to thank me, Edward,” Tom countered immediately. “That’s what families for.”

“Still, thank you.”

“Look after yourselves,” Tom said as he stepped down onto the platform, placing his hands on the doorframe so that he could lean back inside to order them, “Stay out of trouble.”

“I think we should be the ones telling you that,” Thomas chuckled. “Stay safe, Tom.”

“Always.”

As Tom turned to go, offering the couple of a final farewell, a handsome gentleman of a similar sort of age to Thomas and Edward decided to take one of the remaining seats in their carriage, climbing up and offering a polite nod of greeting to the occupants before taking the seat opposite Edward, placing himself nearest the external door on the other bench. He wore a navy blue suit with a matching fedora style hat which was summarily removed and placed on his lap. Thomas himself had automatically removed his hat upon entering the compartment, placing it on top of one of the suitcases, whilst Edward held his in his hands.
The last occupants of their compartment arrived just moments before the guards whistle sounded; two pretty young women in the easily recognisable uniform of the Women’s Auxiliary Air Force, known colloquially as the WAAF’s. They were already giggling to each other as they struggled to get their suitcases through the door and barely tried getting them to fit in the space left on the luggage racks before giving up and placing them between their feet after they’d dropped down onto the bench seat on Edward’s other side putting them opposite the newlyweds. They then produced a magazine and huddled together to read it.

And then they were off, steaming their way out of London towards Hastings, East Sussex.

~ * ~

A/N I’m sure some of you can guess who the handsome gentleman in the fedora is…hope this explains to those of you who commented wondering how I was going to work Foyle’s War into this story. Where else could the Courtenay’s possibly live? Lol. Anyway, Happy New Year and let me know what you think. Have this story mostly planned out but suggestions / thoughts are always welcome as you never know when inspiration might strike. Marblez X
Chapter Two

Disclaimer – I don’t own Downton Abbey, the Crimson Field or Foyle’s War but the Original Characters (of which there are too many to mention) are my creations.

Summary – Sequel to ‘There’s A Long, Long Trail’ following Thomas, Edward and all of the others through the course of the Second World War.

A/N Title taken from a popular song of the era.

~ I’ll Be Seeing You ~

Chapter Two

November 1940

“Would you like one?”

Thomas looked up from the newspaper he had bought at the train station to find a bag of pear drops being offered to him by the smaller of the two WAAF’s who had entered the compartment shortly before the train had departed. She was a flirt, Thomas had realised quickly, and had been most disappointed to learn that the only young man in their group was a blissfully happy newlywed but she seemed like a nice enough girl other than that.

“Thank you,” he murmured, carefully reaching into the paper bag to retrieve one of the sweets. The bag was then offered to Edward who had spent the journey so far tilting his head towards the window so that he could feel the warmth of the sun on his skin. “Mr Courtenay? Would you like a pear drop? One of our fellow travellers is offering you one.”

Edward leaned away from the window, turning his head towards his lover as he responded, “I would love one, thank you.”

“I can’t imagine not being able to see,” the young woman announced conversationally, seemingly oblivious of the look her fellow WAAF shot in her direction. “It must be horrid.”

Only Thomas, who knew what to look out for, noticed the way that Edward tugged the cuffs of his shirt down so that the leather wraps he still wore to conceal the scars on his wrists were completely hidden. It was a habit he had picked up early on after the war, hiding the evidence of what he now referred to as his “most shameful act” from unwelcome eyes.

“It’s remarkable how you can adjust to such things when you have no other choice.”

As though to prove his point he managed to find the paper bag on the first try with only a murmur of direction from Thomas, retrieving one of the sugary sweets and popping it into his mouth, licking his fingertips clean afterwards. Edward had always had something of a sweet tooth and as such the rationing of sweets, due to a shortage of sugar, was unpopular.
“If you don’t mind my asking, Mr Courtenay, how did you come to lose your sight?”

It was the taller of the two WAAF’s who spoke up this time, her enquiry as polite as such a question could possibly be amongst strangers on a train. Edward smiled in her direction.

“I don’t mind,” he murmured, relaxing back into his seat once more as his earlier discomfort faded; he didn’t mind explaining his condition or sharing the story behind it, it was his rapid decent into despair and the act that this had led to that he was still very much ashamed of. “I was an Officer on the Western Front during the last war, a Lieutenant, and during the Third Battle of Ypres, or Wipers as the men preferred to call it, I was exposed to mustard gas which sadly resulted in the loss of my sight. Sadly I was one of the lucky ones; too many of my men who were exposed along with me suffered a more severe exposure and were either killed outright or succumbed days or even weeks later. Those who did survive were blinded, just like I was, but also suffered from severe respiratory problems and extensive scarring.”

“Oh…”

“Is that why the Government want us to carry our gas masks everywhere?”

“Most probably,” Edward answered the young bride who had gone a somewhat alarming grey colour and was now clutching at her husband’s hand. No doubt she had begun to picture her young husband in the situation that Edward had described, Thomas surmised. “Although these days the gas masks seem much more durable and reliable; the first gas mask I was issued with in 1915 was little more than a sack one pulled over one’s head.”

A grunt of agreement came from the as yet silent man sat opposite Edward.

“I remember those things,” he murmured, his voice deep and holding a strange warmth despite the subject of conversation. “Not at all fit for purpose, not with those weak seams. I was lucky in that I only had to use my mask a couple of times before they were replaced.”

“I can’t imagine facing mustard gas with those original masks,” Edward admitting, turning his face towards the man sitting opposite him. “They barely worked against chlorine and phosgene. The Small Box Respirators¹ were much more reliable. I was just unlucky, I think.”

“You served, Mr…?”

“Foyle,” the other man supplied his name readily when the young groom trailed off so as to request it during his soft query. “And, yes, I did. As did most young men of my generation.”

“We’re you gassed, Mr…”

It took Thomas a moment to realise that the flirty young WAAF was speaking to him, the young woman currently residing in his blind spot as he focused on Edward and Mr Foyle.

“Barrow,” he supplied his own name, turning his head so that he could meet her inquisitive gaze with his own. He was aware of everyone else listening. “And, no, by some miracle I was never gassed. Shelled? Oh, yes. Shot at? Most definitely. I was a stretcher bearer with the Medical Corps rather than an active participant in the fighting so I spent most of my time on the Western Front carrying wounded men off of the field of battle. Our position was gassed twice, I think, but I was en route to or from the field hospital both times so was spared.”

“…do you think Hitler is going to use gas against us?”

“I think if he were going to be would have by now,” Thomas answered the concerned bride frankly.
“But then again he is a complete madman so who knows what he will decide to do.”

“Quite,” Mr Foyle murmured in agreement. “This is a vastly different war to the last one.”

They lapsed into silence after that, all of them lost in their own thoughts.

Thomas got the distinct feeling that the three young women in their compartment had been sheltered from the truth of the last war and that none of them had met a veteran with such blatant injuries as he and Edward before. He also suspected that the young groom had been brought up on heroic war stories of his father and believed, incorrectly, that war was a path to glory and adventure. If their conversation allowed him to make an informed decision about joining up then Thomas would recount his entire wartime service for them all; he’d seen enough naïve young boys get shot to pieces in the last war in their search for glory.

“Are you returning home, Mr Foyle?” Edward enquired. “Or do you travel on business?”

“I had business with the Commissioner in London and am now on my way home.”

“The Commissioner?”

“Yes,” Mr Foyle confirmed. “I’m a police officer.”

The taller of the two WAAF’s startled noticeably, tensing up, but she said nothing.

“A police officer? How interesting,” Edward murmured, smiling across at the other man. “I imagine that such a world as we currently live in can’t make your job any easier, Mr Foyle.”

“You’d be correct, Mr Courtenay. Any relation to the Mr Samuel Courtenay of Hastings?”

“My father,” Edward confirmed, his smile dimming marginally. Thomas longed to take his hand, to offer him comfort, but he couldn’t. Especially not in front of a police officer. “I’m to spend the duration of the war with my parents, along with my aide, Mr Barrow. In truth I had intended to remain in London, my family and I having grown distant, but the Air a Raids make it somewhat challenging for a half-blind man to keep a completely blind man safe.”

“Quite,” Mr Foyle agreed. “I’m sure your mother will be glad to have you home.”

Edward hummed noncommittally.

“We’re heading to Hastings too,” the young bride announced cheerfully, obviously glad of the change in subject as she queerest her husband’s hand. “Robbie’s never seen the sea.”

Never seen the sea and he wants to join up, Thomas thought to himself sadly. Bloody hell...

“They’re all heading to Hastings!” the flirtatious WAAF exclaimed happily before loudly clapping her hand over her mouth. “Whoops! You’re not supposed to share that sort of information when you’re in uniform, are you? Careless talk costs lives, and all that...”

And wasn’t that another painful reminder of how young they all were.

“I think you’ll be fine, my dear, so long as you don’t tell us exactly what you shall be doing in Hastings,” Edward chuckled deeply, brushing his hands down his thighs as though he was automatically smoothing the creases out of his trousers when in reality it was an excuse to trail the tips of his fingers along Thomas’s thigh as they were sat so close together that their thighs were pressing against each other. “Also I think it’s time that we introduce ourselves properly, hmm?
Edward Courtenay, at your service. And this is my man, Thomas Barrow.”

Thomas nodded at the group.

“Robert Pickering.”

When the young groom offered his hand, obviously out of habit more than anything else, and looked both embarrassed and apologetic Thomas quickly prompted Edward to offer his own hand. Letting out a small so of relief Robert leaned forwards to shake the offered hand.

“And this is my wife, Mary.”

Even if they hadn’t informed them that they were on their honeymoon earlier Thomas would have been able to guess that their marriage was relatively new by the way they smiled at each other after he said the word “wife” and linked their left hands together.

“Dorothy Gardiner,” the flirtatious WAAF announced cheerfully, fiddling with a wayward lock of her obviously dyed blonde hair, securing it in the roll. “Aircraftwoman 2nd Class.”

“Helen,” her friend answered a little reluctantly. “Helen Holloway.”

Her previously cheerful attitude seemed to have vanished upon learning that Mr Foyle was a police officer and Thomas found himself wondering what it was that she had done wrong to be so afraid of a seemingly oblivious police officer. No one else seemed to have noticed so Thomas mentally shrugged his shoulders and decided to let it drop, if for no other reason than that technically he and Edward were breaking the law every day they were together.

And then the man who had made her so uncomfortable introduced himself properly,

“DCS Foyle, Christopher.”

“DCS?” Edward repeated, his confusion evident even as he smiled cheerfully across at the owner of the warm voice. “My apologies but I’m not familiar with that particular title…”

Mr Foyle’s smile, indulgent as it was, was just as warm as his voice.

“Detective Chief Superintendent.”

Conversation was less stilted from then on, the introductions having finally succeeded in breaking the ice completely. Thomas learned that Robert and Mary had been childhood sweethearts, growing up on the same street although not directly next to each other, and that both of their families had known long before he proposed that the two of them would one day end up married. In fact Mary was quite happy, proud even, to tell them all about their wedding and how the entire street had been there and how the reception had spilled out of her parents house and into the street because so many people had wanted to wish them well or tell them that they knew it would happen one day. Robert had offered his wife an indulgent smile as she’d talked almost non-stop for a good twenty minutes, his cheeks turning slightly pink at times but not once did he attempt to interrupt her or spoil her fun.

Helen, unsurprisingly, glossed over her home life when she was asked about it by Mary and offered what was obviously a rehearsed line about “wanting to do her bit for the war effort” as her reason behind joining the WAAF; whatever had caused her to clam up around Mr Foyle probably had something to do with her reluctance. Dorothy, on the other hand, had been as happy as Mary had been to share her own tale, speaking quite candidly about her large family, her domineering religious parents and the fact that the WAAF had offered her a way out that they could argue against. She was looking forward to enjoying her freedom.
It wasn’t all that surprising that Mr Foyle was less open about himself whenever he joined in the 
conversation, not just because of their generation and the fact that he, Edward and Thomas had been 
brought up to believe that certain subjects were simply not to be talked about in public but also 
because in his career giving out personal information could be a risk.

He gave vague mention to his wife, Rosalind, whilst commenting about the flowers that Mary had 
chosen for her wedding being similar to those that his wife had chosen but the fact that he had been 
careful to always use the past tense when referring to her left Thomas to assume that she was no 
longer a part of his life. So, divorced or widowed.

His son, Andrew, was a pilot with the RAF who came up in conversation with Dorothy.

“Is he very handsome, your son? I’ve heard that pilots can be quite dishy.”

Mr Foyle chuckled,

“He certainly likes to think so.”

It was shortly after that particular conversation that the train arrived in Hastings, all of the signs 
missing as per the Governments orders so as to confuse the enemy should they ever succeed in 
invading the country. Luckily Thomas had been here just enough times to recognise a few things 
although the fact that Mr Foyle began preparing himself to alight from the slowing train was enough 
of a confirmation for the others; he was a local, after all.

Dorothy and Helen exited first, scuttling out with a cheerful goodbye for everyone as they hurried to 
meet the truck they had been told would be waiting for them at the train station.

After helping his wife down onto the platform Robert had hopped back inside, first for their own 
suitcases and then a second time to help Thomas with his and Edwards luggage. It was much 
appreciated, Thomas thanking him sincerely as it meant that he was able to focus on make sure that 
Edward made it onto the platform safely. It was also much appreciated that Mr Foyle made no 
complaints about the time it took for this to happen, waiting patiently in the compartment until he too 
was able to step down, placing his fedora neatly on his head.

“Thank you,” Thomas murmured as Robert handed him his and Edwards hats which he had 
managed to grab along with their suitcases. “I wish you all the best for your honeymoon.”

“And for your future in general,” Edward added, his fingers closing around the brim of his hat when 
Thomas carefully handed it to him. In a move that was much practiced he figured out which was the 
front and carefully placed it upon his head at a jaunty angle as was his preference. Thomas wore his 
own hat at a much more conservative angle, not perfectly straight as that didn’t suit him but not quite 
so flashy. “It has been a pleasure meeting you.”

“It was a pleasure to meet you too, sir,” Robert responded, taking hold of Edwards hand so that he 
could give it a firm shake. “Thank you for being so can do about your experiences.”

Edward offered him a sad smile,

“War is no place for those who do not understand the reality of it, for those naïve enough to believe 
that nothing could possibly happen to them. Nor is it a place for those who believe war is a game or a 
stepping stone to glory. Knowing what you do know, even though it was only a fraction of what we 
all experienced in France, might just be what keeps you safe.”

It was Mary who thanked him this time, leaning up to kiss his cheek before she and her husband 
picked up their small suitcases and joined the flow of people leaving the station.
“It was a pleasure meeting you both,” Mr Foyle remarked warmly once it was just the three of them left, doffing his hat towards them out of habit. “And welcome to Hastings, or rather welcome back to Hastings. I wish you a pleasant reunion with your family, Mr Courtenay.”

And then, with a final farewell, the couple were alone on the rapidly emptying platform and it was then that Thomas noticed something rather important; Jack Courtenay was nowhere to be seen and given that he was supposed to be taking them to the Courtenay Estate this could potentially be something of a problem for them. He waited, hoping that his lover’s younger brother was running late, Edward having telephoned his mother the day before to confirm what time their train was scheduled to arrive, but there was still no sign of him.

“What’s wrong?”

“You’re brother isn’t here.”

Edward’s sigh was one of pure frustration.

It seemed that no matter how many years passed Jack would never change.

He had always been envious of his older brother, even when they were children, and had always felt the need to “one-up” his older brother be that at school, on the cricket pitch or at home. Sometimes that hadn’t been possible, however, which had led to situations just like this one where Jack would do anything he could to make things difficult for Edward.

As a child it had been things like deliberately making a mess in the nursery in such a way that the blame fell on Edward’s shoulders or eating the last of the biscuits and putting the crumbs in his brother’s bed. On one memorable occasion he had even let all of the cows out of the main field and had managed to convince everyone that Edward had been responsible.

As an adult he liked to boast about the things that he believed he had done better than his brother; marrying the young woman who had been Edward’s fiancé at one point, producing two strong, healthy children who had grown into a handsome young man and a perfectly meek and gentle young woman. Charles, never Charlie, was the image of his father only with his mother’s vanity thrown in while poor Margaret, who would have preferred to be known as Meg, had been controlled all her life by her mother, Elvira, leaving her with little or no personality of her own and no prospects outside of finding a rich and dominating husband.

And now this…

“I suppose we shall have to walk…”

It wasn’t as though they hadn’t walked from the station before, it wasn’t a long walk and they enjoyed walking as a rule, but normally they weren’t burdened with so much luggage.

“If you can carry this case, Edward, I think I can manage the other two with one hand.” As he spoke Thomas picked up one of the larger two suitcases, pressing the handle into Edward’s left hand until his lover took hold of it with a smile and a nod. “You’ll have to take my other arm or place your hand on my shoulder unless you feel comfortable enough with your stick?”

“I’ll use my stick, I think,” Edward decided. “You can always direct me if I miss something.”

“Alright,” Thomas agreed, picking up the smallest case which he held against his side with his bad arm, using his prosthetic hand to keep it steady. Most importantly he managed to keep it tucked into his arm as he picked up the final remaining case. “We’ll take it steady.”
Making their way off of the station they began to make their way through the picturesque town of Hastings, unpleasantly marred by the signs of war; paper stuck to every single window in small crosses to help minimise the spread of broken glass should the window be damaged, sandbags piled in windows and doorways, metal fences missing having been taken for scrap metal, notices about rationing outside every shop and so many uniforms.

“Thomas?”

“Hmm?”

“I can smell moisture in the air,” Edward announced just as he had countless times since losing his sight, his other senses having adapted and increased over the years. “I think…”

He didn’t even have the time to finish his sentence before the heavens opened upon them.

Thomas let out a huff of pure frustration,

“I swear there wasn’t a cloud in the sky when we stepped off the train…”

It was a bit of an exaggeration, of course, as there had been a smattering of clouds across the shades of blue which made up the sky above them that day but it certainly hadn’t been enough to warn him of the oncoming deluge. If he’d even had an inkling of a suspicion that it would rain he would have found a taxi or phoned the estate to send for Jack and the car.

“Well, there is now,” Edward chuckled. “So, shall we find shelter or do we keep going?”

A quick glance around confirmed that they had left the town centre where they could have found a shop to shelter in and were now surrounded by houses, none of which had porches.

Thomas was just about to explain as much when a car pulled up beside them, the window lowering as rapidly as the person operating the handle could get it to reveal a familiar face.

“Mr Courtenay. Mr Barrow,” Mr Foyle called out by way of greeting. An attractive young woman in what appeared to be an ATS uniform was behind the wheel…no, not ATS, Thomas suddenly realised. There was something slightly different about it. “Would you like a lift?”

“Mr Foyle?” Edward responded, turning towards the familiar voice with a thankful smile on his face. The young woman frowned across at him before gasping suddenly, obviously noticing the cloudiness of his eyes. Thomas turned, allowing her to see his own scars and damaged eye which until then had been facing away from the car. This time her gasp was much sharper, her eyes going wide. “Oh, yes, that would be much appreciated. Thank you.”

The young woman made as though she was going to get out to help them with the luggage but Mr Foyle waved a hand at her to stop her, instead climbing out himself despite the fact that he was then exposed to the downpour. Between the two of them he and Thomas quickly placed their suitcases in the modest boot of the smart black car which, if Thomas wasn’t very much mistaken, was a 1938 Wolseley Sedan. It was one of the cars that Tom had considered getting to replace the families 1934 Austin Seven when it had been hit by another vehicle, mercifully whilst it was parked on the side of the road rather than whilst being used, before settling on a 1936 Wolseley Wasp. Once the boot had been secured shut Mr Foyle opened the rear passenger door for Edward, instructing him softly on how best to find the seat from his current position on the pavement. It was done respectfully and knowledgeably, catering to Edwards needs without drawing too much attention to them.

“Thank you,” Edward murmured once he was settled. “This is very kind of you.”
Thomas slid carefully into the car beside him.

“Oh, we couldn’t very well leave you to walk along in this awful weather, could we?” the young woman announced brightly as Mr Foyle carefully shut Edwards door before returning to his seat. “I’m Sam, Sam Stewart. Well, it’s Samantha, really, but everyone calls me Sam.”

Her perkiness, accompanied by a rather endearing smile, caught him by surprise.

“I’m Mr Foyle’s driver. He doesn’t drive, you see, so the MTC…that’s the Mechanised Transport Corps…assigned me to be his driver,” she continued brightly, putting the vehicle into gear once all the doors were shut and expertly pulling away from the pavement. “So where am I headed to? I say, you wouldn’t happen to be related to old Mr Courtenay?”

“Don’t let my father hear you referring to him that way,” Edward chuckled deeply, adjusting his loose grip on the handle of his cane which he held between his knees. “He’s been rather sensitive about his age since he hit his mid-sixties and now that he is approaching seventy…”

Miss Stewart tittered brightly, smiling at them through the rear-view mirror.

“Oh, my grandfather is the same…”

“Now I feel old,” Edward announced with a broad smile of his own, his words causing the back of the young woman’s neck to flush a bright pink colour. “In answer to your original question if you could take us to the Courtenay Estate we’d be very grateful; had we one less case and it hadn’t decided to rain the journey wouldn’t have been a problem but as it is…”

“Right-o!” Miss Stewart announced cheerfully, taking a left turn a little later than she should have which caused the car to tip rather worryingly and Thomas’ hand flew out to grab hold of Edwards before he could stop himself. He released his lover’s hand as soon as he realised what he’d done and could only hope that no one had noticed. “I’ll have you there in a tick!”

“How about we just settle for in one piece?” Thomas suggested dryly, his snarky comment considerably softened by his uncontrollable chuckles. “We’re already missing a hand and the use of three eyes between us so let’s not add any other injuries to list, if at all possible.”

Her gaze met his briefly in the rear view mirror before returning to the road ahead.

“One piece…of course…” she murmured, clenching and unclenching her small hands on the steering wheel, the leather of her driving gloves creaking loudly. “Right…of course. Sorry.”

The remainder of the journey passed in a comfortable silence, broken only by the sounds of the engine and the rain continuing to fall heavily upon the roof of the car. In fact if anything the rain seemed to be getting heavier and so Thomas was very grateful that they had had the good fortune to meet Mr Foyle on the train and for him to be a kind enough person to stop and offer two relative strangers a lift. They would have been soaked to skin otherwise.

“Here we are,” Miss Stewart announced cheerfully as she turned off of the country road they had been winding their way along for the better part of ten minutes, carefully guiding the car to a stop just in front of the ornate gate, a beautiful piece of cast iron which dated back to the latter half of the 18th century. The gate, which was currently closed, marked the entrance to the Courtenay Estate which had existed on this spot since the land was gifted to the family after the War of the Roses towards the end of the 15th century. Of course the house had been much altered over the years, updated to suite the changing times as well as being extended on three separate occasions, but the main hall was still that of the original building. “I suppose we should drop you at the house. I’ll just hop out and open
“No, let me see to it,” Thomas countered, using his prosthetic hand to depress the door handle in a move that he had perfected over the years before stepping out into the bitterly cold downpour. Hurrying across to the gates he reached through to release the latch so that he could push both of the heavy gates out of the way. That done he hurried back to the car, all but tumbling back inside in his haste to get out of the rain. “Ugh! What a miserable day!”

“I dread to think what sort of a state we’d have been in had you not offered us a lift, Mr Foyle,” Edward murmured as the car was manoeuvred towards the front of his childhood home, putting voice to Thomas’ thoughts from earlier. The lights were on inside, confirming that someone was definitely home, but the front door remained firmly closed even as the car moved across the gravel. “And you too, Miss Stewart. I don’t know how to thank you…”

“Think nothing of it,” Mr Foyle responded openly. “It was the decent thing to do.”

“Still…”

“A cup of tea wouldn’t go amiss,” Miss Stewart interjected hopefully, putting the handbrake on before killing the car’s engine leaving them with only the rain. “Nor would a sandwich.”

Judging by the expression that appeared on Mr Foyle’s face his young driver quite often thought with her stomach which, given the state of rationing, wasn’t all that surprising.

“I’m sure we can rustle up something so long as you’re not in a rush to get home,” Edward responded just as the heavy oak door of the house swung inwards to reveal Mr Wright, the Courtenay’s butler who Thomas had always found wanting when compared to Mr Carson. He was good at his job, certainly, but the man was about as pompous as they came and had absolutely no right to be, unlike Mr Carson who’s own special brand of pompous stemmed from working for such a highly respected family. “Or perhaps it would be better for us to take you both out for afternoon tea another time? Is Turners Seaside Café still in business?”

“It is!” Miss Stewart exclaimed cheerfully, no doubt thinking of the delicacies that had been available at the popular café for years. “Although it’s not quite the same, rationing and all that, but they still make the best cream teas in all of Hastings, not to mention their biscuits.”

“Do they still serve those, oh, what are they called…ANZAC biscuits?”

“Yes! They’re still available, just a tiny bit smaller than they used to be,” the young woman responded eagerly. “Gosh, all this talk of Turners treats has made me positively ravenous.”

“Well, then, that’s settled; Thomas and I shall take you both out for afternoon tea as a thank you for your actions today,” Edward decided, clapping his hands together. Mr Foyle offered his driver a fond smile when the young woman let out a loud cheer. “Tomorrow? At four?”

Mr Foyle sighed as she turned her hopeful gaze on him.

“Unforeseen circumstances aside we shall meet you at Turners Seaside Café at four o’clock.”

“Excellent!” Edward pronounced cheerfully, smiling broadly at the two of them. “Now, let us get ourselves and our cases inside and out of your way so that you can both get home. I’m sure you must be anxious to do so, Mr Foyle, given that you’ve been travelling just as much as Thomas and I have, if not more so as you had to travel up to London in the first place.”

“Quite.”
Miss Stewart was once again instructed to remain inside the vehicle whilst the others braved the rain, Mr Foyle moving to help Edward find his way inside the building before them whilst Thomas moved to the boot of the car so that he could retrieve their cases.

“Mr Wright?” he called out as he pulled out the first case. “A hand, if you wouldn’t mind?”

His position within the Courtenay household had been something of a sore spot every time they had visited; as Edward’s manservant he was technically still a servant but his position was more like that of a companion, or at least that’s how he was treated, which put him above the three servants that were in the Courtenay’s employ. Mr Wright, predictably, did not care for this fact and went out of his way to make it clear to Thomas that he was still a servant. Mrs Dingle, the cook, hadn’t spoken to Thomas once during their last four visits.

Rose, their former housemaid, had been friendly enough with him but then again she was “friendly” with everyone which was one of the reasons behind her dismissal a couple of months ago, or so Edward’s mother had said in her letter, for the girl had gotten pregnant.

He had no idea what the new housemaid, Irene, would make of his position.

As it was Mr Wright made a great show of returning inside to fetch an umbrella before he would even deign to step out into the rain, sheltering Edward briefly on his way inside as was expected of him before moving to collect the case Thomas held out to him. A sigh of frustration was bubbling inside of him just as Mr Foyle appeared to grab one of the last two cases, pausing whilst Thomas pulled out the other so that he could then slam the boot shut.

Thomas offered him a smile as they hurried inside.

“Thank you for all your help, Mr Foyle,” he murmured sincerely, placing the case he held down so that he could relieve the rain soaked man of his burden. “It is much appreciated.”

“Think nothing of it,” the other man responded warmly. “Until tomorrow, then.”

“Until tomorrow, Mr Foyle,” Edward responded, turning to offer him a polite nod which the police officer returned before stepping out into the rain once more. Miss Stewart offered them a parting wave from inside the car as Mr Wright moved to shut the door. “Wright? A couple of towels, please, and then if you wouldn’t mind telling my parents that we have…”

“Edward? Is that you?”

“Never mind, Wright,” Edward murmured. “Just the towels, please.”

“Yes, Mr Courtenay.”

“Edward! Good heavens, you’re soaked!” his mother called out, genuinely distressed, as she hurried across the main hall from where she had obviously been relaxing inside the sitting room located at the far end behind the roaring fireplace. Once upon a time the sitting room had actually been the kitchen, before the first additions had been made to the property, and as such had a rather unusual feature for a such a finely decorated room in that the ceiling was completely uneven on one side as there was a staircase built into it on the other side of the wall. It hadn’t mattered when it had been built, it was only the servants that had used the room, but when it had been converted the stairs had remained simply because to remove them would have made the building structurally unsound. “I thought Jack was…”

“He must have forgotten, mother.”
She pursed her lips but said nothing.

For all her faults, of which there were several, she wasn’t blind to the actions of her younger son regarding his brother, at least not any more. That hadn’t been the case when they were children, of course, but wisdom came with age and she now knew her sons true character.

“I thought I heard a car, though, so if Jack didn’t pick you up from the station who did?”

As she spoke she took her sons arm, her ability to deal with his blindness having improved greatly as the years passed and lead him across the main hall to the enormous fire roaring away in the impressive fireplace, as original as the rest of the room. Thomas followed.

“No one,” Edward countered, turning his face towards the warmth of the fire. “We were going to walk, we’ve done it before, but the cases made it rather awkward and then the weather turned. Luckily for us a kind gentleman we’d met on the train happened to drive past us on his way home and offered us a lift. Perhaps you know him. Mr Foyle? He’s a…”

“Christopher Foyle?”

Edward nodded in confirmation.

“I knew his wife, Rosalind. It was such a tragedy when she died. She was a lovely woman, very popular although we were never what you would call friends. He’s a policeman now, I think,” his mother explained, turning to take one of the towels Mr Wright had just returned with which she then used to pat her sons face and hands dry, removing his hat for him so that she could rub the towel over his mildly damp hair. Thomas, armed with a towel of his own, performed the same motions on himself. “I think you’d best get changed out of these wet clothes, Edward; we wouldn’t want you catching a chill, now would we? Wright? Have the fire lit in Edward’s room immediately. Oh, and the small guest room too, for Barrow.”

Lips pursed as though he’d sucked on a lemon Mr Wright offered her an exaggerated nod before disappearing to carry out her instructions. When they had first visited some years after the Great War had ended Thomas had initially been given a room in the attic alongside the rest of the servants and Edward had had to fight to get him moved down into the so-called small guest room which was situated beside Edwards own room, pointing out that Thomas was his eyes, for lack of a better explanation, and that he needed him at all hours.

His parents had, albeit reluctantly, agreed and this had been their arrangement ever since.

“And whilst you change I shall endeavour to discover why your brother failed to pick you up as I had asked him to,” Mrs Courtenay concluded firmly, reaching up to cup her eldest sons jawline with one her frail looking hands. She was tiny woman, particularly when compared to the men in the Courtenay family, and still dressed as she had a decade earlier. “I’m so glad you’re here, my darling, and safe from those awful bombs in London. Now, off you go.”

“Barrow?”

“Here, Mr Courtenay,” Thomas murmured, slipping into the act that his lovers family were used to seeing. He wasn’t looking forward to keeping it up for the duration but needs must; he wouldn’t be sleeping apart from Edward as they had always done when they visited, however. Neither of them could stand to be parted for a so long any more. He offered her good arm to his partner, expertly guiding Edward to take hold of his elbow. “Ready, sir?”

“Ready.”
A/N I must admit to being surprised by how many people have expressed an interest in this story, pleasantly surprised, of course. Anyway, I hope you enjoyed it – I’ve got a pretty detailed plan that I’m going to try and stick to but even in this chapter a couple things happened that I hadn’t originally planned to include. Comments and Suggestions welcome.

1 – The **British Small Box Respirator (SBR)** was designed in 1916 and began service by the end of the year. A canvas covered flexible rubber hose attached the mask to the metal small box filter which contained active charcoal and granules. The mask was made of thinly rubberised canvas with glass eye piece. The whole lot was contained in the canvas bag.
Chapter Three

Disclaimer – I don’t own Downton Abbey, the Crimson Field or Foyle’s War but the Original Characters (of which there are too many to mention) are my creations.

Summary – Sequel to ‘There’s A Long, Long Trail’ following Thomas, Edward and all of the others through the course of the Second World War.

A/N Title taken from a popular song of the era.

~ I'll Be Seeing You ~

Chapter Three
February 1941

Thomas was applying a thick layer of strawberry jam, which according to the label on the jar had been preserved in 1939, to Edward’s slice of toast under the watchful eyes of his lover’s family when the telephone rang. It took everything he had not to stop what he was doing in order to go and answer, used to doing so back in their flat back in London and before that at Downton Abbey during the last war, but instead he continued to aid Edward in enjoying his morning meal whilst Irene, the less-than-efficient housemaid who had a habit of forgetting about Thomas’ instructions not to move a single thing in Edwards room so that he would always know where everything was in the privacy of his bedroom, hurried down the main stairs in the oldest part of the oddly shaped house to answer the phone in the Great Hall.

Sir William Morrison had built the Great Hall in about 1495, according the parish records, and his son, Reginald, had extended the property to include the west wing and a gatehouse in 1553. The gatehouse had since been demolished in 1862 to make way for the elaborate walled garden. Sir Robert Greenwood had been the houses next owner, buying it from Sir Reginald Morrison’s widow, in 1587 and he had been responsible for building the east wing.

The estate passed down through the Greenwood family to William Tylney-Smythe, who sold it in 1846 to George Grant. He, sadly, had bankrupted himself whilst creating the impressive gardens; twenty acres of formal gardens consisting of eight walled gardens with numerous fountains and pavilions, plus a balustraded terrace, statues, obelisks and vistas through gate piers. In 1889, the house and its vast estate were acquired for practically nothing by Horace Courtenay, Edward’s grandfather, who carried out a complete restoration of the run-down interior and added the north wing, alternatively known as the servant’s wing, in June 1925.

All of these additions had led to the odd shape of the building, a large ‘U’ shape with an extra wing coming off of the top of the left of it, and the different styles of architecture.

“Hastings 246. Of course, Mrs Branson. One moment.”

Thomas frowned.
He’d only spoken to Sybil the day before, catching up with his friend and finding out how the children were getting on, so the only reason for her to be calling at such an early hour would be if she had received some unexpected news. And, as Thomas knew all too well from the Great War, unexpected news during a time of war was very rarely a good thing.

“Mr Courtenay,” Irene called out as she entered the dining room. “Mrs Branson for you.”

“Thank you,” Edward murmured, placing his napkin on the table. “Thomas?”

“Yes, Mr Courtenay,” he murmured softly, respectfully and entirely for the benefit of their audience. Working swiftly he helped Edward to rise from his chair, tucking his lovers arm through his as he led him out to the phone, placing the receiver in his hand. “Here you are.”

He then checked that the coast was clear and leaned in to listen as well.

“Sybil?”

“Edward?” her voice held a level of panic Thomas had never heard before. “Is Thomas…?”

“I’m here,” Thomas spoke up, knowing the receiver would pick up his voice. “What is it?”

“It’s Tom,” she admitted, her voice trembling. “I haven’t heard from him in a couple of days, not since he called to say that he and Violet had seen Aoife safely off for her basic training.”

Aoife had enlisted in the ATS without any prior warning, or so Sybil had told the pair of them, and had been ordered to report for her basic training a week ago so that meant…

“And the papers are filled with pictures and articles about those awful Air Raids…”

“Sybil, it could be nothing…”

“Or they could be lying dead, waiting for someone to come a claim them!” Sybil gasped, the tears painfully evident in her usually strong voice. “I need to know. I need to go but I…I…”

“You aren’t going alone,” Edward ordered. “Can anyone from the Abbey go with you?”

“No,” Sybil responded. “No, I don’t want them…they don’t understand…I…I need…”

“I can be on the next train to London,” Thomas offered quickly before Edward could speak up, squeezing his partners free hand gently, earning himself a loving smile in response. “I’m sure there’s a simple explanation. Try not you worry and I’ll meet you at your house, ok?”

“Thomas…” their friend sighed deeply down the line. “Thank you…”

“You’d do the same for us,” he hurried to reassure her. “I’ll see you soon.”

Edward wasn’t offended that he wouldn’t be joining them in London as his blindness would hinder their search as they split their attention between it and looking after him. No, he would stay home and pray for the best possible outcome for his friend and goddaughter.

They ended the call and within an hour Thomas was on the train to London with a change of clothes, a thermos of hot tea, a cheese and pickle sandwich and, of course, his gas mask in its brown cardboard box, hoping that everything would turn out alright for his dear friends.

He alighted from the train an hour or so later, travelling by bus as far as the bomb damage would allow and then continuing on foot. It was horrifying to see what had happened to the city he loved in
the months since he and Edward had been forced to flee to the countryside.

Turning into the road he was filled with a deep sense of foreboding; windows were missing from most of the houses, two of which were also missing numerous roof tiles but only one house seemed to have any structural damage. However, that was before he had gone far enough down the road to be able to see the Branson family home…or where it should be.

Where, now, there was only a gap - the house was simply…gone…

“No…”

He broke out into a sprint, crying out in genuine horror as he stumbled to a halt in front of what had once been his best friend’s house but was now nothing more than a pile of rubble.

“No…”

Stumbling along the path which had once led to the brown front door Thomas climbed his way onto the rubble, wobbling precariously as the broken bricks shifted beneath his feet.

He surveyed the wreckage, picking up things such as a photograph of the Branson family at the beach, the frame intact but the glass broken, and Tom’s leather messenger bag which, despite being a little bit singed, still held his journalist notebooks safe and sound. There other things he recognised, the remains of the chairs in the living, some broken tiles from which had been mounted around the fireplace, a bedframe, a set of blackout curtains…

And towards the back he caught sight of the remains of the Anderson Shelter…

“Hey! What do you think you’re doing! That area’s unsafe!”

Turning on the pile of rubble, his ankle protesting, and found himself facing an ARP Warden.

“What happened here?”

“What do you think happened here? The luftwaffie dropped a bomb on it. Now, get down.”

“No, I mean, what happened to the people who live here?” Thomas pressed, making his way awkwardly back across the rubble towards the road. Something groaned beneath him, like a piece of wood when it was about to give way, and he hastened his step. “Were they home?”

“I was dealing with a fire in the opposite property but I know they took two people out.”

“And those people,” Thomas hesitated for a moment before asking, “Were they alive?”

“I think so,” the ARP Warden answered. “Think only one of them was conscious, though.”

Thomas felt his body literally sag with relief.

It was then that he heard his friend’s familiar voice, raised in a hysterical scream as she sprinted along the debris strewn road as fast as her legs could carry her. He moved to intercept her, gathering her up in his arms before she could get too close to the rubble.

“Sybil, they’re not in there,” he told her, holding her tightly as she continued to struggle, sobbing wildly as she called for her husband and daughter. The ARP Warden looked on in genuine concern. “They rescued two people from the house and took them to hospital.”

Sybil sucked in a deep gasp of air, her body going limp in his arms as she stared at what was once
her house, tears streaming down her cheeks, her hair falling out of her emerald snood.

Her hands fluttered in the air for a moment before reaching down to grab the photograph that Thomas still held in his hand, stroking her fingers across their smiling faces for a long moment before she turned in his arms and blinked up at him, tears still present in her eyes.

“…which hospital?”

Thomas glanced across at the ARP Warden.

“Sorry, mate,” he apologised sincerely. “I don’t know.”

“Then we’ll check them all if we have to,” Thomas announced quickly, cutting off his friends sharp whimper of distress. “We can start with the closest hospitals and then move out from there. There’ll be some record of them somewhere and we will find them, Sybil, I promise.”

In the end it took them four tries to find the right hospital.

They found Violet first in one of the few female wards that hadn’t been damaged in one of the worst raids of the war, lying in the seventh bed on the right with her left arm in plaster.

“Mum!” the young woman cried out tearfully as they entered the ward. “Uncle Thomas!”

“Violet!” Sybil sobbed, sitting on the edge of the bed so that she could gather her daughter into her arms. Violet, despite being a young woman of twenty, willingly buried herself into her mother’s body, holding onto her with her good arm. “I’ve been so worried about you!”

“I can’t believe you’re here,” Violet whimpered, glancing up towards Thomas. “I asked them to call you, but the lines been down since the raid so they had to send a telegram instead.”

“I didn’t get it,” Sybil countered. “I got worried when I hadn’t heard from you two…”

“I’ll go find out where Tom is,” Thomas murmured, reaching out to give Violet’s shoulder a gentle squeeze, catching the messenger bag he was still wearing since picking it out of the rubble before it could swing down and strike the young woman. “I’m glad you’re ok, Violet.”

“Thank you, Uncle Thomas.”

Tom, it turned out, was on a smaller ward on the top floor and was still unconscious.

He also looked terrible.

He’d obviously taken a blow to the face, his nose was broken, his eyes swollen and a deep purple colour and there was nasty gash emerging from his hairline to split his right eyebrow in two. His skin was dreadfully pale but he seemed to be breathing fine. None of his limbs appeared to be broken, unlike his daughter, although there were more cuts on his hands.

“Bloody hell, Tom,” Thomas sighed, taking off the messenger bag and hanging it over the foot of the bed. Even though he knew it was against hospital regulations, him being a civilian, Thomas unhooked the clipboard from the bottom of the bed and read the notes that the doctor and nurses had placed upon the form. “Suspected concussion. Contusions. Broken nose. Cracked cheekbone. Broken jaw. Patient has yet to regain consciousness…”

It wasn’t good.

It wasn’t as bad as it could have been but it certainly wasn’t good.
“Are you a friend of Mr Branson?”

Thomas glanced across at the owner of the voice, the ward sister, and nodded.

“How long has he been like this?”

“Since he was brought in two nights ago,” she answered him, taking the clipboard from his with an understanding role of her eyes, placing it back on the bed. “He’s incredibly lucky. We’re hopeful he’ll wake up any day now as he’s started to respond to external stimulus.”

“His wife is downstairs visiting their daughter,” Thomas explained. “I accompanied her back to London to find out what had happened after we hadn’t heard from them for a few days.”

“That’s nice of you,” the young nurse murmured sincerely as she plumped up Tom’s pillows and straightened his sheets, offering him a smile. “Did you serve together in the last war?”

“No, Tom couldn’t serve,” Thomas answered, moving out of the young woman’s way as she moved around the bed to tidy up the items of Tom’s bedside cabinet. Her genuine interest prompted him to explain. “He had a heart murmur so he didn’t pass the army medical. No, I knew him from when we were in service together before the war. Although I did serve with his wife, Sybil, after I was posted to home duties following my injuries. I was in the Medical Corps, first as a stretcher bearer at the front and then as an orderly, whilst she was a VAD.”

“My mum was a VAD,” the ward sister announced cheerfully. “It’s why I became a nurse.”

Had this been a Hollywood feature film Tom would have woken up the moment that Sybil had arrived at his hospital bedside but, sadly, real life had very little in common with the fictional world that the pictures created and so Tom slept through their entire visit. She didn’t mind, however, content to sit at his bedside, hold his hand and watch him breathe.

“I’m afraid visiting hours are over,” the ward sister informed them an hour or so after they’d arrived. “But you’re more than welcome to come back tomorrow morning, Mrs Branson.”

“Thank you,” Sybil murmured. “I will.”

They left the hospital, popping their heads into Violet’s ward to say goodbye, and stepped out into the darkening streets of London. Thomas had already decided to open up the flat for the duration of their stay, grabbing the keys from the dresser in Edward’s room, and so he tucked Sybil’s arm through his and led his way through the streets to their block of flats.

“It should be alright,” Thomas murmured as they made their way up the flights of stairs, carrying their small overnight cases. “We asked our neighbours to keep an eye on the place, give it a bit of a clean and open the windows to let some fresh air in every now and then. And I don’t know about you but I need a cup of tea, a warm bath and a comfortable bed.”

“That sounds absolutely perfect,” Sybil sighed, leaning against the wall as he unlocked the front door, positively exhausted now that the adrenaline had worn off and the long, difficult day had caught up with her. “But will there be any tea if you haven’t been here in so long?”

“We left anything that wasn’t perishable in the pantry,” Thomas explained, stepping into the hallway and flipping the switch, filling the familiar space with light. “Just in case, you know?”

Thomas ducked into the bathroom after dropping his case off in the master bedroom, Sybil having disappeared into the spare bedroom to slip off her shoes and store her own slightly larger case, and starting the bath running. Leaving the tub to fill he moved into the kitchen, lighting the stove and
putting the kettle on to boil, getting out the teapot, cups and saucers whilst he waited. The tea was precisely where he had left it but there was no milk of course.

“Should I turn off the tap?” Sybil called out. “It’s almost reached the water line…”

“No, keep it running,” Thomas responded. Water was rationed to one five-inch bath per household per week but they hadn’t been using theirs since leaving London. “We’ve earned a good wallow in a bath after today. And you can use the water first; I’ll go in after you.”

The kettle began to whistle and Thomas focused his attention on preparing their tea, using his prosthetic limb to steady first the teapot, then the individual cups as he poured the hot water from one thing to another. Once it was brewed, stewed and poured he picked up one of the cups by the saucer upon which it rested and went in search of his friend, finding her in the bathroom turning the tap off. The steaming water was almost to the rim of the bath.

“Here you go,” Thomas murmured. “Enjoy that and a nice soak in the bath.”

“Put the wireless on won’t you, Thomas?”

“I’d like to call Edward first but then I’ll put it on for you,” Thomas agreed, pulling the door closed behind him and heading to collect his cup own of tea, bringing it into the living room. Carefully he set it down beside the telephone and picked up the receiver. “Hastings 246.”

“Connecting you.”

It took a moment before a voice appeared on the other end of the line.

“Hastings 246.”

“Irene? It’s Mr Barrow,” Thomas spoke quickly. “Could I speak to Mr Courtenay, please?”

“Mr Edward Courtenay?”

Thomas barely held back a huff of annoyance.

“Yes, Mr Edward Courtenay, please.”

“One moment.”

Holding the receiver to his ear with his prosthetic was both awkward and more than a little bit clumsy but it freed up his other hand to pick up his cup, allowing him to take a sip of tea.

A long moment later the tell-tale clunks of the other receiver being picked up filled his ear.

“Hello?”

“Edward?”

“Thomas,” his lover sighed down the phone, relief obvious in his voice. “Did you find them?”

“Yes; the house took a direct hit but they’re alright,” Thomas hurried to reassure his partner when the other man inhaled sharply. “Violet has a broken arm and Tom is still unconscious.”

“Oh, God…” Edward all but whimpered. “Is Sybil alright?”

“She’s upset, of course, and worried,” Thomas responded, leaning back into the comfortable chair,
“Tea forgotten for the moment. He could hear Edward settling down into the little seat that the Courtenay’s kept by the telephone for long conversations. Unfortunately it had been made with an awful paisley pattern, not that Edward would know, and clashed with the rest of the decor.

“Understandably so. She’s lost her house, the house she raised all of her children in. Her daughter’s been hurt. Her husband has yet to regain consciousness. I’d be worried if she wasn’t upset. Currently she’s taking what I hope is a nice, relaxing bath.”

“Good, that’s good,” Edward murmured. “Are you alright? I’ve been so worried about you.”

“I’m fine, Edward, I promise,” Thomas reassured him, assuming that Edward couldn’t hear anyone in his vicinity for him to be so open with his questions. Had anyone been anywhere nearby his lover they would have been forced to have a conversation more suitable for an employer and his servant.

“It’s been a long day and I’m a little tired but I feel better knowing that they’re alright. I get the feeling that Sybil is going to want to stay for a while, though…”

“Thomas, I can cope without you for a few days.”

“Oh, you can, can you?”

Edward chuckled.

“That’s good to know,” Thomas sighed, taking another sip of his rapidly cooling cup of tea. “…although perhaps you shouldn’t act too independent whilst I’m away or else your mother will decide that you no longer require my services and we wouldn’t want that, would we?”

“Certainly not, my love,” Edward agreed, murmuring the endearment as softly as he could so as not to be overheard. “I’ll endeavour to make myself seem at least a little bit helpless.”

“You see that you do.”

They talked for a little while longer, Thomas going into more detail about what he had found at the house and their search for Tom and Violet, before ending their conversation with a promise from each of them to look after themselves and a reiteration on how much they love each other. Once he’d hung up the phone he pushed himself up out of the chair, moved across to the sideboard to turn on their wireless, tapping the side of the box when it refused to tune in. The set gave a sharp, almost painful whine and then a burst of static, prompting him to play with the tuning dial until big band music began to play out of the stylish speaker.

Moving through the flat he knocked on the bathroom door,

“Is that loud enough for you, Sybil?”

“Yes,” her voice called out, sounding significantly more relaxed than earlier. “Thank you.”

Sybil emerged from the bathroom fifteen minutes later, wrapped in Edward’s old dressing gown which they had left behind on a hook on the back of the bathroom door, her wet hair hanging loosely about her shoulders. Her skin was flushed pink from the heat of the water, her feet were bare, revealing the fact that her toenails had recently been painted a vivid red to match her fingernails, and in her hands she deftly carried her empty teacup and saucer.

“That was just what I needed, Thomas,” she sighed. “Thank you.”

“A hot bath always does me the world of good after a long or difficult day.”

“The waters still warm if you want to take a dip,” Sybil murmured, moving to pick up his empty
teacup and saucer. “I'll wash these up and see what I can rustle up for our supper.”

“I shall, thank you,” Thomas sighed, pushing himself up out of the chair he had returned to. His back gave a loud crack of protest, prompting him to let out a pained groan and freeze in place until the ache in the base of his spine began to ease. “Sybil, when did we get so old?”

“Speak for yourself,” his friend giggled as she headed into the kitchen. “I'm not old.”

Thomas ended up being a little bit cheeky, letting out a couple of inches worth of lukewarm water and replacing it with some more hot water from the tap to bring up the temperature.

He luxuriated in the bath for a good twenty minutes before giving himself a quick once over with the sliver of soap in the ceramic dish, taking care to give his stump a thorough clean as was his nightly routine so as to keep it from becoming irritated or sore. Getting out he let out the murky water, now practically stone cold, dried himself off with the same towel that Sybil had used and donned the striped pyjamas he'd brought into the bathroom with him.

They dined, he in his pyjamas and she in the Edward’s dressing gown, on canned pea soup.

“Thomas, would it be alright if I stayed in the flat for a few days?” Sybil enquired, washing down her rather tasteless soup with some water. “I want to be here when Tom wakes up.”

“Of course you can stay here,” Thomas reassured her, slurping down the last spoonful of his soup. “I had a feeling you were going to want to be there when Tom wakes up. I'll be staying on until then, too. Don’t argue, Sybil, I’ve already told Edward that I’ll be staying with you.”

“Thank you, Thomas.”

A sudden thought popped into his head.

“And when they get out of hospital Tom and Violet can use the flat for the duration,” he announced. “No point in getting them a place through the proper authorities when this place is standing empty. I’ll clear it with Edward in the morning but it won’t be a problem.”

Sybil smiled at him with tear filled eyes.

“Thank you, Thomas,” she repeated, reaching out to place her hand over his. “I shall forever be grateful for the fact that we became friends. I…I don’t know what I'd do without you…”

It took Tom another two days to wake up, two days of Sybil sitting at his bedside holding his hand with both of hers, two days of Thomas bringing her cups of tea between sitting with Violet until the plucky young woman was discharged and was able to join her mother sitting at her father’s bedside. In the end it was rather anticlimactic, the moment that Tom woke up, but his wife, daughter and the same young staff nurse that they’d met on their first visit to the hospital were ecstatic, Sybil covering his surprised face with lipstick as she kissed him.

“…what happened?”

“You were struck on the head when the house was hit,” Sybil explained tearfully, clutching his hand with both of her own. “You’ve been unconscious for days. I’ve been so worried.”

“I’m sorry, my darling, I didn’t mean to worry you so,” Tom murmured. Turning his head on his pillow he smiled sadly at his daughter, reaching out with his free hand to stroke a finger down the back of her cast, frowning deeply as he studied it. “Are you alright, sweetheart?”
“It’s just my wrist,” she responded softly. “And it’ll heal in no time, you’ll see.”

“Where have you been staying if the house…?”

“Where do you think?” Thomas spoke up from where he was stood at the foot of the bed, cigarette smouldering between his fingers. Tom smiled up at him. “At our flat. And that’s where you’ll be going once they let you out of here. Tom, it’s just sitting empty with me and Edward in Hastings. You and Violet can treat it like it’s yours for the duration of the war.”

“Thomas, we can’t do that…”

“Edward insists,” Thomas reiterated. “I insist. The flat is yours and that’s the end of it.”

In the end Sybil decided to stay on to care for her husband and daughter once they’d both been discharged whilst Thomas returned to Hastings, to Edward, after a total of eight days.

He was met at the train station by Edward who had, apparently, called in a favour with Sam Stewart who had borrowed Mr Foyle’s car in order to give him a lift to and from the station.

“I’ve missed you,” Edward sighed as they walked to the car. “Our bed is so big without you.”

“I’ve missed you too,” Thomas responded, his voice as soft as he could get away with and still be heard by his lover, given that they didn’t want to be overheard saying such things on the reasonably busy train station. “So, tell me what you’ve been up to whilst I was away.”

“Nothing much,” Edward murmured, tilting his head to one side and sniffing. They had just reached the car and its pretty young driver. “Hello, Sam. Here he is, home from London.”

“Hello, Mr Barrow.”

“Hello, Sam,” Thomas greeted the MTC driver. “Thank you for agreeing to be our chauffeur.”

“Oh, it’s no problem, Mr Barrow,” she reassured him, opening the door so that he could help Edward into the back seat before following him. His small suitcase was taken from him by the young driver and placed on the front passenger seat as she took her place behind the wheel. “It makes a change from running Mr Foyle to and from Digby Manor at the moment.”

“Digby Manor?” Thomas repeated. “Something happen up there?”

“Oh, it’s all a bit complicated actually,” Sam responded as she started the engine, pulling the car away from the pavement and making an immediate left turn. “There’s been a few acts of sabotage up at the hospital, things going missing or being tampered with, statues falling…”

“Hospital? What hospital?”

“The RAF have requisitioned Digby Manor and turned it into a hospital specialising in the treatment of burns,” Edward explained, reaching out to take Thomas’ hand in his own as discreetly as he could. “They arrived the day after you left for London, apparently, turning out Sir Michael Waterford, an old friend of my father’s even though he’s closer to our age, served in France during the last war and all, and they’ve completely transformed the place.”

“Yes, it’s quite remarkable what they’re doing there,” Sam agreed, guiding the car out of the town. “Mr Foyle’s been brought in to investigate after someone tried to drop a statue onto one of the senior RAF officers. He’d have been killed if it had actually hit him. As it was it made an awful mess of the car bonnet it struck; I don’t envy the person who has to fix that.”
“How awful…”

“Quite,” she agreed. “Mr Foyle doesn’t know quite what to make of it yet.”

It was almost like history was repeating itself; a military hospital, albeit one that specialised in burns rather than a convalescent hospital for officers, taking over a large country estate.

“We’ll actually be heading out there this evening,” Sam admitted, grunting partway through as she struggled to guide the car around a particularly tight bend and it was pure instinct for Thomas to reach out and steady Edward as the car tilted. “They’re holding a concert party to boost the patients morale and we’ve been invited; Mr Foyle, Sergeant Milner and myself.”

“A concert party!” Edward laughed brightly. “Thomas, do you remember the concerts that were thrown for us at Downton? What was it that you sung at the first one? With Sybil?”

“Sung is a very generous description,” Thomas chuckled in response, thinking back to his brief foray into the performing arts at his friend’s insistence. “And it was ‘There’s A Long, Long Trail’ as you well remember; Sybil still loves forcing me to sing it with her to this day.”

Sam met his gaze through the rear-view mirror, grinning from ear to ear as she suggested,

“Why don’t the two of you come along with us? I’m sure Mr Jamieson wouldn’t mind.”

“And Mr Jamieson is…?”

“The Doctor in charge of the hospital.”

“Military man, is he?” Thomas enquired, thinking of Major Clarkson and how he wouldn’t have been impressed with people turning up without an official invite to the event. “RAF?”

“Oh, no,” Sam hurried to correct him. “Or, at least, I don’t think so. He’s not in uniform and he does seem to enjoy annoying Group Captain Smythe, the officer who was almost killed.”

“Ah.”

Edward tilted his head towards him, a somewhat hopeful expression on his face,

“What do you say, Thomas? Shall we see how their concert party compares to ours?”

“Oh, do come,” Sam pleaded from the front seat. “We’ll make such a jolly crowd.”

Thomas hesitated.

“I don’t know…”

“I’m sure they won’t mind,” Sam hurried to reassure him. “They’re a decent sort.”

“Fine,” he agreed, catching the moment that Edward’s smile grew. “We might as well.”

“Wonderful!” Sam cried out cheerfully, manoeuvring the car through the decorative gates which led to the Courtenay Estate, the gravel of the driveway crunching beneath the tires. “I’ll pop round later to pick you up before collecting Mr Foyle and Sergeant Milner, shall I?”

“If you’re sure it won’t be a problem, Sam,” Edward murmured softly. “We’re neither of us small men, Thomas and I, nor are Mr Foyle and Sergeant Milner from what I’ve heard…”
“We’ll manage,” she reassured them, hopping out with Thomas’ suitcase in hand whilst the former footman assisted his lover in exiting the vehicle. “Although it might be a little snug…”

A little snug, they discovered later, was something of an exaggeration.

Edward sat in the middle of the back seat, his medals pinned to his chest, with Thomas on his left and Mr Foyle on his right, their thighs pressed together. Thomas’ own medals, also displayed upon his chest at Edward’s insistence, had yet to be commented on but had most definitely been noted by both Mr Foyle and Sergeant Milner who had taken the front seat.

Fifteen minutes into the journey Sergeant Milner finally spoke up,

“Excuse me for asking, Mr Barrow, but is that the Victoria Cross?”

“Yes, it is,” Thomas confirmed, reaching up to brush the tips of his fingers across the medal. He hadn’t wanted to wear his medals, knowing the attention that they drew whenever he wore them to the annual Remembrance Service, but Edward had pouted until he had given in. He cleared his throat, still uncomfortable with all of the attention his medal drew even after all these years. “The Somme, 1916. I still can’t decide if it was for bravery or stupidity.”

“Thomas,” Edward scolded him gently. “Don’t dismiss your bravery like that.”

“Is that when you lost your hand?”

“Sam,” Mr Foyle scolded his driver softly. “Perhaps now isn’t the time…”

“Oh!” Sam cried out, her cheeks flushing deeply. “I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to…”

“It’s alright, Sam,” Thomas answered, fiddling with the mechanism that unfolded the fingers of his prosthetic limb as both Mr Foyle and Sergeant Milner turned to face him within the confines of the car. Edward, meanwhile, tilted his head towards him. “And, yes, I lost my hand along with the sight in my left eye on the same day that I was awarded the medal for.”

“I wasn’t aware that you’d lost a limb, Mr Barrow,” Milner commented, glancing down at the prosthetic with a confused frown. “Is that made of wood? Mine is made of aluminium.”

“You wear a prosthetic, Sergeant Milner?”

“I lost my left leg below the knee at Trondheim,” the mild-mannered officer responded, rapping his knuckles on the offending limb to produce a metallic rat-tat-tat. “June 1940.”

“I’m sorry to hear that, Sergeant Milner,” Thomas murmured, his sympathy genuine for the younger man. It distressed him to know that there would be another generation of people physically and mentally scarred by the events of war. It was…cruel. “If you don’t mind my asking how are you coping? I remember how difficult I found it to adjust to the changes.”

“It as a struggle to begin with,” Milner admitted, glancing across at Mr Foyle before going into more detail. “I’ve had to learn how to walk again once my stump had healed enough to be fitted with a prosthetic. Some morning’s I forget and try to put weight on a leg that isn’t there which has led to a few nasty falls although recently it’s been happening less and less.”

“I imagine your stump must get quite sore,” Thomas commented, his focus solely on Milner for the moment. “I know mine certainly does and it isn’t bearing my body weight like yours.”

“It can be quite sore in the evening.”
“Get yourself a good moisturiser to use on the scar tissue,” Thomas advised to policeman, his voice taking on a more autoreactive tone. “If it becomes inflamed your prosthetic could literally scrape layers of your skin away. And watch out for ingrown hairs; I had one once that got infected and I couldn’t wear my prosthetic for weeks because the pain was so bad.”

“Thank you for the advice, Mr Barrow.”

Thomas got the distinct feeling that Sergeant Milner didn’t have anyone he could talk to.

“If you ever need help or advice, please, come to me.”

“I will,” Milner murmured. “Thank you.”

They passed the rest of the journey with pleasant conversation, something that Edward had been sorely lacking whilst Thomas was away in London leaving him trapped in his childhood home with his less-than-understanding parents, his jealous brother and Jacks spiteful wife who had once been engaged to Edward years ago, his lazy nephew and his simpering niece, none of whom approved of their showing support for the hospital which had brought such upset to poor Sir Michael Waterford, the local hero and old friend of the Courtenay family.

It didn’t seem matter to them that the hospital was a necessity in such turbulent times.

It also didn’t seem to matter that Edward himself had been rehabilitated after his injury and suicide attempt in a hospital that had taken over almost half of the Crawley families home.

“Here we are,” Sam announced sometime later, pulling the car to a graceful halt between a military ambulance and a staff car in front of a rather imposing building. The fading light did nothing to help the place look less like something out of an old gothic novel. “Digby Manor.”

In the time it took Thomas, Edward and Milner to exit the car Mr Foyle had approached the well-dressed gentleman greeting people at the door of the hospital, shaking his hand firmly.

“I hope you don’t mind, Dr Jamieson, but my driver invited a couple of former soldiers along to your show this evening,” Mr Foyle murmured softly, gesturing to where Sam was handing Edward his cane which she had place in the boot for safe keeping during the journey. Once they were all ready the rest of their party joined the detective. “May I introduce Mr Edward Courtenay and his manservant, Mr Thomas Barrow. This is Dr Jamieson, the head surgeon.”

“I hope our attendance won’t cause you too much trouble, Dr Jamieson,” Edward spoke politely, extending his hand towards where he thought the doctor was standing. Unusually for him he was a little off in his judgement, making his lack of sight clear to the medical man who hurriedly reached out to shake the offered limb. “Sam mentioned your work here at the hospital when she was giving Thomas and myself a lift home from the station earlier and, as we both expressed an interest in visiting, suggested that we come along tonight.”

“It’s no problem, no problem at all,” Jamieson, his accent clearly Scottish, hurried to assure them whilst shaking Thomas’ own extended hand before returning his attention to Edward. “The more the merrier, as they say. Sir, I hope you don’t mind my asking but…mustard gas?”

Edward nodded.

“I thought so, given the burn scars around your eyes and your obvious lack of sight,” the doctor concluded, his tone clinical and precise. “Might I enquire as to your treatment?”

“I’m afraid I don’t recall much between the attack and being transported from the casualty clearing.
“Cases of mustard gas were treated differently to others,” Thomas found himself explaining. “Because of the blisters the gas caused they couldn’t be bandaged or, in some cases, even touched. Sadly those were the cases where the patients were more likely to die. After the wounds were cleaned with a saline solution, or just boiled water if there wasn’t any saline available, the wounds were left open to the air or covered with a tent made of bed sheets.”

“You have quite a lot of knowledge on the subject, Mr Barrow?”

“I was a stretcher bearer in France until I was wounded. Spent a lot of time traveling back and forth to clearing stations so I picked up a few things,” Thomas explained, reaching up to move his hair back off of his face so that the doctor could see his own scars. The Scotsman hummed thoughtfully, studying the scars with obvious interest. “Then, after I was wounded, I became a medical orderly, first at a military hospital and then at a convalescent hospital.”

“I presume that you were not injured by gas, Mr Barrow?”

“No,” Thomas confirmed with a chuckle. “Shrapnel. You see Fritz dropped a bomb on me and my friends whilst we were working to recover a casualty from No-Mans-Land. From a plane, no less. They liked to pick us off, the stretcher bearers, to lower the men’s morale.”

“Oh!” Sam gasped sharply. “How barbaric…”

“I don’t suppose there’d be a chance of getting a tour of your hospital sometime would there, Dr Jamieson?” Edward enquired, leaning both hands on his cane, his curls flopping onto his forehead as he tilted his head. “I’m interested in finding out how differently burns are treated now, as is Thomas. Sam tells us your doing wonders for the men in your care.”

“Oh, we wouldn’t want to put you out…”

“Nonsense. It’ll do the men good to meet a couple of heroes like yourselves.”

“We’re not heroes, Dr Jamieson,” Thomas countered. “Just men who fought in a war that was supposed to end all wars, just as Mr Foyle here did and so many other tortured souls.”

“Excuse me for saying so but your medals says otherwise,” Jamieson pointed out. “The VC.”

“And this is why I didn’t want to wear them…” Thomas sighed deeply, shutting a fond glare at Edward even though his lover couldn’t see it. He’d feel it, nonetheless. “Yes, it’s the VC.”

“Then please allow me to refer to you gentlemen as the heroes that you are,” Jamieson insisted with a broad smile. “That includes you too, Mr Foyle. I have a great deal of respect for your generation; my father fought at Passchendaele. Made it through physically intact.”

It didn’t escape Thomas’ notice that the doctor has specified the word physically.

“Now, this way, please,” the doctor continued, gesturing for the five of them to follow him into the building. Thomas hooked his flesh and blood hand around Edwards elbow so as to guide his partner’s steps. “We’ll start with the operating theatre, then the private rooms where we house our more severely wounded patients until they are fit to join the others on the main ward. That is where tonight’s concert is taking place so well finish the tour there.”
Thomas found the operating theatre morbidly fascinating.

“It’s so…different…to what we had,” Thomas murmured, his voice filled with a significant amount of wonder as he took in the instruments that Jamieson showed off. “Major Clarkson would have sold his soul for even half of the equipment you have. Not to mention those lights; I once held a candle for him so that he could get better light whilst removing a piece of shrapnel that the clearing station had missed before sending a patient back to Blighty.”

“I can’t even imagine operating by candlelight.”

“Although I must ask; what’s with the bathtub?”

“Bathtub?” Edward asked with an adorably confused frown. “Isn’t this the operating room?”

“Yes, it is rather a strange feature but a necessary one,” Jamieson explained with a chuckle. “My mentor, Dr McIndoe, realised that pilots who crashed into the sea were healing faster and figured out that it was the salt in the water that made such a difference. So we use the bathtub to bath our patients horrific burns in a concentrated saline mixture, more potent than they would have used on your eyes, Mr Courtenay, in order to simulate the effects.”

“Such a simple thing to make such a big difference,” Edward chuckled, feeling around with his cane until he found the bathtub before using his hands to feel around the rim. Mr Foyle had obviously heard this before but Sam and Sergeant Milner looked equally as fascinated as Thomas and Edward did. “Ordinary salt water. If only we’d known that back in our day.”

“Shall we visit some of our patients in the private rooms now?”

It turned out that most of the men in the private rooms were bandage almost from head to foot, some without even their eyes or lips showing, and were either asleep or on morphine.

“And they're all expected to recover?”

“Yes,” Jamieson confirmed. “It’ll be a long road of reconstruction and therapy but they will.”

“Remarkable,” Thomas breathed softly, his hand trembling as it rested on Edward’s elbow. Jamieson had given them a derailed run down of each patient, allowing Edward to picture them clearly in his mind, and all five members of their group were obviously shaken. “It is truly remarkable what you’re doing here. Back during our war men such as these wouldn’t have had a hope of surviving their injuries, most severe burn patients didn’t, you know? And those that did somehow survive, well, let’s just say sometimes they wished they hadn’t...”

“I’ve heard horror stories about the last war. Not from my father, he could never talk about it, but from some of my older colleagues,” Jamieson explained, meeting Thomas’ gaze. “I was too young to enlist, I’m afraid, although I and all my friends wanted to. My mother has often said that’s eternally grateful that I wasn’t a few of years older or I would have gone.”

“Never apologise for not being old enough to fight,” Thomas hurried to insist as firmly as he could, both Edward and Mr Foyle nodding their heads in agreement. “Where would these men be if you’d been killed in the last war and were no longer here to help them recover?”

“Well said, Thomas.”

Their arrival on the main ward, come performance venue, caused something of a stir.

Sam was, understandably, popular with the patients seeing as how she was a good looking young
woman in uniform who was willing to have a chat about almost everything. Within minutes of arriving she was sat at a patient’s bedside helping him write a letter to his mum.

Mr Foyle and Sergeant Milner were easily identified by the nurses and patients alike as the men who were attempting to catch their villainous saboteur and were more than welcome.

And then there were Edward and Thomas.

“Ladies and gentlemen, might I introduce two of our guests for this evenings performance; Mr Courtenay and Mr Barrow, gallant heroes from the Great War who wished to visit us.”

Thomas and Edward were introduced to dozens of young men, all horrifically burned, some almost completely healed whilst others were obviously still in the early stages of healing. Some had some odd protruding des of skin on the arms or faces, prompting Thomas to ask,

“I apologise if this makes you uncomfortable but what is that on your forehead?”

“That’d be my new nose,” the pilot in question answered happily enough, reaching up to stroke the bulge of flesh. “It’s called a pedicle, specifically a waltzing tube pedicle. Basically they’re going to use that bit of skin to reconstruct my nose which I lost after crashing my Hurricane in a field. Most of the men had had one, if not for their nose then for their hands or other parts of their face. I’m lucky, really, that my forehead wasn’t burned so they’ve only got to move the pedicle once. Some of the chaps with the really bad burns have had to use skin from their thighs which means the pedicle had to be moved up to the target area one twist at a time. They can only sever one end at a time, you see, or the whole thing dies off.”

“That’s…brilliant…”

“It is, rather,” the pilot laughed, obviously relieved that Thomas had responded favourably to his simple explanation. “Bit gruesome to look at mind you, but it works so who cares?”

“I say, old chap,” a cultured voice startled them all. “Isn’t that the Victoria Cross?”

Thomas was sorely tempted to stuff his medals into his pocket to get them out of sight.

Instead he was forced to nod, turning to face the patient who had white bandages around his entire face, two small gaps allowing him to see out of one eye and to speak. He sounded young but with so much of him hidden from view Thomas couldn’t be completely certain.

“I’ve never seen one up close before?” the pilot gushed, reached out a hand. “May I?”

“Yes, of course.”

A finger, pink as though it had been in the sun for too long, stroked across his medal.

“I didn’t realise you had the VC, sir,” the original pilot they had been speaking to murmured, his expression becoming almost reverent. “Would you mind sharing how you earned it?”

“Firstly, don’t call me sir; highest rank I ever achieved was Sergeant,” Thomas ordered with a small smile, causing both of the patients to chuckle softly. “And, no, I don’t mind sharing.”

And so, once again, he regaled an audience with his acts of stupidity, also known as bravery.

By the end of his tale he’d garnered quite the audience, most of the patients in the room along some of the nurses and audience members gathering around to listen to him speak.
“...and then I ended the war as head orderly in a convalescent hospital.”

One of the younger looking nurses frowned worriedly,

“Weren’t your injuries severe enough to allow you to be discharged?”

“Yes, but I had nowhere to go,” Thomas explained simply. “I was a footman before the war. I had lived a life in service and looking the way I did and with only one hand I couldn’t return to my old position even if it had been available. The RAMC offered me a secure job for the remainder of the war, through which I met Mr Courtenay and was offered the position as his manservant or, rather, his eyes. I would have been a fool to leave any time before then.”

Then, at last, it was announced that the concert was about to begin.

“You’ve got a lot to live up to, gentlemen,” Edward chuckled as Thomas led him across to a pair of empty seats on the end of one of the middle rows. Mr Foyle, Sergeant Milner and Sam were sat in the row behind them and a little way over to the right. “We put on some wonderful concerts in our day, didn’t we Thomas? Or rather you did, I never could sing.”

“Neither could I,” Thomas protested. “I just couldn’t say no to Sybil when she asked.”

Bill Jenks, a patron of numerous pubs in Hastings, took a seat at the piano.

The concert began with a pretty young nurse giving a pleasant enough rendition of ‘A Nightingale Sang in Berkeley Square’ and was followed up by the evenings compère, Flight Lieutenant Bridges, who complimented her performance before introducing the next act.

“No, please, ladies and gentlemen, give it up for Flight Lieutenant Horace Worthing, our resident magician,” the almost completely healed but badly scarred pilot requested. The act in question joined him on the ‘stage’ wearing a nurses cape and an old top hat, offering his audience a theatrical bow and a twisted grin, the lower half of his face covered by a horrific burn. “Now, no funny business, you hear me, like making people disappear. Unless it’s our own dead Group Captain Smythe, of course, in which case you go right ahead my dear boy.”

The officer in question pursed his lips but everyone else roared with laughter.

In the end the act was almost entirely made up of clever card tricks, some of which included disappearing cards, as well as a trick that made Jamieson’s watch vanish from his pocket. It turned up, predictably, in the magician’s pocket, but was still a very clever display of ‘magic.’

After that there was a duet by two patients, both sporting pedicle’s, who have a rather rousing if not entirely accurate impression of Flanagan and Allen, singing a medley of their more popular songs and encouraging the audience to join in with them if they wanted to.

Next came a comedy sketch which had everyone, bar one audience member, in stitches.

“Mr Foyle! Mr Foyle! I need your help!” a patient, dressed in a black coat and matching black hat, a red beard painted on his cheeks and with a stethoscope hanging around his neck, cried out as he hurried onto the ‘stage.’ Awaiting him was a significantly taller man, dressed in a pilot officers uniform but sporting a deerstalker hat like Sherlock Holmes wore in the popular crime novels and holding an unlit pipe. “I understand you’re a bit of a sleuth.”

“Which bit did you have in mind?”

It was the patients who roared the most following the first joke, clearly referring to the fact that some
of them had had their burnt limbs amputated by the real Jamieson at some point.

“My name is Jamieson and I need someone with a nose for crime.”

“I’m sorry, Mr Jamieson,” ‘Mr Foyle’ responded gravely. “My nose stays where it is.”

Another roar of laughter burst out from the audience.

“Pity.”

The way that ‘Jamieson’ said it was rather clever, implying that he would have taken the nose if he could and prompting the real Dr Jamieson to let out a loud burst of laughter.

“But listen to me, something terrible has happened,” the actor continued melodramatically, hurrying over to his cohort. “Someone has dropped a statue on Group Captain Smythe.”

“That is terrible.”

“You’re telling me,” here ‘Jamieson’ paused dramatically before announcing, “They missed.”

Quite predictably this got the loudest burst of laughter yet.

Next came a surprising double act, the night’s compère and the hospitals Matron, dressed in a red velvet smoking jacket and floor length dressing gown over their respective uniforms.

And together they sang a rather touching, in not technically pleasing, duet.

“Paris without the Eiffel Tower,
Spring without an April shower,
Sherlock Holmes without a single clue.
Imagine it, I just about can,
I'll agree to Hirohito without Japan.
I just can't imagine,
What the world would be like without you.
London without Trafalgar Square,
Ginger without Fred Astaire,
A rainbow that's insane for it has no blue.
Imagine it, I'd try if I could,
I could see the trees but without the wood.
I simply can't imagine,
What the world would be like without you.
Imagine it I'll try if you ask me,
But a world without you would be simply too ghastly.

I could never do it,

So don't put me through it.

I just can't imagine,

What the world would be like without you.”

Thomas didn’t know it at the time but he and Edward would be humming it to each other for years to come, the words having touched something within them, almost as much as ‘There’s A Long, Long Trail’ had and that would remain their favourite song all their lives.

Several more songs followed, including a truly rousing rendition of ‘Somewhere Over The Rainbow’ by a Flight Sergeant wearing a short blue dress, a white apron and a mop head as a wig. What made his outfit even more hysterical were his hairy legs and heavy black boots.

And then, much to his genuine surprise, the compère called for silence.

“Now, I have been reliably informed that we have an old hand at the concert party lark with us this evening, ladies and gentlemen,” he announced loudly. “And a military hero, no less.”

“Edward…”

“It wasn’t me, Thomas,” his lover chuckled joyfully. “I’ve been with you this whole time.”

“So perhaps, if we ask him nicely enough, Mr Barrow might come and show us how it’s done?” Flight Lieutenant Bridges suggested amidst oars of approval from the audience, most of whom turned around to look at him once the compère gesture to him. “Well?”

“I wouldn’t want to spoil your evening,” Thomas called out. “It was a long time ago…”

“Go on, Thomas,” Edward murmured softly, so soft that only he could hear him. “For me.”

Sighing deeply Thomas gave in as he walkways did where Edward was concerned, shaking his head as he pushed himself up out of his seat and approached the stage, shaking the hand that the compère offered him amidst the round of applause before turning to Bill.

“I don’t suppose you remember ‘Oh! What A Lovely War’, do you?”

“I’m sure I can figure something out,” Bill, who had served himself, answered. “You start.”

Thomas turned to face the audience, searching out Edward who was smiling I’ll broadly.

“I don’t know how many of you will remember this but it was popular in the trenches.”

Clearing his throat he tried to pretend he was alone in the kitchen of their flat, somewhere that he often found himself singing to pass the time away as he cooked, and began to sing,

“Up to your waist in water,

Up to your eyes in slush,

Using the kind of language,
That makes the sergeant blush;
Who wouldn't join the army?
That's what we all inquire.

Don't we pity the poor civilians sitting around the fire.”

By this point Bill had, thankfully, recalled enough of the old song to be able to join on the piano, giving Thomas something to sing along to as he launched into the catchy chorus,

“Oh! Oh! Oh! it's a lovely war,
Who wouldn't be a soldier eh?
Oh! It's a shame to take the pay.
As soon as 'reveille' has gone,
We feel just as heavy as lead,

But we never get up till the sergeant brings our breakfast up to bed.

Oh! Oh! Oh! it's a lovely war,
What do we want with eggs and ham,
When we've got plum and apple jam?

Form fours! Right turn!

How shall we spend the money we earn?

Oh! Oh! Oh! it's a lovely war.”

He had no choice but to repeat the chorus as the audience, those who knew the song or could pick it up fast enough, joined in with their own rousing version, Edward included.

Mr Foyle didn’t sing, he noticed, but he was smiling broadly.

Sam most definitely did sing even though she obviously didn’t know the words.

And whilst Sergeant Milner obviously did know the words, if way he was mouthing them along with the repeat of the song was any indication, he didn’t utter a single solitary sound.

Thomas returned back to his seat during the applause, shaking the offered hands on his way back to Edward’s side. The concert then drew to a close with an emotional performance of ‘There’ll Always Be An England’ from all those that had performed, minus Thomas of course.

“I give you a toast, ladies and gentlemen.

I give you a toast, ladies and gentlemen.

May this fair dear land we love so well,

In dignity and freedom dwell.
Though worlds may change and go awry,

While there is still one voice to cry.....

There'll always be an England,

While there's a country lane,

Wherever there's a cottage small,

Beside a field of grain.

There'll always be an England,

While there's a busy street,

Wherever there's a turning wheel,

A million marching feet.

Red, white and blue,

What does it mean to you?

Surely you're proud, shout it aloud,

"Britons, awake!"

The empire too, we can depend on you.

Freedom remains.

These are the chains,

Nothing can break.

There'll always be an England,

And England shall be free,

If England means as much to you,

As England means to me.”

Everyone, including Sir Michael Waterford but excluding Group Captain Smythe, devolved into rapturous applause as the company took a well-deserved bow, signalling the conclusion of the evening’s entertainment, and almost immediately afterwards nurses started ushering patients back to their beds, most of whom went willingly following the offer of painkillers.

Seemingly some of the men had ignored their discomfort in favour of enjoying themselves.

Honestly, Thomas couldn’t really blame them; sometimes laughter was the best medicine.

“I thought you said you couldn’t sing, Mr Barrow!” Sam cried out as she bounded over, full of the kind of youthful energy that Thomas missed more and more each passing day. She was followed by Mr Foyle and Milner at a much more sedate pace. “That was spectacular!”
Thomas felt his cheeks flush.

“Courtenay?” an unfamiliar voice interjected before he could form a response. As one they turned to find a gentleman, probably only a few years older than themselves and leaning heavily on a walking stick. He was dressed in a tweed suit, his waistcoat a fraction too tight around his belly as he could be described as portly if not overweight. “Edward Courtenay?”

A smile blossomed on Edward’s face,

“Good evening, Sir Michael. It’s a pleasure to see you again.”

“I thought that was you,” the former resident of their current location announced warmly, reaching out to shake Edward’s hand firmly. “It’s good to see you after, what, ten years?”

“More like fifteen, I’m afraid,” Edward responded, offering Sir Michael a sheepish smile. They had grown up in the same circle, gone to school together before the war although the other man had been a few years ahead of him. They’d had a lot in common, though; both of them the eldest of two sons, the heirs of their families estates, Sir Michael’s being the larger of the two, of course, both of them somewhat envious of their younger brothers favoured treatment. They’d enlisted within months of each other, both of them taking commissions in the Army, and had both been injured at the Battle of Passchendaele in 1917. And, now, all these years later they had another thing in common; they’d never married or beget an heir. “How have you been keeping? You must be very proud of what is going on in this old place.”

Sir Michael smiled tightly as he replied,

“Yes, of course I’m proud of what’s going on here. We must all do our bit in times of war.”

“Indeed.”

“Perhaps you’d care to join me for afternoon tea tomorrow? I think it’s about time that we have a bit of a catch up, don’t you, old friend?” Sir Michael suggested, his smile becoming significantly more genuine when Edward nodded in response. Around them nurses began clearing away the rows of seats, the audience members either returning to their beds or saying their goodbyes and heading home. Some of the performers were clearing the stage. “I’ve moved into the lodge for the duration. Shall we saw three o’clock? Does that suit you?”

“Thomas?” Edward enquired. “Do we have anything planned for tomorrow?”

“Not unless somethings been arranged whilst I was in London, sir,” Thomas said in his most pompous manner, feeing the need to reinforce the lie that he was nothing more than his lovers aide with Edward’s old friend. “As far as I’m aware there are no plans for tomorrow.”

“Excellent! Would it be alright if I bring Thomas with me? He’s my eyes, you see.”

“Of course it’s alright, Edward,” Sir Michael responded. “I shall see you tomorrow then.”

That said Sir Michael left made his way across to say his goodbyes to Dr Jamieson and Group Captain Smythe, leaning heavily on his cane which told the former medic that his injury had been to his leg, and Thomas placed his hand on Edwards arm to turn him towards the door.

“We shouldn’t keep Mr Foyle and the other waiting.”

“Quite right, Thomas,” Edward murmured, covering Thomas’ hand with his own and giving a discreet squeeze, a silent way they had of saying ‘I love you’ to each other when they were in public.
In response Thomas gave Edwards arm a squeeze. “We should be getting home.”

As they were leaving the familiar voice of Dr Jamieson called after them,

“Fell free to come back and visit anytime, gentlemen! I’m sure the men will appreciate it!”

“Thank you,” Edward called back over his shoulder. “We shall.”

“I knew inviting you along would be a good idea,” Sam announced as their group stepped out into the cooling night air, the moon, thankfully almost full, illuminating the world around them. “And there was no sign of the saboteur. Perhaps they’ve have enough?”

Mr Foyle sighed, holding the ornate front door open for Thomas to guide Edward through,

“Sadly I don’t think it’s going to be that simple, Sam.”

And unfortunately his prediction turn out to be correct as the following morning the body of Sergeant Gordon Drake, a member of the ground crew at the local airfield, was discovered.

~ * ~

A/N I wasn’t going to finish here but this chapter is already longer than I was intending it to be so I shall just tag the bit that I have left planned out onto the beginning of the next one. The Foyle’s War episode featured in this chapter was from Season Three; “Enemy Fire.” I hope you enjoyed it and I apologise for the delay; I’ve been performing as Sarah Brown in “Guys And Dolls” with my local amateur dramatics society which has taken up a lot of my time, both with rehearsals and the run of shows. I included the titles of the songs I used in the story but just want to state that I do not own any of them and use them to help my story progress. Oh, and the Courtenay’s house is based on Athelhampton House, Dorset (a beautiful place to visit BTW) if you want some visual aides although I have made a few tweaks to the floorplan. Comments and Suggestions are always welcome. X
Chapter Four

Disclaimer – I don’t own Downton Abbey, the Crimson Field or Foyle’s War but the Original Characters (of which there are too many to mention) are my creations.

Summary – Sequel to ‘There’s A Long, Long Trail’ following Thomas, Edward and all of the others through the course of the Second World War.

A/N Title taken from a popular song of the era.

~ I'll Be Seeing You ~

Chapter Four
February 1941

“The housekeeper?”

Several heads turned towards Edward as he repeated the news he had just heard from Sam as they slowly made their way along the path towards the church, the rest of the Courtney’s striding on ahead, on the Sunday following their visit to the burns hospital, Thomas guiding him with a gentle grip on his left elbow. Sam nodded in silent confirmation, turning back and forth between the church even as she continued to lead the way towards their destination.

“…but why?”

“Mr Foyle doesn’t like to talk about cases with me, not really,” Sam answered, reaching up with a gloved hand to tuck a stray lock of hair behind her ear. “However, I overheard some of the constables talking about it. She did it for Sir Waterford, not that he knew; she was worried that he was depressed, suicidal after losing his house to the RAF. She planned to force the RAF to leave by sabotaging their work so that Sir Waterford could return home.”

“He didn’t seem depressed when we met him at the concert party,” Edward murmured, frowning. “If anything he seemed rather, well, proud to be doing his bit for the war effort.”

“As anyone would be, I’m sure,” Thomas responded. “Mind the step, sir.”

“Thank you, Thomas.”

Stepping up onto the level that the entrance to the church was at the couple made their way inside, a chill instantly settling around them; it seemed to Thomas that no matter what the temperature was outside churches were always rather cold inside. Whether it was to do with the way they were designed or the materials that they’d been made of he didn’t know.

“Shall I take your hat, sir?”

“Yes, thank you,” Edward sighed, doffing his hat and holding it out to Thomas who had to let go of Edward’s arm briefly in order to take off his own, carefully placing Edwards directly on top of his
and holding them in the crook of his left elbow. A hymn book was pressed into Edward’s hand by one of the church volunteers, not for him but for Thomas; neither of them had been frequent church goers until moving to Hastings but Edward’s parents had insisted, claiming that the reputation of the family was at stake. The first time they’d attended the volunteers had fuss ed over Edward incessantly, one of them apologising for all the world to hear when she’d given him a hymn book that he couldn’t use. It had been then that Edward had explained softly that whilst he certainly couldn’t use it in his condition Thomas would and that in his condition he couldn’t carry their hats, the prayer book and guide Edward all at the same time. Neither of them were overly religious due to the churches view of their ‘perversion’ but both still held to their faith. “Poor woman. I hope they go easy on her…”

Thomas hummed softly.

“There’s two spaces with your family or we could sit slightly further back with Sam,” he explained their options softly as he led his lover down the aisle. “Oh, and Mr Milner, too.”

“I suppose we should sit with my family, really, much as I’d prefer to sit with our friends…”

The service passed by in typical fashion, the congregation treated to a lesson about hope in times of struggle as well as two rousing hymns, ‘Guide Me, O Thou Great Redeemer’ and ‘O God, Our Help In Ages Past’ before finishing up with a series of heartfelt prayers for those at war, for those whose loved ones were away at war, for those who were sick or injured, for those who had known grief before finishing up with the Lord’s Prayer. Once the service was over they repeated their earlier motions in reverse, slowly making their way back out into the warm sunlight, before heading down the path intent of taking a stroll along the beach.

They were stopped from doing so by an unlikely turn of events.

“Mr Barrow!” an unfamiliar voice called out, causing Thomas to bring the two of them to a halt just as they’d stepped onto the pavement, searching out the owner. “I say, Mr Barrow!”

He found himself facing a man only a few years older than himself, dressed in a smart brown suit and wearing his dark grey hair combed over to hide the loss of the hair on the top of his head. A few paces behind him stood a woman surrounded by four noisy children under five.

“Yes? Can I help you?”

“Mr Barrow, my name is Robert Taylor,” the other man introduced himself, holding out his hand for Thomas to shake. He did so. “I’m sorry to bother you but I’ve been hoping to speak to you for a couple of weeks now, ever since I heard of your previous military experience.”

“I’m afraid I don’t understand Mr Taylor…”

“I’m sorry, I should have introduced myself properly,” he explained, smiling broadly as he shook Thomas’ hand one final time before releasing it. Edward stood silently beside him, his head tilted to one side as he listened to the conversation. “As well as being Headmaster of the boy’s school I’m also the Captain of the local Home Guard detachment. We’ve recently lost our platoon medic, killed along with his wife during a raid, and you were recommended to us as a potential replacement. We parade every evening, assist with patrols of the local area and occasionally are called upon to help with searches of a most important nature.”

“…who recommended me?”

“Mr Foyle,” Taylor responded, nodding across to where the police inspector was getting into his car.
Sam was, of course, with him as was Mr Milner who was chuckling. “He mentioned that you were a stretcher bearer in the last war. So? What do you think about joining us?”

“I…don’t know…”

He liked the idea of doing his bit for the war effort, don’t get him wrong, but it sounded like it would take up quite a lot of his time which would therefore take him away from Edward.

They weren’t co-dependent, both of them perfectly capable of functioning alone for any length of time despite their individual physical limitation, but it would restrict Edward on what he could do without Thomas to help. That and he would miss spending time together.

“I think it sounds like an excellent idea, Thomas,” Edward announced cheerfully, patting the hand holding onto his arm as he offered him a genuine smile, before turning his sightless gaze towards Taylor. “I don’t suppose you’re looking for a blind man to act as a mascot?”

“You would be more than welcome within the platoon, Mr Courtenay,” Taylor responded warmly, quickly reaching out to shake Edward’s hand just as vigorously as he had Thomas’, prompting the former officer to offer him an almost blinding smile. “We are always looking for new members but I was unsure whether or not you would be interested. Of course there will be some limitations on when you can attend, I’m afraid; we can’t very well expect you to crawl through fields and the like, now can we? Now, does this mean that you’ll join us?”

Thomas had never been able to deny Edward anything when he’d looked at him like that.

And so, thanks to Mr Foyle in a way, Thomas and Edward ended up joining the Home Guard.

They hadn’t really known what to expect, particularly regarding Edward’s involvement, but Captain Taylor had been as good as his word. Whilst Thomas was involved in everything, sometimes too involved if he was honest, Edward was exempt from field training exercises, patrols and emergency call-outs of which there were more than either of them had been anticipating. Regular parades weren’t a problem for either of them, Thomas not being required to carry a rifle as he was a medic whilst Edward was one of the smartest in the platoon when it came to rifle drill despite being unable to see. They were both privates, a fact that Edward found amusing but Thomas complained about bitterly having worked his way up to the rank of Sergeant in the last war, and found themselves getting on well with the other members of ‘Hastings No.1 Platoon’ who had welcomed them with open arms.

Howard Bell, a forty-seven-year-old tailor, was the comedian of the platoon and his main victim for jokes was himself, particularly regarding the terrible limp he had been left with by a childhood bout of polio. It came and went, usually with the bad weather, and he wasn’t above over-acting it for comedic effect. He was married to a plump woman with an equally raucous sense of humour and together they were raising half-a-dozen high-spirited children.

Ernest Richardson, the eldest member of the platoon at seventy, was a fisherman. He, like most of the others, had served before although he had served in the Boer War rather than the Great War. He was soft spoken and serious, fond of Shakespeare and generous almost to a fault. He had no family; he’d never married, his parents were long dead and his only sister had died as a child. He lived alone in a little hut down on the beach, just one room with a kitchenette, table, single chair, armchair by the fireplace and a bed. His dog, Peggy, followed him everywhere, even on parades, and he regularly supplied them all with fish.

Private Edwin Miller was a Prison Warden, a reserved occupation which stopped him from being called up but he had wanted to do his bit and so had willingly added to his already difficult workload.
by joining the home guard. He was only thirty-nine, one of the youngest members of the platoon, built like a tank with shoulders as broad as an oak tree and always wore a scarf knitted by his wife when on patrol. She was, apparently, an avid but not altogether talented knitter as all she could manage was striped scarves. All of the platoon had been gifted one at some point or another. They had two sons together, both under the age of ten, along with a baby girl and were as picture perfect a family as you could ever find.

The platoon’s non-commissioned officers were Lance Corporal George Carter, a sixty-year-old farmer whose eldest son had been captured at Dunkirk, and Sergeant Bobby Brown, a fifty-five-year-old shopkeeper who kept the town supplied with their basic necessities. As far as NCO’s went they were nice enough, Lance Corporal Carter reminding Thomas of the stereotypical friendly grandfather that always appeared in movies despite there only being nine years between them. The hard life of a farmer had aged him, giving him a much older appearance than his actual age warranted. Sergeant Brown was the opposite in terms of looks, looking barely a day over thirty much to the annoyance of Thomas who definitely looked his age these days, and whilst he was strict when it was necessary he was also fair. Sergeant Brown was a widower with four children and was walking out with Mrs Horncastle, a widow with four children of her own. There was a betting pool within the platoon regarding when the two would eventually be tying the knot. Lance Corporal Carter had been married since he was a seventeen, his bride being only sixteen at the time, and had been “blessed” with five children, nine grand-children and even one great-grand-child.

Captain Taylor it turned out was a strict disciplinarian whenever he was in uniform. This was due, in part to his career as a teacher, or rather as a head teacher at the local boys grammar school. Outside of the platoon he was a pleasant enough chap but as soon as they were on parade or out on patrol he was a stickler for protocol, order and military precision. He and his wife, who Thomas had seen that day at the church, had never been blessed with children of their own and instead had thrown themselves into caring for a gaggle of refugees from London, three of whom had since been orphaned by the war. One had family elsewhere he could return to but the others, a brother and sister, were in the process of being adopted by the couple. As an officer in the Home Guard he was a respected pillar of the community.

April 1941 saw an unexpected visitor, or rather visitors, arrive in Hastings.

“Mr Courtenay?”

Edward, sat listening to the wireless in the Morning Room while Thomas perched beside him reading the newspaper, turned his head in the general direction of the families butler,

“Yes, Wright?”

“I’m sorry to bother you, sir, but there’s someone here to see you. Shall I show them in?”

“A visitor?” Edward hummed thoughtfully. “Yes, please, show them in.”

Neither of them were expecting anyone, particularly not with the torrential rain pouring down outside, but assumed that it was Sam or Milner coming to visit as they had before.

Their friendship with the young war veteran had come about slowly, born from that night they’d visited the hospital and Thomas had given the younger man some advice on how to make sure that his stump remained in good condition. It seemed to be doing the police sergeant the world of good having someone he could talk to about his injuries, about his experiences in the war, someone that really understood what he was going through. His wife, they had learned, had been staying with her sister so as to avoid dealing with him.
The figures that were escorted into the morning room were not who they were expecting.

“Thomas!”

“Flora?”

It was indeed their friend from the war who flung herself into Thomas’ arms in her usual fashion once the former footman had sprung to his feet, his newspaper falling to the floor.

And she wasn’t alone.

“Hello, Uncle Thomas,” her twelve-year-old son Richard called out brightly. “Uncle Edward.”

Ten-year-old Eloise and six-year-old Edmund, both of whom had taken after their mother in both their looks and personality, were much less controlled and hurried over to hug Edward, little Edmund climbing into his lap so that he could lean back against his chest with a happy sigh, pulling Edwards arms around him until he was completely wrapped up in them. Eloise didn’t mind being pushed out of the way for this to happen, content to move over to hug Thomas around his waist once her mother had stepped back. It was only then that Thomas noticed the pram that Richard was in charge of, a navy blue silver-cross with the top still up.

“We weren’t expecting you,” Thomas pointed out to his old friend. “Is this…?”

“I wanted you to meet Arthur,” Flora responded, her hair now a faded red and pulled back into a simple knot on the back of her head, moving over to the pram to pick up the youngest member of the Huntington family. “You two didn’t make it to the christening because of this awful war and he’s almost eighteen-months-old now so I wanted you to meet him. Here.”

Thomas barely had time to prepare himself before he had an armful of squirming baby.

His instincts, born out of years of practice with the various Branson and Huntington babies, kicked in within a couple of moments and saved little Arthur from taking an unpleasant fall. Supporting the baby underneath his nappy clad bottom with his prosthetic limb he spread his good hand out across the infants back to keep him tucked into his chest. Thankfully the little boy was old enough to support his own head, his big blue eyes gazing up at Thomas.

“Hello, there,” Thomas murmured, watching as the boys eyes fell to his lips. “Well, aren’t you the spitting image of your father? Except for this those eyes, those are your mothers.”

“That’ll be all, Wright,” Edward murmured, feeling the butlers presence across the room, giving the little boy in his arms a squeeze before tilting him from one side to another, causing him to giggle loudly as his body flopped wildly. “How long are you visiting for?”

“A week,” Flora answered, reaching out to swipe her thumb across Arthur’s mouth to get rid of the babies dribble before it could drip onto Thomas’ collar, causing the baby in question to grumble. “We’ve booked into the ‘Sea View Hotel’ in town. It’s a lovely room, just right for the five of us. We don’t have a sea view, ironically, but I quite like overlooking the town.”

“Charles not with you?”

“He had intended to be but Mrs Gregson, our elderly neighbour, was hit by a car during the blackout a couple of nights ago,” Flora explained, her voice unusually heavy with sadness. Eloise moved to hug her mother tightly. “She’s in a bad way so he didn’t want to leave her.”

“I’m sorry,” Edward murmured, his sympathy genuine. “I hope she makes a full recovery.”
Flora sighed,

“As do we, of course, but sadly I’ve seen these type of injuries before…”

Of all her children it was Richard, the eldest, who seemed to be taking their neighbours injury the hardest. Normally he was as chatty as his mother but he hadn’t spoken a single word since stepping into the room, his hands fluttering across the handlebar of the pram.

He, like Arthur, was the spitting image of his father and the likeness was only growing more severe the older he got. His hair was as dark as his sisters was red, settling around his face in a halo of inky black curls, and he had grown almost a foot taller since they’d last seen him.

“You, young man, have got to stop growing,” Thomas announced, changing the subject much to Flora’s obvious relief as he moved over to bump the twelve-year-old’s shoulder with his own. “Otherwise I’m pretty sure you’re going to end up being taller than all of us.”

“He’s already taller than me,” Flora chuckled, the mirth in her voice ever so slightly false, moving to stand beside her son so as to demonstrate. Richard blushed, smiling shyly. “See?”

Edward leaned in to stage-whisper in Edmund’s ear,

“Is your brother really taller than your mother?”

“Uh-huh.”

“…are you taller than your mother?”

“No, silly,” Edmund giggled, kicking his feet lightly against Edward’s shins. “I’m only six.”

“What? No, that can’t be right,” Edward protested dramatically. “You must be ten, at least.”

“No, Uncle Edward, I’m six. I promise.”

The mood suitably lightened Thomas happily held on to baby Arthur as they caught up with each other, Flora dropping down into the seat Thomas had vacated and pulling her daughter into her lap. Richard moved to stand beside Thomas, offering his finger for his baby brother to gum on when the little boy scores he’d intelligibly at him upon seeing him, accompanying the move with a small sigh and a fond roll of his grey eyes which spoke of how often he was called upon to perform this particular service. The fact that he didn’t even think to protest being used as a chew toy by an obviously teething baby spoke volumes about his character.

“So, Richard, how are you finding school at the moment?”

“All of the teachers have been called up to fight, apart from the, Mr Friar, the Headmaster. He’s too old to go to war,” Richard answered him, his voice quite a bit deeper than Thomas remembered it being. “It’s why we could come with mum to visit you this week; both the junior and senior sides of the school are closed until the replacement teachers arrive at the end of the month. Mr Friar told us to practice our lessons and to read our assigned books.”

“…is this a good or a bad thing?”

“A whole month without school could never be anything but a good thing, Uncle Thomas,” the twelve-year-old responded cheekily, his eyes twinkling brightly with mirth, reminding Thomas of the young girl his mother had been when they’d first met in France. “Although mum and dad don’t think so. They’re worried about how it’ll effect our overall education.”
“I hope that wasn’t sarcasm I heard just then young man,” Flora commented, breaking away from her conversation with Edward who held the now sleeping Edmund curled up to his chest so as to turn and address her eldest. “You know what your father thinks of sarcasm.”

“No, mum, I wasn’t being sarcastic. I promise.”

“Good. Now, as I was saying…”

The arrival of Margaret, Edward’s niece, halts both conversations before they can start up again. She had the distinct appearance of someone who would rather be anywhere else.

“Uncle Edward?” she called out, awkwardness heavy in her voice as she surveyed the group. “Grandmama wanted to know if your…guests…would be staying for dinner this evening?”

It was obvious that she, like her mother and grandmother no doubt would as well, had judged the Huntington’s on their appearance and had found them wanting. Flora and her children were dressed nicely, probably in their second best clothes, but they bore obvious signs of wear and repair whereas everything Margaret wore was always in the latest style.

Ignoring the judgemental tone his niece had adopted Edward smiled at their friend,

“Flora? Would you like to stay for dinner or have you already made plans?”

“No plans, no,” Flora responded cheerfully, glancing around at her older children who were watching the newest arrival warily. “We’d love to stay for dinner, wouldn’t we, children?”

Both Richard and Eloise nodded obediently but said nothing.

“I’ll let Grandmama know.”

“Well, she’s a bit of a wet blanket, isn’t she?” Flora muttered sympathetically once they were alone once more, smoothing her fingers through her daughter’s hair. “She’s your…?”

“Niece,” Edward supplied. “And I’m afraid her mother is responsible for her…well…her.”

“Poor thing. It was like watching a china doll speaking; no true emotion apart from when she slipped up and made it clear she didn’t think us worthy of joining you all for dinner,” Flora sighed sadly before letting out a giggle and ducking her head somewhat guiltily. “I’ll admit I may have been so quick to accept just to see if her mask would crack any further.”

“Her mother, my sister-in-law, has been trying to find her a suitable husband for months but none of the candidates have lasted more than a couple of visits,” Edward sighed, genuine sadness creeping into his voice. “Either something was wrong about them or they saw Meg for the puppet that she really is. It’s sad; she’s a sweet girl at heart, I think, or at least she was before her mother sent her away to finishing school and filled her head with nonsense.”

“Finishing school? Ugh!” Flora cried, her face an expression of disgust. “There was talk of sending me to one of those once upon a time but my father put his foot down, thankfully.”

“I’m going to go to the grammar school,” Eloise announced proudly. “Aren’t I mummy?”

“Hopefully,” Flora responded, tapping her daughter’s nose. “We shall have to wait and see.”

It came as no surprise to Thomas that dinner that evening ended up being something of a strained affair, particularly when Edward’s mother realised that Flora was quite happy for Edmund to eat the
at the table with everyone else rather than keeping him out of the way.

“Surely he’d be happier in the kitchen,” she had stated as Flora had lifted her youngest son into the seat to her right. “That way he won’t have to struggle with using proper cutlery…”

Flora’s voice had been unusually tight as she’d countered her weak argument,

“My son is perfectly capable of eating at the dining room table, thank you very much.”

And he was, Thomas noted with a smirk as he assisted Edward as per usual.

Richard, Eloise and Edmund all had impeccable table manners, using their knives and forks with the suitable amount of dexterity required to cut up the simple vegetable pie and boiled potatoes into more manageable bites, and answered all of the questions which were thrown their way as politely as they could. In comparison Charles, whose manners should have been even more impeccable than theirs, spent most of the meal drinking and doing everything he could to make the Huntington’s feel inferior. He failed, mostly due their kind-hearted nature and the fact that they hadn’t been raised to think that money and status were everything. In comparison Margaret barely said a word for the entire meal, instead she spent most of her time staring enviously across the table at Flora and Eloise, silently comparing her restricted and controlled life their obviously happy and carefree one. Flora, like her children, had years of well-trained manners to fall back on and filled the air with cheerful conversation which, much to Thomas’ genuine surprise, appeared win both of Edward’s parents over to her side.

“And you met Edward while he was convalescing at Downton?”

“I did. I was a VAD, posted to France for most of the war which is where I met Thomas but then towards the end of the war I was transferred to home duties,” Flora confirmed, using her desert spoon to transfer a piece of the delicious smelling bread and butter pudding from her dish to her mouth. A noise of delight escaped her, “This is delicious. You’re cook must be very talented; I haven’t tasted a pudding this rich since before rationing came into effect.”

Thomas smirked as Ida preened, unaware that what she had interpreted as a compliment had in fact been a subtle accusation that they like many people had hoarded food against the orders of the ‘Ministry of Food’ and were therefore able to supplement their individual rations so as to improve their overall diet and the quality of food that was available to them.

“Anyway, as I was saying, towards the end of the war I was transferred to home duties and was lucky enough to secure a posting to the same hospital that Thomas was in charge of,” Flora continued, not even pausing as she artfully used her thumb to wipe away a piece of pudding which had landed on Edmund’s chin, licking her thumb clean afterwards much to the Courtenay’s shock. “Shortly after arriving at Downton I was introduced to his favourite patient and the three of us became fast friends. And the rest is history, as the saying goes.”

“Did you meet your husband in the war?”

“Given that my profession revolved around treating men who had been through the worst experiences of their lives it’s something of a relic to be able to say that, no, my husband and I didn’t meet until after the war,” Flora answered Elvira’s question calmly. “He served in the war, of course, as did almost everyone of his generation, but our paths never crossed.”

“His generation? Shouldn’t that be our generation?”

“My husband is thirteen years my senior,” Flora answered, lowering her eyes before they could catch
the mirth shining out of them. She enjoyed dropping that into conversation, Thomas knew, just so that she could see people’s to their age difference. The Courtenay’s, of course, didn’t disappoint; Ida and Elvira wore almost identical wide-eyed expressions of the shock, both of them no more that two years younger than their husbands, whilst Samuel and Jack wore equally identical expressions of thoughtfulness, no doubt contemplating what their lives would have been like with a wife so much younger than themselves. After a long moment Jack adopted an expression of disapproval, obviously having decided that age gaps such as their had no place in modern society. Samuel, on the other hand, looked practically envious and Thomas could only assume that he was jealous of Flora’s husband for getting to spend his married life with an attractive younger woman to share his bed. Charles looked openly disgusted, his handsome face twisted with an ugly sneer which prompted Richard to shoot him a particularly sharp glare. Margaret, unlike her mother and brother, looked to be contemplating the news more than anything else before settling on an almost nonexistent smile. This smile disappeared when her mother shot her a look of disapproval. “Charlie, my husband, was with the Gloosters for the duration of the war along with most of his friends.”

Charles looked most put out to learn that he and Flora’s husband shared the same name.

“And what does he do now?”

“Daddy is the vicar of St Mary the Virgin,” Eloise announced proudly, picking up her glass of water to wash down the last mouthful of her own pudding. “But we just call it St Mary’s.”

“You’re married to a vicar?” Charles snorted, unable to contain his shock. “You?”

“No, Uncle Edward, I just meant that she’s so…”

“So?”

“…never mind…”

Flora shared a look with Thomas, one that assured him that she knew exactly what Charles had been implying; it wasn’t the first time someone had commented that she was too “fast” to be the wife of a vicar, implying that her morals weren’t up to scratch, or that she was too pretty, of all things. She’d also been told that she wasn’t serious enough to be a vicars wife, that because she liked to enjoy herself whenever possible she wasn’t what Charlie needed.

“What do you have planned for the rest of the week?” Thomas enquired a short while later as he and Edward escorted Flora and the children out to her car. Albert, who had spent the duration of dinner sleeping in the company of Mrs Dingle, was being carried by Thomas and was now wide awake, twisting his little head this way and that as he tried to take in all of his surroundings. He was going to be into everything, Thomas predicted, getting into all sorts of scrapes because of his innate curiosity. “Is there anything you would particularly like to do?”

“Well, let’s face it, that’s the only reason we’re coming.”

“Spend time with the two of you, of course!” Flora answered brightly, her children nodding eagerly from where they were gather around Thomas and Edward, all of them touching one if not both of them as they walked whilst managing not to get in Edwards way. “That’s why we’ve come, after all? So the real question should be when are the two of you available?”

Edward offered her a thoroughly pleased smile,

“To my knowledge our only plans for this week are our duties with the Home Guard. Other than that were all yours, Flora. So, how about a walk down the seafront tomorrow? I’m afraid we won’t be
able to go down onto the beach; it’s a restricted area now. Fishermen and military personnel only. And there won’t be any ice creams like there would have been before the war but the view are spectacular, or so I’m told these days. What do you think?”

“I think a walk along the seafront is exactly the kind of outing we need.”

And so as planned they met up in the foyer of the hotel, the nicest hotel in town, an hour or so after breakfast the following morning and took a leisurely stroll along the sea front. Well, the three adults took a leisurely stroll, Flora pushing Albert along in his pram; Richard, Eloise and Edmund shrieked with laughter as they ran around the adults, taking turns chasing each other. They’d been most put out by the fact that the barbed wire lining the top of the beach stopped them from going down onto the patches of sand which appeared every now and then on the otherwise pebbled beach but had quickly forgotten to be upset when they were allowed to run free, their raised voices drawing countless looks of disapproval from passing locals that went completely ignored. In the end it was due to the children’s exuberance that Thomas was given the opportunity to introduce one of his oldest friends with someone who he had only been introduced to recently but could already see them becoming good friends.

“Edmund! Stop!”

Edmund, running backwards to avoid his older brother, ignored Richards order.

He might only be six but he wasn’t stupid, he knew his brother just wanted to catch him so that he’d be “it” for the next part of their game of chase, so he kept on moving backwards…

And collided with a solid pair of legs.

Thomas watched, unable to do anything to stop the predictable catastrophe, as the young boy rebounded off of the limbs he had struck with a startled cry, his small body dropping to the uneven ground with enough force to put deep gouges into the heels of his palms and to take the skin off his knees. A cry of shocked pain sounded almost at once as he froze in place and continued, vowing in volume, as he lifted his hands up to stare at the blood oozing out.

“Mummy!”

“I’m so sorry,” the familiar, to Thomas and Edward at least, voice apologised as Flora knelt in front of her son, pulling him to sit on her thigh so that she could examine his injuries. “I wasn’t paying attention to where I was going, otherwise I’d…Mr Barrow? Mr Courtenay?”

Edward smiled, somewhat with relief, in the direction of the younger man, “Good Morning, Sergeant Milner.”

“Good Morning,” the police officer responded politely, nodding towards both Edward and Thomas despite the former not being able to see it. He then turned his attention to Flora and Edmund, crouching down rather awkwardly with his prosthetic leg stuck straight out behind him. “Looks like we both need a lesson in watching where we’re going, young man.”

Edmund, his hysterical sobbing reduced to hitching whimpers, frowned tearfully at him.

“I’m most terribly sorry about this. Would you like me to fetch anything?” Milner enquired, watching as Flora carefully picked a piece of gravel out oh her sons right hand. Richard had moved to steady the prom whilst Eloise, not one for the so of blood, had moved to press her face into Edward’s side. “I could pop in to the chemists for some bandages? Some iodine?”
“These things happen, Sergeant Milner, was it?”

Milner nodded, his hat tipping ever so slightly as he did so.

“Particularly when a certain little boy doesn’t look where he’s going,” she continued, lightly scolding her son whose lower lip trembled and a fresh wave of tears welled up in his eyes. His knees, given only a quick going over, were still bleeding freely and Thomas moved on instinct to press both his and Edwards thankfully clean handkerchiefs against the grazes. “Thank you, Thomas. And although I couldn’t possibly let you purchase them, Sergeant Milner, I agree that a trip to the chemists for bandages and iodine is definitely in order.”

And so the group, including Milner, left the seafront and headed inland.

“I’d been hoping to bump into you again, Mr Barrow, but nothing quite this literal,” the policeman murmured as he walked between Thomas and Flora who was expertly carrying her still weeping son on her hip. Richard was pushing the pram, making silly faces down at his baby brother who had woken up amidst the kerfuffle, whilst Eloise remained as tucked into Edwards side as she could whilst walking. “I wanted to thank you for your advice. Sam was kind enough to gift me a pot of cream which has already done wonders for the scar tissue on my stump and has promised to pick me up another pot when she replaces hers.”

“I’m glad to hear it’s helping with the inflammation.”

“You wear a prosthetic, Sergeant Milner?”

“I do,” Milner answered, obviously startled by Flora’s interest in the subject. Most women, his wife included or so Sam had confessed to Thomas, preferred to act as though it wasn’t there at all. Reaching down he patted the side of his prosthetic leg. “I lost it at Trondheim.”

“Trans-tibial or trans-femoral?”

Thomas chuckled as Milner literally stumbled, surprised by the medical terminology.

“As you might have been able to guess Flora was a VAD, a voluntary nurse, in the last war,” he explained, offering his energetic friend a warm smile. Milner hummed, nodding his head to show his understanding. “In fact I have her to thank for being as independent as I am. She was the nurse assigned to look after me in the field hospital following my amputation and other assorted injuries, got me through my melancholia and helped me learn everything that I needed to know about living with only one hand and half my eyesight. And now she, nosy ex-nurse that she is, wishes to know if your amputation is above or below the knee?”

Nodding once more with understanding Milner answered cheerfully enough,

“My leg was amputated an inch or so below my knee after I was caught by a shell blast.”

Edmund, his tears finally forgotten, stared up at Milner in obvious wonder,

“You’re a soldier?”

“I was, before I was injured. Now I’m back to my peacetime profession.”

“…what’s that?”

“I’m a policeman, a Detective Sergeant.”
All three children who were old enough to understand were suitably impressed.

Shortly thereafter they arrived at the chemists on the parade of shops, the tall thin building located between the butchers and the tobacconists. Before the war there would have been a much wider variety of products available but with the disruption to the overseas supply routes and the precedence be in made for the war effort there were only a few things on offer; thankfully bandages and iodine were still available. Purchases made they exited the shop and Thomas and Flora both commented that the quality of bandage had deteriorated and the size of the glass iodine bottle was bordering on pathetic whilst they searched for a suitable place for them to treat Edmund’s injuries. It would do the job but not much more.

“Are you working on a case at the moment, Sergeant Milner?”

“Not currently no, although were always on the lookout for black marketeers of which there are sadly quite a few,” Milner answered Edward’s question, watching as Flora sat herself down on the bench they’d found, placed her son sideways on her lap and set to work. Her hands were gentle yet firm as they first cleaned his hands and knees and then bandaged them, all the while murmuring reassuringly in his ear. “Sam has begun hoping for a ‘nice, juicy murder’ to alleviate the boredom but Mr Foyle and myself are happy with the break.”

“I’d imagine so,” Edward murmured. “I don’t know how you can stomach such things as…”

“It’s upsetting, of course it is, when you’re trying to solve a murder,” Milner responded, his expression suitably grave. “But it can feel quite rewarding, solving the puzzle as it were and bringing the perpetrators to justice. I always enjoys puzzles as a child. Word games, too.”

“Like crosswords?”

Milner nodded, smiling down at Richard who positively beamed up at him.

“Daddy and I do the Times crosswords together,” the twelve-year-old announced proudly, one hand hidden inside the pram so that his baby brother could play with his fingers. “We used to do it in pencil but now we’ve started doing it in pen just to see if we can manage it.”

“I enjoy a good crossword myself,” Milner announced. “Although I do all of mine in pencil.”

Such a little comment and yet Thomas could literally see Richard swell with pride.

“There,” Flora announced, lifting Edmund off of her lap and setting him on his feet, gently wiping the last traces of her sons tears away with her thumbs. The bandages, as was to be expected, were all tight enough to stay where they were needed but not too tight so as to cause him any discomfort.

“Now, I think you owe Sergeant Milner and apology, don’t you?”

Edmund, his eyes on his feet, moved to stand in front of the policeman.

“I’m sorry for running into you when I wasn’t looking where I was going but we were playing a game of chase and I thought Richard was trying to trick me into stopping so that he could catch me because he’s done that before and I wanted to win because I never do because I’m the littlest which isn’t fair so I didn’t stop when he told me to but I didn’t mean to hurt you.”

No one could blame Milner for looking so thoroughly confused as the words tumbled out of Edmund’s mouth in an endless stream without even pausing for breath. Thomas chuckled, shooting Flora a look to make it clear that he knew exactly who the little boy had picked up that particular habit from; Flora had never been one for unnecessary pauses when speaking.
“Thank you,” Milner responded at length, offering the six-year-old a warm smile which transformed his stern expression, which appeared to be his default expression. “And you didn’t hurt me. I promise. My limp is permanent; you didn’t cause it. Now, I do feel that I should offer you an apology for not watching where I was going as you did get hurt...”

“Edmund?” Flora prompted. “What do we say when someone apologises to us.”

“Thank you. I accept your apology,” the little boy dutifully recited. “Was that OK, mummy?”

“Yes, sweetheart, as long as you meant it.”

“I did.”

“Then that was fine.”

Edmund smiled, his world put to rights now that he wasn’t in trouble any more. Turning he reached out to take hold of Flora’s hand in both of his, leaning against her legs in such a way that her knees pressed against his stomach. He didn’t care, focused instead on announcing,

“Mummy? I’m hungry.”

“...of course you are.”

Milner took the opportunity to excuse himself from the group,

“And on that note I should let you get back to your day. Again, please accept my heartfelt apologies for not watching where I was going earlier. I’m sure we’ll see each other again, Mr Barrow, Mr Courtenay, given the way that Sam appears to have adopted the three of us.”

Thomas chuckled,

“That’s…not altogether an inaccurate description, actually.”

Whilst it was technically true that they’d known Mr Foyle the longest having met him on the train it was definitely his young driver who had inserted herself into their lives since then.

“Well, then, until next time.”

With a nod to Flora and the children the police officer turned and walked away, heading towards the police station where a pile of paperwork was no doubt awaiting his attention.

“Mummy?” Edmund called out again, bouncing against her legs. “Is it lunchtime yet?”

Flora, who wasn’t wearing a watch, quirked a questioning eyebrow in Thomas’ direction.

Shaking his head fondly Thomas pulled out his pocket watch in order to check the time.

“Its just gone half past eleven,” he announced, slipping his pocket watch away and moving to stand beside Edward, their arms touching in an intimate but not too obvious kind of way. Eloise smiled at him from where she was still happily tucked into Edwards other side. All of the Huntington’s, bar baby Albert of course, knew the truth about their relationship. Even Charles whose profession should have prompted him to shun them. Instead he had proven to be every bit as caring and understanding as his wife, raising his children to believe that the most important message in the bible was that ‘God is love.’ “Now would be a good time to begin looking for somewhere to go for lunch unless you want to return to the hotel?”
“Not the hotel,” Flora countered. “I’ve reserved us all a table there for dinner.”

“I believe that there is a café by the pier,” Edward spoke up, running his fingers through Eloise’s hair and looking every bit the doting uncle. “Thomas and I used to get afternoon tea there on the days that we used to visit my family before the war. Of course with the pier closed off for the duration the café might be closed too but it might be worth finding out?”

The café, unsurprisingly named ‘The Pier Café’, hadn’t been closed by the war and despite rationing the group were able to purchase a rather sumptuous spread of sandwiches and even a slice of cake. It was somewhat dry, had been made with powdered eggs and was more savoury than sweet but it was still cake and so the children enjoyed it immensely.

They returned to the hotel after lunch, Edmund needing a nap and everyone else needing to rest their legs. Eloise ended up napping alongside her brother while Richard read aloud to Edward and Thomas from his current boom of choice; Mary Shelley’s ‘Frankenstein.’ Flora, taking the opportunity whilst there was someone else to watch her children, took a bath.

“I don’t know if this book is entirely appropriate for a child,” Edward commented as he shifted Albert on his lap, turning the grizzling baby around until his back was resting against Edward stomach as he reclined in the rooms lone chair. “What with the subject matter...”

“I’ve read worse,” Richard countered blandly. “Anyway, mum said I could read it.”

“Just out of curiosity has she read it?”

The twelve-year-olds cheeky giggle was answer enough.

No, Thomas had a feeling if she had her son wouldn’t have been allowed to read it.

Or rather he wouldn’t have been allowed to read it so young…

The book, unsurprisingly, went away when Flora emerged from her bath.

She looked thoroughly refreshed; her skin flushed a light pink, hair pinned up high on her head so that only the curls which had escaped had gotten wet and a relaxed smile on her face. Thomas noticed that she’d also changed her clothes, going from her pretty summer dress to a cream coloured blouse and a blue-grey skirt and was in the process of tidying up her hair, unpinning and re-pinning the curls until it had been returned to her usual style.

“Children? Please go and wash your hands before we head down for dinner.”

Dinner, when they eventually made it down after Edmund had been forced to re-wash his hands three times before they were suitably clean, wasn’t the most delicious thing that any of the adults had ever tasted but it certainly wasn’t the worst. That honour went to the so called meals that were clobbered together in the trenches and field hospitals of the Great War. And despite the ration sized portions they received it proved to be reasonably filling.

“Is there anything you’d particularly like to do tomorrow, Flora?”

“I wouldn’t mind visiting that hospital you told me about,” the former nurse responded, referring to the burns hospital. Thomas and Edward had regaled the family with a child friendly version of the investigation which they had been privy to through their friendship with Mr Foyle, Mr Milner and, of course, Sam. “I’d love to see how things have changed.”

“We do have an open-ended offer to return,” Edward murmured thoughtfully. “Thomas?”
“It’s too far to walk to,” Thomas pointed. “We’d need to find some form of transport.”

“Oh, that’s not a problem,” Flora countered cheerfully. “I drove us down in our family car.”

“…you drove?”

“Yes, Thomas, I can drive, thank you very much, and I’ve got my license to prove it,” she countered indignantly, opening her purse and withdrawing the little red book which was indeed a driving licence. A quick check proved that it was for Mrs Flora Huntington. “Now it will be a bit of squeeze but I’m sure Edmund don’t mind riding on your lap, Thomas, and the baby will be perfectly happy to spend the journey with you, Edward. So, shall we say 0900?”

Handing back her licence Thomas knew better than to argue with her so simply nodded.

“Perfect. Now, it’s coming up to someone’s bedtime,” Flora announced, bringing forth a shine of protest from Edmund as all of them stood up from their chairs as one and made their way out of the dining room together, Thomas guiding Edward with a hand on his elbow. “Would you like me to run you home once we’ve got through the evening routine?”

“No, it’s fine,” Edward countered, sensing that the ‘evening routine’ could taking a little while as Edmund was already complaining softly about not being tired at all. “We’ll walk.”

“Are you sure?”

“Of course,” he reassured her, patting Thomas’ hand companionably. Only those watching for it would have noticed the way his fingers lingered a second too long. “It’s not a difficult walk, not when you cut across the fields, and we’ve done it often enough that we know it by heart. Neither of us can drive, legally, and it isn’t often that anyone is available to drive us.”

“If you’re sure…”

“We’ll be fine, Flora,” Thomas reassured her. “Sleep well, everyone.”

“Night, Uncle Thomas!” Edmund cried out as Eloise all but dragged him up the staircase in the entrance hall of the Art Deco hotel, drawing plenty of attention. “Night, Uncle Edward!”

“Goodnight, Edmund,” Edward responded with a fond smile. “Sleep well.”

Stepping out into the cool evening air, both of them automatically placing their hats on their heads, Thomas was thankful for the brightness of the moon as they began making their way through the seaside town. The nationwide blackout, whilst necessary, was both dangerous and annoying; more people than anyone wanted to admit had been killed as a result of the blackout, mostly from being hit by vehicles going too fast for the conditions. It was only on nights when the moon was full, now more commonly known as a ‘Bombers Moon’ due to the advantage it gave to attacking bombers, that people could move about without a torch.

Of course, Thomas thought bitterly to himself, their ability to navigate their way home safely meant that someone somewhere was going to go through another hellish air raid.

“I can smell roses,” Edward murmured some time later. “And gardenias.”

“Were passing the station masters garden,” Thomas explained, breathing just as deeply as his partner so as to enjoy the scents to their fullest degree. “His spring garden is in bloom.”

Hastings station master was famous amongst the local community not only for his diligent work
running the station to perfection but for his garden which he split into four miniature gardens so that there would always be an array of beautiful flowers in bloom all year round.

What would happen when the old man retired or, heaven forbid, passed away no one knew.

The gardens were almost as much a fixture as the train station after so many years.

Once they’d reached the edge of the town, the last houses disappearing into the darkness behind them, Thomas manoeuvred them off of the road and through a wooden gate, taking them into a field which was home to a shortcut to the Courtenay Estate. It was more uneven underfoot, a challenge for both of them, but it was off of the road and away from any prying eyes and so Thomas released his hold on Edwards elbow in favour of wrapping is arm round his lovers back, his hand coming to rest on Edwards right hip as their sides pressed together.

Edward sighed deeply, tilting his head up towards the sky as he spoke softly,

“It’s times like these I can almost forget there’s a war on.”

Thomas couldn’t help but agree, struck by how beautiful his partner of twenty-four years looked bathed in nothing but moonlight, the light giving an almost ethereal glow to his skin.

Using his prosthetic limb as dextrously as he could Thomas carefully guided Edwards hand up until her could press his lips against the heel of his palm in a gentle, tantalising kiss. A gasp of surprise mixed with what was undeniably arousal escaped his long-term partner.

“Thomas…”

“Do you have any idea how beautiful you are right now, Edward?” Thomas murmured, lips brushing against the edge of the leather encasing his lovers wrists. “How did I get so lucky?”

“I’m the one who got lucky,” Edward countered breathlessly, reaching up with his free hand to stroke the back of his fingers along Thomas’ jawline knowing full well that this particular action always sent a shiver down the former footman’s spine. “And nothing you can say will make me think otherwise. Now, stop teasing me unless you’re intending to follow through.”

Their pace had slowed to the point where they were barely moving at all.

“Who says I won’t follow through?” Thomas enquired deeply, pressing another intimate kiss to Edwards palm. His own breathed seized briefly in his chest as Edward let out a gasp. “It’s been over a week since we were able to be alone together, my love, and even then it was a quick fumble in the bathroom. How could expect me to pass up an opportunity like this? To have you beneath me, bathed in moonlight like a nymph? To feel the cool air on our skin?”

“…Thomas…”

Bringing them to a complete stop Thomas pulled Edward around until they were stood as close together as they could physically get, their bodies pressed together so that they could feel each other’s undeniable arousal, both of them already hard and aching for the other.

“When was the last time we were able to make love under an open sky, Edward?”

Mouth dropping open Edward responded with a guttural moan, unable to speak.

“Would you like that? Do you want me to take you apart here? Now?”
In the end it was another two hours before they made it back to the Courtenay family home, both of them well sated and a little bit sore, brushing the last bits of grass from their clothes as they stepped through the the front door into the entrance hall moments before Edwards mother came around the corner and caught sight of them. Repressing the urge to giggle like schoolboys who had been caught out Edward had answered her polite enquiries about their day, Thomas commenting when required, before claiming exhaustion and heading upstairs.

As promised Flora picked them up the following morning, Edward taking the passenger seat with Edmund in his arms rather than Albert as had originally been suggested whilst Thomas sat between Richard and Eloise in the back, Albert sprawled happily in his lap. They headed out to the burns hospital, Thomas giving directions from the back seat, and Flora proved to be a capable driver who had definitely learned her craft on country roads with blind corners.

People who learned to drive in towns and cities never quite knew how to handle them.

Flora, with a well-practiced air, tooted the horn before going into the turn to warn anyone coming the other way of her presence. It was a trick which Thomas had seen Sam do plenty of times, the MTC having taught her the technique, and had saved them from a couple of head on collisions with larger vehicles which would have flattened the compact Wolseley.

They were welcomed with open arms at the hospital, particularly the children who had won over the hearts of everyone by not even batting an eyelid at the mens scars and deformities.

Although they’d only intended to spend the morning at the hospital the eager to learn Flora had been adopted by a group of nurses, following them as they completed their duties and even assisting with some of the techniques which hadn’t been around back during her time as a VAD, and so they instead spent their entire day with the doctors, nurses and patients.

Lunch had been military rations and therefore nothing new to anyone by the children who had considered it an adventure and had been washed down with a pint of beer, courtesy of the patients and not at all watered down like most beers were in pubs these day. Thomas and Flora had been shocked, given that alcohol had been strictly forbidden on the wards back in their day, but had understood Dr Jamiesons reasoning behind the unusual practice.

Thomas had worried that a day swapping “war stories” with the patients would dredge up some bad memories for both himself and Edward, maybe even Flora who had suffered with her own case of shell shock as it had been called then, but it had actually been surprisingly cathartic. Some of the patients had been through horrific ordeals, burning alive inside the planes that they had loved so much, and it did them as much good listening to Thomas and Edward recount their memories as it did the two Great War veterans to hear their stories.

Richard was permitted to hear a certain amount of detail, his mother considering him old enough to understand, but Eloise and Edmund were entertained with light-hearted stories.

Given that he had missed dinner with his family the day before Edward had been forced to promise to be back in time before being allowed to leave the house that morning as though he were still a child rather than a man in his late-forties and so despite being invited to dine with the patients for a second time that day they had been forced to leave, Flora dropping them off on her way back to the hotel where she and the children would be dining again.

“I’ll give you a call in the morning,” she promised before departing. “We can decide what we’re doing then or, if you want a day to yourselves, I can take the children exploring.”
“Of course we won’t want the day to ourselves,” Edward countered immediately. “But exploring sounds like a good idea. Why don’t you just come and spend the day here? The grounds are definitely large enough for them to spend the day getting into adventures.”

“Won’t your family mind? They weren’t exactly thrilled to meet us…”

“What makes you think I’d care if they did?”

And so, with Edward only announcing their plans for the day once he heard the car coming to a stop in front of the house, the third day of their visit was spent at the Courtenay Estate.

Thomas had had the foresight to arrange for a picnic lunch to be made up for them, going down into the kitchens before breakfast to speak with the cook in person, and so whilst the Richard, Eloise and Edmund were allowed to explore the gardens at their own pace Edward led the way to the main lawn which was located in one of the eight walled gardens. It was a favourite retreat of his, one he had been visiting since he was a child and had been able to finds aided even without his sight since their first visit to his family home. Thomas had since learned that the layout of the lawn hadn’t been altered since it was originally designed, only the growth of the trees over the years changing its appearance; the lawn, a so-called sunken lawn as you had to go down six steps to reach it from the gravel path which surrounded it, was home to an elegant pond with a statue of Venus at its centre and twelve yew pyramids.

“Oh, Edward,” Flora signed as they came to a halt on the soft green grass. “It’s beautiful.”

Edward smiled proudly.

“Thomas and I come here quite often to just sit and relax,” he admitted, accepting Albert into his arms when she softly alerted him to her intentions so that she could assist Thomas in spreading out the blanket they’d brought. He’d even brought a collection of cushions, the smallest he could find so that they’d fit in a large hessian bag, which would definitely make their time spent there much more comfortable. “It’s the perfect place to just…breathe…”

“I can certainly understand that…”

The day passed by quite pleasantly, the children eventually joining them when the rumbling of their stomachs grew to be too much. Albert really came out of himself for the first time, babbling away to himself as he tottered round the sunken lawn, and shrieking with delight when his siblings played a game of chase with him. Eventually, when the four of them began to overheat on the blissfully hot day, Flora permitted them to take off their shoes and socks and go paddling in the pond under the watchful eye of both herself and Thomas. Edward had laughed along with them, listening to the splashes of water and their shrieks of delight.

Of course all of this was overseen, unbeknownst to them, by the various members of the Courtenay family; Charles glared at the children after they almost bumped into him in the rose garden where he had been sneaking a cigarette, Margaret watched them share their picnic lunch together thrumming with envy at the cheerful scene, Jack and Elvira sneered down at them from the raised terrace as they took a turn about the gardens together, Ida glared down at them from the window in Jack and Elvira’s bedroom on the corner nearest the sunken lawn whilst Samuel spent most of his day discretely checking up on the group.

In the end the children were all exhausted after a day of playing in the gardens and were practically asleep when Flora and Thomas loaded them into the car to return to the hotel.

The following day, Thursday, Thomas and Edward offered to look after the children for the day so
that Flora could have the day to herself. This was unexpected but not unwelcome, the dedicated wife and mother not having had a day to herself since she’d been married.

And so whilst Thomas and Edward took the children for a walk around the outskirts of Hastings, once again letting the older three run off the excess energy that they seemed to always be in possession of whilst Albert was content to be pushed along in his pram, Flora popped to the shops, treating herself to a new blouse and cardigan, enjoyed a quiet cup of tea and wafer thin sandwich before getting her hair done as a nice surprise for her husband.

That evening they all heard the planes overhead, German bombers passing them by on their way to their targets and then returning hours later, minus their deadly cargo. Thomas held Edward in his arms as they stood at the window, the room in darkness so that they could open their blackout curtains, and watched the intermittent flames of the engines going by.

Edward flinched as the anti-aircraft guns opened fire.

“And I thought the bombings in London were bad,” he sighed, pressing his face into the side of Thomas’ neck, his hands clutching at his lover’s sides. In response Thomas tightened his arms around his partner, holding him closer still. “Canon fire still sounds exactly the same…”

A loud explosion caused them both to duck down together, instinctively making themselves a smaller target, before the rational part of their brains caught up with the situation and the returned to their full height, chuckling together as they returned to their former embrace.

“What a pair of…wait…” Thomas cut his own self-derisive snort off with a gasp as something caught his eye, illuminated by the flames of the burning plane. “What’s that? I looks like a…”

Parachute.

He turned, his eyes going wide as he followed the silhouette as it fell.

That was definitely a parachute.

“Thomas?” Edward called out, understandably concerned. “What is it?”

“A parachute. It’s a parachute.”

“Who’s on patrol tonight?”

“Baker, Frasier and Williamson,” Thomas listed off the three members of the Home Guard who had been assigned the night patrol for that evening. “With one rifle between them.”

Their lack of enough weapons for the whole platoon was an ongoing struggle.

“I suppose we should try and get some sleep,” Edward murmured, tugging Thomas towards the bed. They tried to share the bed as often as they could but some nights it just wasn’t possible, due either to his family or the servants. Tonight they had been lucky. “Just in case they don’t catch the owner of that parachute and the whole platoon gets called in to help.”

Leaving the curtains open Thomas allowed himself to be pulled back to bed, the route so familiar to both of them that he didn’t even need the limited sight he had left to navigate it.

Edward climbed under the covers first, holding them up so that Thomas could join him.

The bed springs creaked rather ominously as the two shifted around until they were content with
their positions, both on their right side with Edward pressed up against Thomas’ back.

Thomas woke with the dawn, sunlight streaming in through the window and reluctantly pulled himself out of Edward’s warm embrace and snuck his way back to his room in the attic. He didn’t dare stay any longer as the other members of staff were up at six o’clock.

And, just as Edward had predicted, they were called in shortly after breakfast for a patrol.

Knowing that it would be quicker in the long run to sort himself out first before helping Edward with the intricacies of his own uniform Thomas hurried up to his bedroom and retrieved the khaki coloured uniform from where it hung in his wardrobe. Other members of the platoon, he knew, kept theirs folded up in a drawer but Thomas couldn’t stand the creases this would create and insisted on hanging both his and Edwards after they had been cleaned, as best he could, aired and pressed to get the proper military creases into them.

Aspects of the uniform reminded him of his uniform from the Great War but there were enough differences that no one that had served had suffered any flashbacks because of the uniforms. It had been modelled on the uniforms those of regular soldiers for practicalities sake and as such was made of the same hard-wearing khaki coloured serge that they worse, a vast differences to the wooden fabric which had been dyed a deeper khaki colour which most of the platoon had worn in the last war. For those who had been officers, such as Edward, the difference was even more staggering as those that could afford it back then had had their uniforms crafted of the finest quality fabrics money could buy, Edward included.

The trousers, stiffer and heavier, were tucked inside of leather gaiters for protection and Thomas had never been more grateful than when they were issued with their kit and had realised that the British Army had finally gotten rid of puttees. The boots, on the other hand, were identical to those that he had worn complete with hobnails and laces which had a tendency to snap if you pulled on them too hard. Edward detested the boots, claiming that they were too heavy and made walking very difficult for him until his mind adjusted.

A leather belt had been issued, intended to replace the braces that they’d worn during the last war, but most of the men were so used to wearing braces in everyday life still that the belts were worn in addition to their civilian braces. As they were hidden by their tunics most of the time it didn’t really matter anyway. And speaking of tunics they had taken some time to get used to; gone were the long tunics of days of old and in their place were the short, tight-fitting tunics which were commonly know as “battle dress” tunics or even “blouses.”

Thomas couldn’t physically finish dressing himself in his uniform due to his prosthetic limb and instead grabbed his cap, similar in shape to the Glengarry caps which Thomas now knew had been authorised for all British infantry regiments back in 1868 although the Scottish regiments had been wearing them since 1848, and carefully folded it in half so that it would fit inside one of the two pockets on his tunic. He then grabbed his webbing, pretty much identical to that which he had worn during the Great War only with an added satchel full of medical equipment which he wore slung across his chest, and his MK 2 Tommy helmet and made his way down to Edwards bedroom, his hobnail boots thudding on the wooden stairs.

In terms of the headgear they had been issued the helmet was the most similar to that which he had worn before however it was lighter, although still heavy enough to give him a crick in the neck after a long patrol, whilst the flat design of the cap was entirely different to the peaked cap he’d worn throughout his service. Only the Officers wore peaked caps now.

He found Edward already dressed in his simple white flannel undershirt and his trousers, his arms contorted in the action of slipping his braces up his arms and onto his shoulders. He’d also managed
to pull his boots on although the laces weren’t done up and his gaiters were still sitting alongside his webbing at the bottom of the wardrobe which held both his current uniform and the uniforms that he and Thomas had worn in the last war, kept for posterity.

“Thomas? Is that you?”

“Who else would it be in these boots?”

“Quite,” Edward chuckled. “Do you need me to do your buttons up for you?”

“Yes, if you wouldn’t mind,” Thomas murmured, setting his webbing and helmet down on the bed and turning his back on his lover so that the buttons in question were facing him. “Why the buttons connecting the tunic to the trousers are at the back I’ll never know.”

“I would assume it’s to stop your trousers slipping down and showing off your undershirt,” Edward responded, trailing his hands down Thomas’ back until he found the button-holes at the bottom of the tunic. Keeping one hand on the right button-hole he felt around for the corresponding button on the back of Thomas’ trousers whilst also managing to cop a good feel of his buttocks. “And I don’t mind, really, if it means I get an excuse to touch you…”

“Careful, or we won’t be in any fit state to go anywhere,” Thomas chuckled even as Edward pulled his trousers up rather painfully on finding the button so that he could thread it through the hole. The process was then repeated with the left button and button-hole. This time the hand searching for the button gave his bottom a firm squeeze. “Feeling a bit randy, hmm?”

Edward hummed in agreement, pressing his lips against the back of Thomas’ neck.

“It’s the thought of you in a uniform,” he admitted deeply. “Always gets me going…”

Shaking his head fondly Thomas turned on the spot and pressed a brief kiss to Edwards lips.

“Later, my love,” he promised softly. “Later. We’ve got a German to find first, remember?”

“Ah, of course,” Edward chuckled, holding still as Thomas pulled away and began to sort out his clothing, beginning with I twisting one of the blind man’s braces before taking a knee so that he could tie off his laces. “I knew there was something important we had to do today.”

Shaking his head fondly at his partners gentle sarcasm Thomas went through the motions of dressing the younger man in his uniform, making sure that everything was as perfect as it possibly could be. Like with most of the platoon they had their “Pip, Squeak and Wilfred” medal bars mounted on their timings above the left Brest pocket. Thomas was, of course, the only one to also sport the instantly identifiable Victoria Cross which had earned him many a free drink after a patrol, both from his fellow Home Guard members and civilians.

Once he’d even received a tot of whiskey, a rarity nowadays, from a British Army Major.

Soon they were both dressed and Thomas had donned his webbing after helping Edward into his own, all of the buckles, clasps and buttons secured. All that was left to do then was to grab their wallets and identity cards, securely placing them inside their trouser pockets, and convince another member of the family to drive them into town so that they would get there in time for the patrols to be sent out. Jack ended up being the one to drive them, his offer coming in even before his mother could order him to do so which was unusual to say the least but he then spent the entire drive complaining that his application to join the Home Guard had been turned down whilst they, a couple of cripples, had been invited to join the platoon, reassuring both of them that he hadn’t had a personality change overnight.
“Ah, good, you’re here,” Captain Taylor rumbled deeply as they stepped into the village hall where the other members of the platoon were gathered in their patrol groups. “Courtenay, you’ll be in charge of the phones here at platoon headquarters. The RAF and the Army have been informed that the search is ongoing. They’ll be phoning hourly for updates, all right?”

Edward agreed happily, manning the phones was something he often did whilst the platoon was out on exercises or patrols, and allowed Thomas to help him into the office where the old-fashioned phone sat upon the somewhat cluttered desk. Their hands lingered together as Thomas guided Edwards hand to the phone, fingers stroking together as they parted and Thomas headed off to join his search group; Howard Bell and Ernest Richardson. When they had first been put together for an exercise Thomas hadn’t been able to stop himself from snorting at the blatant attempt to put those that would struggle the most together. Ernest was the oldest member of their platoon, Thomas had a prosthetic hand and was blind in one eye and Howard had a limp and sometimes wore a leg brace thanks to his brush with polio.

And now, when handing out the areas for each group to patrol, Thomas was unsurprised to learn that his group had got the easiest portion right in the centre of the town. No fields or wading through streams for them; instead they had to check people garden sheds and such.

“Thomas?”

Thomas thanked the elderly couple who had just allowed him to search their property and turned to find a concerned looking Flora pushing Alberts pram towards him, Richard, Eloise and Edmund scurrying after her. He nodded for Ernest and Howard to go on ahead of him.

“Thomas, what’s going on?” Flora all but demanded, breathing sharply from the exertion of hurrying along the road. “I called the house and they said the Home Guard had been called out and now I see you’re searching people houses? Is it to do with the plane they downed?”

“Flora, breathe,” Thomas ordered, reaching out to give her shoulder a squeeze. “And, yes, it does. A parachute was sighted leaving the plane before it crashed and thus far the owner of said parachute has evaded discovery. The Home Guard’s been called in to help find them.”

“Gosh!”

“I’m sorry, I can’t stay around talking anymore; I have to get on,” he murmured, nodding to where his fellow platoon members were entering their next properties. “Edward is manning the phones at the village hall and I’m sure he wouldn’t mind a bit of company for the day?”

He didn’t point out that it was safer for the children to be inside until the airman was found.

It didn’t need to be said.

Flora nodded, wished him luck, and herded her children towards the village hall.

It was almost lunchtime before a runner found their group to inform them that the missing airman had been found hanging unconscious from a tree in the lower field of Brook Farm.

Returning to the village hall they found the pilot, a painfully young boy with a shock of hair so blond it appeared almost white, sat in a chair in the very centre of the room cradling a cup of tea in his hands. There was blood on his face, some drive, some fresh and all from a nasty looking cut to his forehead which was most probably what had knocked him out cold.

His uniform was torn in a couple of places, particularly along both of his arms, revealing more cuts on his lightly tanned skin along with an assortment of rapidly blossoming bruises.
Simply put he looked like he’d had a fight with a tree and had lost.

And kneeling in front of him wearing an expression of concern was Flora.

“Thomas!” she called out when she spotted him. “Bring your first aid kit over, would you?”

Pausing before he obeyed her he looked to Captain Taylor for permission,

“Sir?”

“Go ahead, Barrow,” he murmured, accepting the cup of tea that Eloise had just carefully carried 
over to him. Flora had obviously decided to put her children to good use, Richard manning the kettle 
whilst Eloise handed out the cups of tea. Edmund was being very helpful by keeping Albert 
entertained, playing with him. “Courtenay is just relaying our successful apprehension of our guest to 
the RAF but it could still be a couple of hours before they come and collect him. Might as well make 
him comfortable; we’re not barbarians after all.”

“Yes, sir.”

As he approached the wide blue eyes of the young airmen shifted to stare at him, a frown marring his 
youthful features as he took in the scarring that Thomas no longer kept hidden.

“Hast du im letzten Krieg gekämpft?”

“I’m sorry,” Thomas apologised as he knelt alongside Flora and set about retrieving the items that 
they would need to treat his many injuries. “I’m afraid I don’t speak German.”

“…did you…fight…in the last…the last Krieg?”

If anything the tremble in the boys heavily accented voice made him seem even younger.

Thomas deduced, as he set about removing the airmans jacket so that he could get to the cuts on his 
arms easier, that Krieg was the German words for War. Flora, meanwhile, had risen to her feet and 
moved to a better position so that she could treat his head wound.

“I didn’t fight, as such,” Thomas answered, beginning to clean the worst of the cuts he was treating. 
The airman frowned in confusion, seeming not to notice as Flora too began to clean the wound on 
his forehead with some of the iodine from his kit, his focus so firmly on Thomas. “I was in the Royal 
Army Medical Corps, a stretcher bearer. I was sent out to collect the wounded men from No-Mans-
Land in France and, yes, that’s where I was wounded.”

“Mein vater…father…was killed in the last w-war?”

His statement ended as a question as he checked on the English translation of Krieg.

Thomas nodded quickly to reassure him he’d gotten it right.

“I never knew him.”

“I’m sorry,” Thomas murmured, taking himself by surprise as he felt genuine sympathy for a young 
man who was effectively his enemy. “What was his name? Wait, what’s your name?”

“Friedhelm, mein vater was Friedhelm Müller. And I am Wilhelm, Wilhelm Müller.”

From where he was stood behind the young airman Sergeant Brown gave him a thumbs up.
He could only assume that meant that they hadn’t managed to get any information from their guest yet and that anything Thomas managed to coax out of him would be helpful.

“And your mother?”

“Mutter?” Wilhelm gasped, tears welling up in his eyes. “She’ll be so worried for me…”

“I’m sure the Red Cross will let her know that you’re alright so long as you tell them where to find her,” Thomas hurried to reassure him, tying off one of the bandages. “Wilhelm?”

A single tear falling down his cheek the young man rattled off what Thomas assumed to be his address, given that it began with what sounded like a number and ended with ‘Dresden.’

“And your mother?” Flora prompted gently, tying off her bandage. “What’s her name?”

“Greta, Greta Müller.”

“Wilhelm, do you hurt anywhere other than your head and your arms?”

Behind the airmen Sergeant Brown motioned with his pencil, previously busy jotting down the information that Wilhelm had provided, for Thomas to keep getting more information.

“Nein,” Wilhelm answered softly. “Es geht mir gut.”

“Gut is good, right?” Thomas enquired, earning a nod and a small smile in response. “Ok. That’s good, I mean gut. I was worried that you might have hurt your back; I’ve heard it’s a common injury amongst airmen who have been forced to use their parachutes. The other common injury is a sprained ankle but as you didn’t make it to the ground I think we can skip that one. Now, Wilhelm, the plane you were in; was it a fighter plane or a bomber?”

“A-A bomber,” the young German answered nervously. “A Heinkel He 111.”

Sergeant Brown gave Thomas a thumbs up; obviously that matched with the wreckage.

“I am…was a bordschütze…”

Unable to translate it into English the airmen mimed firing a gun.

“A gunner? You were a gunner?” Thomas surmised, earning a nod from the young man whose arm he was now carefully bandaging. He’s been surprised when he’d attended his first training exercise how easily the skills he had learned in the last war had returned to him, even with his prosthetic; apparently being able to properly apply a bandage was a skill that would never leave him. Sergeant Brown held up a note which prompted him to ask, “…and what about the rest of your crew? Did any of them manage to bail out with you?”

Wilhelm shook his head, another tear spilling down his cheek as he answered,

“Nein. Nur ich. Die anderen sind alle tot…tot…dead…the others…are all dead…”

It was a sign of the times that a sigh of relief spread throughout the crowded room at his announcement that the men who must have been his friends were dead; they didn’t rejoice in their deaths as some would have done but they were relieved nonetheless that there weren’t any other Germans wandering around their town. Flora, ever the compassionate soul, quickly moved to press her own handkerchief into the young airman’s right hand.

“Danke, Fräulein.”
Anyone could translate that, even those who’d never heard any German before.

“You’re welcome.”

In the end it was another two hours before the RAF Military Police arrived to take their prisoner off their hands, by which time Thomas had managed to learn all about the young man they had captured; his mother was a seamstress, providing for him and his older sister, Hildegarde, and although he and his sister had both been members of the Hitler Youth none of them were members of the Nazi Party. Or so he claimed, not that he’d given them any reason to doubt him thus far. He had joined the Luftwaffe for no other reason than he had wanted to fly. As an enlisted man he hadn’t been privy to any vital information regarding the war and could only answer very vaguely when posed questions about his squadron.

When they hand him over the RAF Military Police were surprised by the sheer amount of information they’d managed to get from him even if most of it was pretty harmless and had thanked Thomas in particular once Wilhelm had been safely transferred to the back of the truck, informing him that he’d just made their jobs a lot easier for them and had probably made his future interrogations easier on Wilhelm; no need to be too harsh on someone who was willing to talk to the right sort of person in exchange for his mother being kept updated.

“Not all Germans are like him, you know?” the lead MP reminded them all as they prepared to leave. “We’ve picked up some nasty sods just recently, complete Nazi’s who want each and every one of us either dead or enslaved to their cause. Don’t let him turn you soft, ok?”

“Of course, Sergeant,” Captain Taylor reassured him. “We shall remain vigilant.”

“Well,” Flora signed once they’d gone, holding a dozing Albert in her arms. Edmund was out cold, curled up in Edward’s lap, whilst Eloise and Richard were still buzzing from being able to help. “That was a bit more exciting than we were expecting today, wasn’t it darlings?”

After the events of the day the evenings parade was postponed by an hour, allowing the couple to take Flora and the children out to dinner on their last night in Hastings before reporting back to the village hall. It was then Thomas’ turn to be on patrol for the evening and so after getting Edward settled at home he headed back out for the night, walking the perimeter of the town at a gentle pace for the entire night. Thankfully the Germans had decided to take a night off, no planes flying over at all, and they were able to retire at dawn.

Which meant he was able to get a couple of hours sleep in before the Huntington’s arrived.

“I can’t believe our visit has already come to an end,” Flora bemoaned as she passed Albert to Edward, the baby having taken a distinct liking to his honourary uncle. Not that said honourary uncle minded. “We’ve checked out of the hotel already to save time but I’m afraid we can only stay until lunch time if we want to make it home whilst it’s still daylight.”

It was something of a bitter sweet morning with the children playing happily in the gardens as they had earlier in the week whilst the adults watched on, or listened to in Edward’s case.

Lunch came all too quickly, with Edwards mother insisting that they eat with the rest of the family for their final goodbye, and although Flora would much have preferred another picnic she acquiesced so as not to cause trouble for Edward and Thomas. The meal was pleasant enough in terms of the food but the conversation was as stilted as it had been during their first dinner with the rest of the Courtenay family. And then, far too soon despite the less than pleasant conversation the meal was over and it was time for the Huntington’s to leave.
“…you will come and see us soon won’t you, Uncle Edward?” Eloise whimpered as she all but squeezed the very air from his lungs with how tight she was hugging him. “We hadn’t seen you in forever before we came here and I know there’s a war on but please come…”

“Of course we’ll come and see you, darling,” Edward promised readily. “As soon as we can.”

“Promise?”

“I promise.”

Richard managed to hold himself together slightly better, shaking both Edward and Thomas’ hands with a maturity that belied his actual age and promising to look after his mum when Thomas brought the subject up softly and to look out for his siblings as Edward requested.

Edmund, on the other hand…

“I don’t want to go home!”

“No!” the young boy wailed, wrapping his arms and legs around Thomas’ leg and holding on for dear life, hiding his face in the fabric of the former footman’s trousers. “I want to stay!”

“Edmund!” Flora snapped, glancing at the rest of the Courtenay’s who had gathered to see them off and were watching with obvious disapproval. “That is enough! We’re going home.”

His mothers sharp words only served to make the little boy wail even louder.

“No! I don’t want to go home! I want to stay here!”

“Edmund, what’s brought this on?” Thomas demanded, managing to pull the little boy off of his leg so that he could crouch down in front of him, steadying him with his prosthetic whilst he used his good hand to wipe away the boys tear. “There’s no need for tears, sweetheart.”

“I-I want to stay here with you and Uncle Edward,” Edmund hiccuped, his hands clenching and unclenching at his sides. “I want to stay with the trees and the beach and the hotel a…”

Thomas hushed him, pulling him into a tight hug.

“Those things will still be here the next time you visit us,” he promised the hysterical boy, rubbing his hand up and down his heaving back. “But you have to go home to really enjoy them. A treat, like a holiday, loses its shine if it becomes something you have every day.”

“But…”

“And then you’d have to find another treat,” Thomas continued, pulling back once more so that he could meet the little boys eyes. “So, you’re going to go home and next time we will come and visit you. And then you can come visit us again when you need another holiday.”

“…I still want to stay…” Edmund eventually mumbled but made no more attempts to cling on to his honourary uncle, wiping at his eyes as he sighed dramatically. “But I’ll go home.”

That settled baby Albert was passed between Edward and Thomas for goodbye cuddles, the four children were loaded into the family’s car so that the adults could say their goodbyes.

“Thank you for a wonderful week,” Flora murmured, her voice trembling with emotion as she
stepped into Edward’s arms, giving him a hug. “This has been just what we needed.”

“You’ve been a wonderful breath of fresh air, as always, and are welcome back any time.”

Thomas received a hug next, slightly tighter than the one his partner had been given.

“You would have made a wonderful father,” Flora whispered in his ear, her voice trembling ever so slightly, before she pulled back to address him loud enough for everyone to hear. “Thank you as well, Thomas, for everything you’ve done this past week. Look after yourself.”

“You as well, Flora,” Thomas responded, shaken by her initial comment to him. “Drive safe.”

Flora turned to face the rest of the Courtenay’s.

“Thank you for lunch and for allowing us to monopolise Edward, and therefore Thomas’, time for the past week,” Flora informed them with a bright smile, one that was barely returned. “If you’re ever in our neck of the woods please pop in and I’ll return the favour.”

“We’ll do that,” Ida responded somewhat awkwardly. “Safe journey home.”

“Drive safe, Flora,” Edward called out as Thomas opened Flora’s car door for her. “Let us know when you get home. I don’t care what time it is, I want to know all of you are safe.”

“I’ll call. I promise.”

Waving goodbye to their friend and her children was hard.

The phone call that they received the following afternoon was harder,

“Thomas? It’s Sybil.”

~ * ~

A/N …so, apologies for the cliff-hanger but I just couldn’t resist after the chapter ended up being a bit more rambling than I had originally planned. Hope you enjoyed it anyway. X
Chapter Five

Disclaimer – I don’t own Downton Abbey, the Crimson Field or Foyle’s War but the Original Characters (of which there are too many to mention) are my creations.

Summary – Sequel to ‘There’s A Long, Long Trail’ following Thomas, Edward and all of the others through the course of the Second World War.

A/N Title taken from a popular song of the era.

~ I’ll Be Seeing You ~

Chapter Five
May 1941

Somehow, despite the passage of twenty-three years, Downton Abbey seemed entirely unchanged and Thomas couldn’t help but gaze about him in wonder as Mr Asquith, the family chauffeur, silently transported Thomas and Edward from the station to the house.

Thomas rode in the front alongside the driver, just as a manservant should, whilst Edward sat in the back alone, one hand holding his cane whilst the other was pressed to his lips.

It had been an week since they’d received the terrible news that Sybil had been caught in a raid whilst volunteering with the WVS (Women’s Volunteer Service), five days since they had learned that other than a broken leg her injuries were relatively minor, a vast assortment of cuts, scrapes and bruises, none of which were life-threatening, and two days since they had been invited to stay at the Abbey where she would be residing during her road to recovery.

Tom couldn’t leave London, no matter how much he wanted to, because of his job.

Aoife had put in an application for leave from the ATS but it had been denied, seemingly for no reason, so she was stuck in an office filing paperwork whilst worrying about her mother.

Violet, as an employee with a perfect record, had been granted a week off. She had spent two days organising things with her mother, contacting her grandparents once the decision had been made to convalesce at Downton and packing the things they would need into two large suitcases. It had also been an already exhausted Violet who had passed on Sybil’s wish for Thomas and Edward to join her at Downton for a little while to keep her company and to see the children. The third day of her week off had been the date that hospital had agreed to discharge Sybil, yesterday in fact, the young woman had successfully managed to get her wheelchair bound mother from London to Downton, Tom going to the station with them to say goodbye, without losing either of their suitcases or causing any major disruptions. All she’d had to do was smile at the porters and they’d rushed to help her in her hour of need.

“I can’t believe those statues are still there,” Thomas chuckled, referring to the figures of a man and a woman, done in the style of Ancient Roman Architecture, which were located on either side of the
main gate. “They were falling apart when I came to work at the Abbey.”

Mr Asquith, just as he had for the entire journey thus far, said nothing.

“Is it strange being back, Thomas?” Edward enquired from the back seat. “At the Abbey?”

“Yes, I suppose it is a little strange,” Thomas admitted, looking up at the familiar array of gleaming windows amidst the cream colour stone. “Nothing’s changed, not so far as I can see, although I’m certain that things inside the house must have been updated a little bit.”

As the car approached the front door, the gravel crunching noisily beneath the tires, the door was flung open in such a manner that Thomas knew that the butler wasn’t responsible for the sharp movement and a moment later a gaggle of bodies tumbled out to greet them.

Thomas couldn’t help but blink at the group in shock.

They looked so…different…

He couldn’t believe the change in them but then again, he reasoned silently, it had been almost two years since he’d last seen the four youngest members of the Branson family.

Of course they’d changed.

Bobby…Bobby wasn’t a boy any more.

He was a young man with broad shoulders, a charming smile and a stylish curl in his hair.

Eighteen.

Thomas felt his stomach clench.

Bobby was eighteen, old enough to enlist without his parents permission should he want to.

Beside him Eilis looked far too grown up for her sixteen years, her blonde hair pulled back into a pair of braids which rather than hanging loose as they had used to were now gathered into a simple yet stylish bun at the base of her scalp. Her clothes were tailored to for her properly, showing off the curves which she had been blessed with over the last two years.

She’d also lost the last of her puppy fat, as Sybil had always called it, and for some reason it was this that caused Thomas to let out a soft sigh, missing her pudgy cheeks and dimples.

She wasn’t a little girl any more, either.

It wouldn’t be long before she was as independent a young woman as her sisters were.

And the twins…

They stood almost as tall as their sister now, their own blond hair as messy and unkempt as always but ever so slightly darker than it had been, and their legs looked too long for shorts.

They’d be in long trousers soon, well on their way to growing up.

It was therefore unsurprising to hear the cracking in their voices when they called out,

“Uncle Thomas!”
“Uncle Edward!”

“…that can’t be the twins.” Edward choked out, sounding pained just as the car came to a halt a couple of metres away from the gaggle of children. “They sound so…so different…”

“They’re growing up,” Thomas sighed, watching as a second group emerged from the house at a more sedate pace; the youngest generation of Crawley’s and Pelham’s. “They all are.”

George Crawley was the spitting image of his father, Matthew, except for his hair which despite being blond when he was a child was now the same dark brown as his mother.

It was a surprise to see the young man still at Downton, given that his twentieth birthday wasn’t far off, although at the same time it made sense; they didn’t want to lose the heir.

Marianne, who was a year or so younger than her cousin, Eilis, was surprisingly plain looking for the daughter of the famed beauty that was Lady Mary Crawley. She was pretty enough, Thomas supposed, but her clothes didn’t suit her, nor did her lose hairstyle. They were, no doubt, what was fashionable for young women to wear currently, but it just wasn’t right.

In fact the only thing which did seem to suit her, oddly enough, were her spectacles. The rounded frames gave her a wide-eyed look of innocence that was quite striking.

It was surprising to see the three Pelham siblings, given that they had their own country house and vast estate in which to stay safe from the deadly air raids, but there they were.

Marigold, who everyone knew was Lady Edith’s illegitimate daughter, was eighteen now and had blossomed into a stunning young woman who shared only the shape of her nose with her mother; the rest of her features she must have inherited from her unidentified father.

This was probably a good thing as it allowed those not in the know to go on thinking she was nothing more than their ward, adopted by the Pelham’s out of the kindness of their hearts.

Archie was every bit the image of his father as he pushed through the group with a cheeky smile to stand between the twins, already towering over his cousins despite being almost nine months younger than them. Although he was dressed in a smart shirt, tie and trousers he still managed to look every bit as scruffy as his cousins; his shirt was untucked on one side, the sleeves were rolled up to his elbows and his tie had been pulled down to reveal the fact that the top two buttons of his shirt weren’t only undone they were missing entirely.

In contrast to her elder sibling Helene couldn’t have looked more like her mother if she tried, even at such a young age, and it was only in the colour of her eyes that her father showed through. She was nine, Thomas thought, although he had a feeling her birthday was in May so she could in fact be ten, and was so short she barely came up to George’s waist.

In the time it had taken him to identify each member of the welcoming committee Asquith had already exited the car and moved around to retrieve their cases from the boot, leaving it up to Thomas to exit the vehicle rather hurriedly so that he could help Edward to get out.

With his own limited field of vision Thomas only just saw the movement in time to mutter, “Incoming…”

“Uncle Edward!” Eddie cried out, voice breaking halfway through, as he literally threw himself at his favourite uncle, wrapping his arms around the blind man’s waist. It was a miracle that Edward
managed to stay on his feet, laughing as he hugged the boy back. “You’re here! We’ve been waiting all day and mummy was worried your train was late!”

“No, our train ran remarkably on time,” Edward murmured, feeling up along the boys back until he could place a hand on the back of his head. “You’ve grown far too tall. Stop it.”

Eddie snorted loudly.

“Sorry, Uncle Edward, I don’t think I have a choice.”

Thomas meanwhile had found his arms full of his own namesake, much to the obvious surprise of the Crawley, Pelham and Aldridge members of the group. To them, after all, he was merely a servant. To the Branson clan he was just as much an Uncle as Edward was.

“I’ve missed you, Uncle Thomas.”

“I’ve missed you too, Tommy,” Thomas murmured in the boys ear, copying Edward pose and resting his good hand on the back of Tommy’s head. “But you have to remember…”

“…that everyone else thinks you’re just Uncle Edward’s servant. I know,” Tommy finished for him, pulling back with a rather cheeky smile. “But that doesn’t mean I didn’t miss you too.”

A handsome young man in the recognisable uniform of a footman exited the house next, skirting around the group so that he could take the identically cases from the chauffeur.

“The one with the luggage label is mine,” Thomas called out to him as he nudged Tommy back towards his siblings and cousins. “The one without adornment is Mr Courtenay’s.”

The footman nodded, his lips pursed ever so slightly, before he vanished inside the house.

It was only then that their official hosts made an appearance, all but gliding out of the house as they moved to greet Edward. The years hadn’t been kind to Lord Grantham, his cheeks permanently flushed, his flesh sagging in places where it was once taught and his hair was all but non-existent on top and thinning on the sides. Lady Cora, on the other hand, seemed to ageing as gracefully as any woman of her station could, aided no doubt by powders and creams, and whilst her hair was now entirely grey she was as fashionably turned out as ever.

“Mr Courtenay,” Lady Cora greeted him warmly, moving to shake his hand. “It’s so good to see you after all this time. You’re looking so much better. Sybil tells us you’ve given them your flat in London for the duration after their house was hit. That’s so kind of you.”

“Your daughter and son-in-law are my closest friends and have been for the last twenty odd years,” Edward responded, laying on the charm. Obviously Sybil had decided not to mention the fact that it had been Thomas who had insisted that they move into the flat. “And the flat had been standing empty since I conceded that London is currently not the best place for a blind man and his half blind manservant. It was best solution open to everyone at the time.”

“Well, thank you,” Cora murmured. “And Thomas, it’s good to see you looking so well.”

“Thank you, Your Ladyship.”

Lady Mary and Lady Edith were as fashionable as two women could be in wartime, their clothes obviously pre-war but altered so as to fit with the latest fashions. Due to her dark hair, similar to Sybil’s own, the grey streaks showed more in Lady Mary’s hair than they did in Lady Edith’s auburn locks, something Thomas felt for certain she must be very jealous of.
Beside them their husbands were resplendent in their suits, Henry Talbot, Mary’s second husband and a former racing car driver of all things, wore a dark grey suit whilst the 7th Marquess of Hexham wore a traditional country tweed ensemble. They too had a fair amount of grey in their dark hair and the Marquess was well on the way to losing what little was left on top. Neither had put any weight on, however, and still stood tall and slim.

“It’s so nice of you to come all this way to make sure that Sybil is alright,” Lady Cora sighed once everyone else had greeted Edward and acknowledged Thomas. “I was sure something like this would happen when she returned to London but would she listen to me? No, she…”

“Mama,” Lady Edith sighed loudly. “Sybil is her own woman and can do as she likes.”

“Still,” Lady Cora huffed. “I’m glad she’ll be out of that dangerous place for a while at least.”

“Indeed, Lady Cora,” Edward murmured, smiling warmly at her. “And I thank you for having us. I know it must be rather inconvenient to host guests at such a time but I was so worried about her that when she asked for me to come and keep her company I couldn’t refuse…”

“No inconvenience at all,” Lady Cora reassured him, her tone daring anyone to try and argue with her. “I’ve put you in the Egyptian Room. Thomas, I’m sure you remember the way?”

Thomas inclined his head to confirm that he did.

It was one of the smaller guest rooms, further away from the stairs than he’d had liked, but with such a busy household it wasn’t all that surprising; the better guest rooms would have been given over to the various children either visiting or staying for the duration of the war.

“Excellent. We still dress for dinner although if you’re too tired from your journey we will excuse you this evening,” Lady Cora reassured Edward, looping her arm through his so that she could lead him inside the house. Thomas followed behind the rest of the large family, noting that whilst Edward’s suitcase had obviously been taken up to his room Thomas’ had been left just inside the door, tucked out of the way. “Sybil is in her old room if you’d like to see her before coming back down. I believe dear Violet was helping her to get settled in.”

“Thank you. I think I’ll pop in and see her now, if that’s alright?” Edward responded, smiling when he received a confirmation that that was fine. “That way there’ll be less chance of my being late to dinner. We do tend to lose track of time. Thomas? Where have you got to?”

“I’m here, Mr Courtenay,” Thomas called out, skirting around the edge of the group until he was in a position to make his way to Edward’s side. Lady Cora patted his hand once before releasing him, allowing him to slip his arm through his lover’s. Aware that they were all watching Thomas kept his voice louder than he normally would as he began to explain the landscape ahead of them to his partner. “There are four steps to begin with, Mr Courtenay, then we’ll be turning right and going up four more. Then a left turn before going up four more. After a second left turn we shall go up a flight of twelve steps and then after a third left turn we shall go up a second flight of twelve steps. That will bring us to the landing.”


Before they’d even made it to the first landing Bobby had spirited his younger siblings and cousins out of the house, quietly promising to keep them out of the way for a little while, which left only George standing amidst the group of adults watching the couple make their way up the winding flight of stairs. Thomas kept his attention focused on the task at hand even though the back of his neck burned from their unwanted attention. It wasn’t until they turned onto the last portion of the
stairs and therefore were no longer visible from below that he relaxed and allowed himself to glance around their familiar surroundings; not one on the beautiful paintings hanging on the walls had been changed since he was last here.

“Last step,” he murmured out of habit. Edward squeezed his hand in response, his thumb stroking as much as he dared to get away with. “There. Now, Sybil’s room is to the left.”

They followed the path laid out by the landing, Thomas noticing that a few of the painting shad been moved around in order to allow for a couple of new pieces to be hung, and then when they reached the end of the landing he guided them around to the right and up to the correct door. A knock, a slight pause, and then there was Violet opening the door for them.

“Mum, Uncle Edward and Uncle Thomas are here,” she called out over her shoulder before darting forwards to give each of the men a tight hug. Sybil called out for them to come in, her voice a little weaker than it usually was, and as they stepped inside Thomas was at once transported back in time; not a single thing inside the room had changed. It was as though the family had closed the door when Sybil moved out and had only opened it for her various visits throughout the passing years, never allowing the room to move on with the times. “Is it alright if I go and have a lie down for a bit before we have to change for dinner? I’m tired.”

“Of course, love,” Sybil reassured her daughter without hesitation, pushing herself up into a more upright position against her pillows. Her leg, wrapped in a thick layer of plaster of Paris was cushioned on a couple of pillows. “You’ve had a long day looking after me. Go and have a nap or you’ll never survive the formal dinner they’ll insist on putting on now we’re here.”

Violet leaned down to kiss her mothers cheek before slipping out of the room.

“Stop staring, Thomas, and get yourself over here,” Sybil commanded, patting the empty side of the bed beside her. Thomas snorted, tearing his gaze away from the cast, and guided Edward across so that the two of them could perch where she wanted them to. “I’m fine.”

“A broken leg isn’t fine, Sybil,” Thomas pointed out. “What happened? Tom didn’t say?”

“I was helping Agnes serve cups of tea to the firemen and rescue crews working down near the docks when an unspooled bomb wen off nearby,” Sybil explained, reaching out to take hold of Thomas’ good hand and one of Edwards. “The tea wagon was flipped over by the force of the blast and my leg ended up at a rather painful angle. Agnes broke her arm and we both had a collection of cuts and bruises but that’s all. It could have been a lot worse.”

“Yes, it could,” Edward agreed. “But that doesn’t mean that it was nothing.”

“Which is why I didn’t say it was nothing, I said I’m fine. Which I am,” she reassured them both, squeezing their hands to get her point across. Thomas took a moment to study her face, noting both the sincere smile and the cuts and bruises marring her skin. Her hands and forearms weren’t much better, one cut in particular obviously having required stitches which Tom hadn’t mentioned. “I’ve got my children and you two to keep me sane around my family who still don’t understand that I’m not Lady Sybil anymore and Dr Clarkson is just a phone call away should anything happen, not that it will. Only Tom and Aoife being here could make me feel better than I already do but we all understand why that’s not possible.”

“They’d be here if they could…”

“I know,” Sybil agreed with a smile before frowning down at her injured leg. “Why must my leg insist on itching right down where I can’t possibly reach with a knitting needle? Quick, I need you to
distract me. Tell me of Hastings. What has happened since we last spoke?"

Chuckling at her predicament the couple obeyed, telling her all about Flora’s visit and the triumph of the Home Guard in finding the down German pilot. They ended up talking for over an hour, Sybil interjecting with her own tales from London, and as such they were all taken by surprise when Violet slipped into the room to inform them that everyone had come up to dress for dinner, the young woman already dressed in a nicer dress than earlier.

Sybil, who wasn’t quite up for a formal dinner just then, would be eating her meal off of a tray in her room and Edward was sorely tempted to request that they could join her. Sadly, as a guest of the family, he had no choice in the matter although he was tempted to take Lady Cora up on her offer of not changing for dinner. He would need to freshen up, though.

“Sybil, would it be alright if I rejoined you after dinner whilst Thomas is having his with the servants?” Edward enquired as his partner helped him to his feet. They’d talked it over on the way here, Thomas pointing out that in such a big house he wouldn’t be able to get away with things that he did in Hastings. Taking his meals with the servants was one of the things that would be expected of him. “I’m not sure I’m ready to face your family alone just yet.”

“Of course,” Sybil agreed. “Bring the children with you if you can. That would be nice.”

Edward agreed, happily.

“Right, Thomas, to the Egyptian Room, wasn’t it?”

Getting Edward to his room and freshened up took a fraction longer than they really had and so when they made it down to the dining room everyone else was already seated. A place had been left for Edward between Lady Cora and Lady Edith and so under everyone’s watchful eye Thomas helped him to get settled. They large dining table was filled almost to maximum capacity with everyone in attendance, the host of children jumbled up between the various adults. Eddie looked most put out that he hadn’t been seated next to Edward.

It was a bit of a shock to see Mr Moseley stood where Mr Carson had once stood.

Mr Carson, he knew from Sybil, had retired shortly after marrying Mrs Hughes, the couple being gifted a house by the sea from the Crawley family as a thank you for their loyal years of service. He might not have always got on with the former Butler and Housekeeper but he was happy for them and hoped that their happy ending was everything they’d ever wanted.

Still, knowing he wouldn’t be there and seeing someone else in his place was still jarring.

“Good evening, Mr Barrow,” Moseley murmured as Thomas retreated to take up a position beside him whilst the Footmen set about serving up the first course. “You’re looking well.”

“Thank you, Mr Moseley,” Thomas responded. “You’re not looking too bad yourself.”

This was, in fact, the truth.

Moseley had always looked out of place before, either at Grantham House or here at the Abbey, but now he seemed to have settled into the foundations of the building itself. He, just as Carson had before him, had become as much a part of Downton as the Crawley’s.

Before either of them could say anything else Thomas spotted something that could easily become an issue for Edward and hurried forwards to murmur in his ear about the layout of the table settings and how it was different to what he was used to. Edward thanked him, his fingers lightly trailing along
the knives so that his hand was lined up with his glass of wine which he picked up without incident, and Thomas retreated back to his former position.

“We use a slightly different layout back home,” Thomas explained to Mr Moseley. “And if he’d reached for his glass as usual he’d have put his hand across Lady Cora’s bowl instead.”

“I see,” Moseley harrumphed in a manner so like Caron it made Thomas smile. “Well done.”

“It’s what I’m here for.”

Dinner passed by relatively uneventfully, the two footmen working well together although the younger of the two was obviously still learning some of the tricks of the trade, and the conversation remained pleasant and light, only a few of mentions of the war being allowed.

It turned out that the Pelham’s were at Downton to celebrate Helene’s tenth birthday.

Initially the plan had been for everyone to join them at their estate but after Sybil was injured and decided to recuperate at the Abbey it was decided to have the party there.

“Won’t you join us for a sherry, Mr Courtenay?”

“I’m afraid. I promised Sybil I’d bring her children up to see her after dinner,” Edward responded, his tone suitably apologetic. “And then I thought I’d have an early night.”

“Of course,” Lady Cora murmured agreeably. “Then we shall see you at breakfast.”

“Indeed you shall,” Edward agreed cheerfully. “Thomas, one of the children can help me upstairs. You head down for your own dinner and then come and see to me afterwards.”

“Yes, Mr Courtenay.”

In the end Edward was graced with two guides, a twin on each side of him and hurrying him out of the room with a pair of identical giggles, their older siblings following closely behind.

It was a pleasant site, one that cause a fair number of rooms remaining occupants to smile at one another before they went their separate ways; the men to smoke cigars and drink a glass of something a little stronger than wine and the women to a room of tea and gossip.

“You aren’t required to help clear the table, Mr Barrow,” Moseley announced once only the servants remained, a couple of young maids slipping into the room in order to help with the cleanup. Thomas himself had instinctively stepped towards the table. “You are our guest.”

“I don’t mind lending a hand here and there, Mr Moseley,” Thomas responded, his choice of phrase causing one of the young maids to giggle sharply. “I’ll even make sure it’s my good hand I’m lending you,” he continued, just for her benefit which earned him a louder giggle. “And I can even manage light trays so long as someone else can open any doors for me.”

“Very well, Mr Barrow,” Moseley murmured, a hint of surprise and admiration showing in his voice as he was confronted with a rather different Thomas to the man he remembered. “Get everything properly cleared away. And no more broken wine glasses, please, Nell.”

As one the servants, Thomas included, murmured a polite,

“Yes, Mr Moseley.”

Thomas assisted them as best he could, easily slipping back into routines he thought long forgotten,
and in no time at all they were descending the winding staircase to the familiar basement level of the grand house. If the upstairs levels had remained almost entirely the same this level had undertaken a vast transformation; to begin with the walls, which had always been a mixture of browns, greys and creams, had been repainted in a collection of blues and greens which were much more pleasing to the eye. The flagstone floors remained unchanged but had been covered in a number of places by rugs which Thomas was certain had once belonged upstairs. The kitchen, where the trays of used glasses, cutlery and plates were deposited, had been repainted a warm yellow colour and the cracked white tiles that protected the wall behind the stove had been replaced with a beautiful floral pattern. And the stove, Thomas couldn’t help but notice, was only a couple of years old and very modern.

“Thomas?”

A familiar voice startled him out of his inspection of the room, prompting him to turn on the spot to face the figure who had slipped into the kitchen behind him and the other servants.

“Daisy?” he choked out, jaw dropping in shock as he looked her up and down. “Bloody he…”

“Language, Thomas,” she snapped, nodding over to the two girls scrubbing out a couple of pans in the twin sinks. She was completely changed from the waif like creature she had once been, adopting a similar kind of plumpness to that of her predecessor, Mrs Patmore. Her hair, still remarkably dark, was curled and pinned beneath a starched cap. “You look well.”

“As do you, Daisy. Or I suppose that should be Mrs Mason, given that you’re the cook now,” he responded, aware that the kitchen maids, both kitchen and house, were now watching him like a nest of hawks. The footmen, lingering, weren’t much better. “I was sorry to hear about Mrs Patmore and Mr Mason. Influenza, wasn’t it? Must be, what, five years now?”

Daisy nodded, sadness flooding into her eyes.

“She’d be proud of you, Mrs Patmore, I mean,” Thomas chuckled deeply. “And jealous. Tell me, was that new stove put in whilst she was still working here or has it been yours alone?”

“Actually it was one of my conditions,” she admitted, flushing ever so slightly. “I’d only take the job if they got rid of that old stove that Mrs Patmore loved to hate and got a new one.”

“I’m impressed,” he murmured sincerely, idly rubbing at the point where the straps holding his prosthetic onto his arm were beginning to chafe as they often did after a long day. He couldn’t wait to take it off and allow the skin to breathe. “I’ve come to appreciate the wonder of a good stove. I can’t imagine trying to create anything edible with that old monstrosity. I struggled enough on the first stove Mr Courtenay had put into the flat in London. In fact it wasn’t until I insisted he get a new one in 1938 that it got any easier.”

“…you cook?”

“Only meals befitting a bachelor and his manservant,” Thomas countered quickly, being careful of his phrasing so as not to arouse suspicion. “Nothing like the meals you create.”

It was Daisy’s turn to look impressed, if a little bit reluctantly.

Sybil had told him about the influenza epidemic which had swept through the village and surrounding areas during the winter 1935 and had been genuinely saddened to learn that one of its victims had been Beryl Patmore. That Mr Mason had also been taken had been a particularly cruel blow to Daisy, he’d thought at the time, and he’d worried briefly what she would do given that she’d left service to help Mr Mason on his farm. Hearing that she was the new cook at Downton Abbey
had been a relief but it was still rather strange to witness.

“You lot had best go through if you want your dinner on time,” Daisy instructed the group of servants watching the pair of them, startling them with her suddenness. Ducking their heads all four of them scurried out of the room like naughty little children who had been caught pilfering the biscuits, the kitchen maids returning to their vigorous scrubbing. “It’s good to see you, Thomas, but you’d best head through too or they won’t leave to a seat.”

Nodding Thomas bid her farewell, smiling to himself as she started barking orders at the kitchen maids just like Mrs Patmore had used to as soon as he was out of the room, and made his way through the basement level to the busy servants hall which held the most surprising alteration yet; the enormous bell-board which has been there when Mr Carson had first come to the house was gone. In its place hung a modern looking board of less than half the original boards size, three rows of windows no bigger than 5cm² above which the rooms of the house were clearly printed. Each of the windows held what appeared to be a miniature bell and a lightbulb and was covered with a see-through film of various colours.

“Huh.”

“Lady Mary had it put in when the house was re-wired a couple of years ago after a series of dangerous electrical faults were discovered,” another familiar voice announced and Thomas found himself turning to face the Bates’. It was Mrs Bates that had spoken. “Hello, Thomas.”

“Hello, Anna,” Thomas responded softly, nodding to each of them in turn. “Mr Bates.”

Alongside the couple stood a boy of about fifteen who looked so much like a blond version of Mr Bates that it took very little deduction to figure out that this was their son, Arthur.

If he remembered correctly the boy had been born in Lady Mary’s bed after Anna had been caught short by her labour, or so Sybil had claimed at the time, and his rapid arrival had left his mother unable to have any more children. He was dressed as a hall boy, Thomas noted, so he’d obviously decided to follow both his parents into service, for the time being, at least.

“And this must be the younger Mr Bates,” he murmured, offering the boy his hand. After a gentle prod from his mother the teenager reached out to shake it. “Pleasure to meet you.”

“Are you the same Thomas that tried to get my dad fired so you could steal his job?”

The cold words were, as they had obviously been intended to be, like a slap to the face.

“No, it’s alright, Anna,” Thomas interjected quickly before the pouting teenager could obey her command. “He’s right. I am the same Thomas that did all those things. I was young and petty and jealous. I wanted what I thought was owed to me, regardless of whether or not I had earned it. Thankfully I grew up, mostly due to the war I’ll admit, and changed my ways.”

It was somewhat rewarding to see the stunned expression shared by all three of the Bates’.

Before anything more could be said between them a decidedly unfamiliar voice interrupted,

“And who’s this?”

“Mr Barrow,” Anna answered quickly, Thomas taking the opportunity to turn and face the woman that had just entered the servants hall. She was short, barely reaching his shoulder, and was dressed
smartly but simply in a black dress, the waist cinched in by a thin leather belt from which hung a familiar set of keys. This was Mrs Hughes’ replacement, the current housekeeper. In some ways she had even bigger shoes to fill than Moseley did following Mr Carson. “Mr Courtenay’s manservant, Mrs Brennan, and a former footman of Downton.”

“Ah, yes,” Mrs Brennan hummed, her accent clipped and cultured and obviously fake. She was trying to sound like the family to whom she was employed. It didn’t do anything to endear her Thomas but he deter idly forced this reaction down, refusing to slip into old habits of judging people by their first impressions alone. “Well, welcome back to Downton, Mr Barrow. Tell me, how long has it been since you were last within these hallowed walls?”

...hallowed walls?

“I left service at Downton to enlist in 1914,” he explained simply even as he chuckled silently in response to her unusual choice of words. As one the unfamiliar faces scattered around the room turned to him, not even trying to himself the fact that they were listening in. “The Royal Army Medical Corps. I returned to the Abbey when it was converted into a hospital.”

“I thought only officers were admitted here…”

“Oh, no, I wasn’t treated here,” Thomas hurried to explain. “I ran the military side of things for Major Clarkson. This was after I had been wounded in France, my injuries making it impossible for me to return to the front. Truthfully I was offered a medical discharge but at the time I wanted to continue serving my country. I left Downton for the second time when the hospital was closed down, at which point I accepted the offer of employment with Mr Courtenay who had been a patient at the Convalescent Hospital and needed assistance.”

“I see,” Mrs Brennan murmured, her smile tight. “What an impressive life you’ve led.”


“Yes, of course,” Mrs Brennan responded stiffly. “Ah, Mr Moseley. There you are.”

“Something wrong, Mrs Brennan?”

“No, of course not,” the housekeeper reassured him, seeming to transform into someone entirely different as she smiled warmly at the butler. “I just didn’t want everyone’s dinner to get cold. Why don’t you sit beside Mr Parker, there, Mr Barrow? He’s Mr Talbot’s valet.”

The valet in question lifted his hand to indicate himself, everyone to his left instantly moving one seat down on the long table, and Thomas made his way around the head of the table as he’d ended up talking to the Bates’ on the far side. As was tradition everyone waited until Mr Moseley had taken his seat at the the head of the table before sitting down themselves.

“I’m Andy,” Mr Parker introduced himself, offering his hand for Thomas to shake as the kitchen maids entered carrying the trays containing the delicious smelling stew that was the servants dinner and slices of buttered bread. There wouldn’t be much meat in the stew, not with rationing, but the vegetables would be fresh and the sauce delicious, of that Thomas had no doubt. Mr Moseley quickly set about dishing up an equal portion for everyone, the plates getting passed automatically around the table “I’m sorry if it’s none of my business but I’ve never met a manservant before. What’s the difference between that and a valet?”

“Mr Courtenay is blind,” Thomas answered softly as he carefully accepted his own plate of stew
“As his manservant I am by his side from the moment he wakes to the moment he retires for bed. I’m his eyes, you see, despite only having one good eye myself.”

“Oh, I see,” Andy exclaimed, reaching out and snagging a piece of bread for himself and another for Thomas. “I’d wondered about the eye. Sorry, that was rude. Shrapnel, was it?”

“Yes,” Thomas chuckled, accepting the bread with a murmur of thanks. Despite being in his early thirties, Thomas guessed, the younger man behaved more like a teenager, reminding him of an eager puppy. “A Hun dropped a bomb out of his plane whilst my fellow stretcher bearers and I were trying to bring a casualty in from No Mans Land. Made a bit of a mess.”

“My dad’s got a bit of shrapnel lodged in his hip,” Mr Parker explained, dipping his bread into his stew. “Says he can feel a storm coming. Gives him merry hell, you see, in the damp.”

“I know the feeling,” Thomas sighed. “Is that a London accent I can hear?”

The smile that transformed Mr Parkers face was one of pure pride.

“Poplar, born and raised.”

“Then, and I hope you don’t mind my asking, how did you end up here?”

“I was working as a hall boy when Mr Carson, the old butler, called my butler to see if there was anyone available to be a temporary footman at Grantham House,” Mr Parker explained cheerfully. “This was when Lady Rose was getting married, you see, so they needed extra staff. And Mr Gates, my butler, suggested me. Afterwards I went back to being a hall boy but when the position of second footman became vacant here they remembered me and I got the job. Christmas 1924. Best gift I’ve ever received; a career. Worked my way up since.”

“And now you’re valet to Mr Talbot.”

“Indeed,” Mr Parker preened. “He’s nice. A real forward thinker.”

“Again, I hope you don’t mind my asking but it’s surprising to see a young man like yourself out of uniform…” Thomas trailed off, his gaze flickering across to the two footmen. “I just…”

“Failed my medical” Mr Parker answered frankly and without an ounce of shame. “I had pneumonia when I was a kid. Nearly died, or so my mum’s always said. Anyway the army doctor said I’ve got scarring on my lungs, not that I’ve ever noticed apart from picking up coughs and colds left, right and centre, and was therefore unfit for military service. I could still be called up for something else though, factory work perhaps, but for now I’m here.”

“Ah. I see.”

“I got my call up papers last week,” the first footman announced, smiling warmly at the maid who reached over to squeeze his hand comfortably. It obviously wasn’t new news. “Royal Navy. I asked for RAF but never mind. I’m leaving for basic training in two weeks.”

“And I’m still waiting to hear back.”

“It’s just like last time,” Anna sighed, glancing towards where her son had moved to sit with the other hall boy. They were too young to be called up, Thomas could tell, but it was only by a couple of years, maybe less. “All the young men leaving to fight someone else’s war…”

“To do their bit for King and Country,” Mrs Brennan announced firmly, offering them all a sharp
smile. Thomas got the feeling that she would have been one of those women who handed out white feathers to men they thought were cowards during the last war. One such woman had handed Tom a feather, he knew, despite the fact that he had been declared medically unfit just as Mr Parker had beside him. Of course, Tom’s case was a bit more complicated, given that he was still a bit of a revolutionary and had only wanted to join up so that he could use it as a way to embarrass or shame the people he saw as his country’s oppressors. Him being medically unfit probably save him a long spell in jail. “Now, no more talk of war at the dinner table, please. Mr Barrow, where is it you have joined us from?”

“Mr Courtenay is spending the duration at his family estate just outside of Hastings, East Sussex, after it became apparent after one particular air raid that London was no place for the visually impaired,” Thomas explained, pausing in his meal so as to adjust one of the straps on his forearm through his clothes, making a mental note that he’d need to apply some cream to that particular area before he went to bed. “The house is older than the Abbey but smaller, even with the extensions that have been added to it over the years, so the family currently only employ a butler, a cook and a housemaid come ladies maid. The estate is of a similar size, however, with a number of tenant farmers looking after the land.”

“Isn’t Hastings near the coast?” Anna queried, frowning thoughtfully. “Or am I mistaken?”

“No, you’re correct,” Thomas reassured her, laying down his spoon so that he could take a bite out of his slice of bread. Both were delicious. “The town is on the coast, not that you can go down onto the beach currently, but the Courtenay’s estate is slightly further inland.”

“Have the mined it?” the other hall boy asked eagerly. “The beach, I mean.”

“I believe so…”

“Mr Carson said that the beach near them has been mined in one of his last letters,” Arthur announced, sharing an excited look with his friend even as his mum shot him a disapproving look. “They’ve got some evacuees living with them and he said that one of them had gone down onto the beach and had almost stepped on a mine but a soldier on patrol saved him.”

“…Mr Carson has taken in some evacuees?”

“Hard to imagine, isn’t it?” Mr Bates commented, chuckling deeply. “It’s was Mrs Carson’s idea, I believe, as they had the spare rooms in their cottage. I think they’re from London.”

“They’re from Lambeth,” Mr Parker confirmed, using the crusts of his slice of bread to mop up the last of his stew from his bowl. “One girl, three boys, wasn’t it? Siblings? No, cousins.”

“Close. Three girls, one boy,” Anna confirmed, turning her frown on Mr Parker as he helped himself to another slice of bread. “But, yes, they’re cousins. Peggy, the oldest I believe, is from one family and has been a great help to Mrs Hughes whilst Renee, Molly and Oliver are her cousins and much younger. They’re also the ones that have been getting into trouble.”

The stew, once everyone had finished at a more sedate pace than Mr Parker, was followed by a small serving of bread and butter pudding, the rationing version, and cups of hot tea.

Conversation continued throughout, eventually straying away from Thomas, and he learned that as well as the footmen being called up the head housemaid, Grace, had been too and was also waiting for her travel documents to arrive telling her exactly when she would be leaving for the WAAFs. Her sister, Nellie, was the younger of the two housemaids and was currently too young to be eligible for war work although she did admit that she wouldn’t want to go into uniform when the time came and
would volunteer to work in a factory.

“A factory,” Mrs Brennan all but hissed disapprovingly. “Well, I don’t know about that…”

“What’s wrong with working in a factory? It’s important to the war effort…”

“Nothing’s wrong with it. I just don’t think it’s a suitable occupation for proper young ladies,” Mrs Brennan defended her reaction calmly. “At least the young women in the armed forces are restricted to clerical and menial duties away from lustful temptations.”

...lustful temptations?

Thomas wasn’t the only one struggling to hold back a snort of disbelief.

“I wouldn’t have thought a factory was full of…”

“Enough, Eugene,” Mrs Brennan scolded the young hall boy who Thomas had been hoping someone would refer to by name so that he could learn it without actively having to ask. “I believe that everyone has tasks that they should be getting on with rather than gossiping…”

“Yes, Mrs Brennan.”

As the stern housekeeper retreated to her sitting room the various servants scattered, going about their duties, and Thomas took this opportunity to check which of the rooms up in the attic his suitcase had eventually been taken to by Arthur or Eugene. It wasn’t his old room, he was somewhat relieved to find, but one of the ones usually given over to a visiting valet.

Deciding that it would be best to unpack his things now before heading down to “help” his employer, as everyone else would be referring to Edward, he set about transferring his clothes from his suitcase to the small wardrobe and chest of drawers. One shirt, however, was taken to his bed and carefully placed underneath his pillow. It was the shirt that Edward had been wearing yesterday, unwashed so that it still smelt of him rather than the washing powder they used. Thomas had predicted he would struggle to sleep without Edward by his side for however long they ended up staying, very much aware of the fact that the longest he had lasted before sneaking into Edward’s bed back in Hastings had been three days, and it had been Edward who had suggested the unwashed shirt as a possible aid; perhaps having something that smelt of him would be enough to get him through their forced nights apart?

Placing his empty suitcase on top of the wardrobes once he was finished he gave the room a quick once over, making sure that nothing was out of place and that the shirt was concealed beneath the pillow, before heading down to the Egyptian Room to see if Edward was there.

He was, sat by the window which he had managed to open, enjoying the breeze.

“Thomas?” his lover called out, turning to face him with a frown. “Is that you?”

“It’s me,” Thomas confirmed, crossing to perch on the arm of the chair Edward was sat in, smiling when his lover immediately placed a hand on his thigh. “So, you survived your first dinner with the Crawleys, with added Pelham’s thrown in for good measure. Well done.”

“I’d forgotten what they could be like,” Edward confessed, tilting his head until it came to rest against Thomas’ arm. “And it was different, last time. I was a patient, not a guest.”

“They’re better than they used to be. More welcoming,” Thomas confessed, reaching round with his good hand so as to begin running his fingers through Edwards curls. “Then again. Now that I think
of it, it was mostly the Dowager Countess that used to make some of the dinners rather awkward and uncomfortable, always taking the opportunity to bring up the subjects that either the family or their guests didn’t want to discuss. She was brilliant at rooting out a secret, I can tell you. Almost doesn’t feel right, her not being here anymore.”

The Dowager Countess had passed away in 1930, slipping away in her sleep at the ripe old age of eighty-eight, and Thomas had read her obituary in the paper one morning. Sybil had been distraught, understandably so given how close she’d been to her grandmother, and Tom had used his wife’s state to ensure that he had the time off to escort his family to the funeral which had been held in the village church. Well, most of his family. The twins had been too young, it had been decided, and had stayed with their favourite uncles instead.

Edward sighed deeply before enquiring softly,

“Thomas?”

“Yes?”

“Would you…would you take me to bed?”

Thomas instinctively glanced towards the door, finding the key in the lock.

“I thought I would be fine for a few days but this room, it doesn’t smell like us, like you at all,” Edward explained, his hand moving slowly up Thomas’ thigh. “Please, take me to bed.”

Trailing his hand down the side of Edwards face until he could cup his jaw, his thumb moving to press against his lips, Thomas smiled at his lover, a sharp gasp escaping him when those lips parted to allow the tip of his thumb to disappear inside the damp, warmth of his mouth.

“Let me just lock the door, first,” he murmured, hesitating for a moment before pulling himself away and crossing to do exactly what he’d said he would. The lock protested, not having been used in a number of years, but with a little added pressure he was finally able to rotate the key as needed to secure the properly door. “Now, what did you have in mi…”

Somehow, Thomas discovered when he turned round, his partner had managed to strip himself out of everything but his underwear in the time that it had taken him to lock the door, Edward’s clothes scattered haphazardly around the chair he now stood in front of.

“Oh.”

Even though the years had taken their toll on him Edward was still the most attractive man that he’d ever seen, his pulse beginning to race as the majority of his blood rushing south.

Especially when he wore that particular smirk.

“You’re wearing too many clothes, Thomas.”

Yes.

He was.

“That was your cue to take said clothes off, Thomas,” Edward chuckled, carefully making his way across the room to the bed, only stumbling once when his foot got caught on his shirt. Once his extended hands found the bed frame he paused to strip off his last item of clothing before moving to recline against the pillows, arms stretched comfortably above his head, legs parted. “Or did you think
I meant something else when I asked you to take me to bed?"

Thomas couldn’t remove his clothes fast enough.

~ * ~

A/N …and the rest of their evening is left up to your imagination. I apologise for the delay in getting this chapter out and hope that the length made up for the wait, despite it being a bit of a random filler chapter. I wanted them to visit the Abbey, though, so I could explain how everyone else was getting on in my Alternate Universe. We’re back to Foyle’s War in the next chapter and the Americans are coming! Comments and Suggestions always welcome. X
Chapter Six

Disclaimer – I don’t own Downton Abbey, the Crimson Field or Foyle’s War but the Original Characters (of which there are too many to mention) are my creations.

Summary – Sequel to ‘There’s A Long, Long Trail’ following Thomas, Edward and all of the others through the course of the Second World War.

A/N Title taken from a popular song of the era.

~ I’ll Be Seeing You ~

Chapter Six
March 1942

Standing on the pavement outside the corner shop, Edwards hand tucked through his elbow in a move that most people were used to seeing from the two of them, Thomas found that he was unable to hold back the deep sigh that burst from his lips at the sight in front of him.

“Thomas?” Edward murmured, concerned. “What is it?”

“We’ve been invaded.”

“…what?”

Another deep sigh,

“The Yanks are here.”

Just then a loud cheer rang out from the group of young men sprawled across the chairs outside of the most popular pub in Hastings, all of them dressed in an unfamiliar uniform.

Edward chuckled deeply.

“The Americans are our allies, Thomas,” his lover reminded him. “They sound young.”

“They are young.”

Painfully young, if he was honest.

A couple didn’t even look old enough to shave yet…

It had been almost a year since Thomas and Edward had visited Downton Abbey and much had happened in the world, the war continuing to shift and change with every new battle.

Hitler had marched three million of his troops into Russia less than a week after the couple had returned to Hastings, the newspapers reporting it as soon as they had the information.

It had been a surprise to everyone, no one foreseeing the creation of what was now known as the eastern front, although none had been more surprised than the Russians themselves who had signed a treaty with Germany back in 1939. Following the unexpected invasion Russia had signed a mutual assistance treaty with Britain, shifting the balance of power.
Not everyone approved of the treaty, given that the Russians were Communists, but it was especially true in wartime that “the enemy of my enemy is my friend” so they were Allies.

And then, as though the war hadn’t been bad enough already, the Japanese had attacked.

7th December 1941, a day that would live in infamy just as President Roosevelt had claimed in his broadcast, had come as a shock to the entire world. No one had been expecting Japan, who were already started war with China to make a move against both Britain and America.

It had begun with the attack on Pearl Harbour, Oahu, Hawaii Territory, during which the Pacific Fleet of the United States Navy suffered significant losses, as did the Army and Marine Air Forces whose task it was to defend the fleet when it was at anchor but hadn’t ended there, the Japanese launching offensives against Allied forces in East and Southeast Asia, with simultaneous attacks on British Hong Kong, British Malaya and the Philippines.

Rather than be cowed by the attack America, led by President Roosevelt, had declared war on Japan. Four days later Hitler and Mussolini had declared war on the United States, thus merging the separate conflicts, and just like that the Americans were in the war with them.

“I suppose we must have seemed young to some of the career soldiers when we signed up for the last war,” Edward murmured, his hand tightening on Thomas arm. “We were young.”

Thomas snorted.

“Not that young.”

No, they hadn’t been as young as some of the group seemed to be.

But, Thomas conceded, some of the men he had fought alongside had been even younger.

Edward’s parents, along with many others, were still reeling over the loss of Singapore.

In Malaya, not long after the attack on Pearl Harbour, the Japanese had overwhelmed the allied troops of Britain, India, Australia and Malays, allowing the Japanese to advance down the Malayan Peninsula, whilst the remaining Allied Forces had been forced to retreat to the assumed safety of Singapore. The loss of both HMS Prince of Wales and HMS Repulse, which the papers had attributed to a lack of air cover, on Wednesday 10th December had come as a shock and had left the east coast of Malaya open for the Japanese to land their troops on.

Hong Kong had surrendered to the Japanese on Christmas Day.

Singapore, after a week of what the reports had described as “intense fighting against an overwhelming enemy force”, had fallen on Sunday 15th February, less than a month ago.

Thomas had not been expecting Edwards mother, of all people to begin sobbing following the wireless broadcaster had announced the surrender of both the military and civilians who had been unable to get out of Singapore before it had fallen. It had only been then that he’d learned of Edwards aunt, on his mothers side, and the fact that she had followed her husband, a senior officer with the British Army out to Singapore when he was posted there.

Their three children, mercifully, were in England at boarding school and so were safe.

“I suppose that means a quick pint at the pub before we head home is out of the question?”

The question, posed innocently enough, caused Thomas to snort loudly.
“Well, there’s no seats outside, that’s for sure,” he responded with a chuckle, checking for oncoming vehicles before leading his lover across the road towards the busy public house. “But if your heart is set on that pint we can always try and find somewhere to sit inside.”

Edward nodded.

The atmosphere at the house was unpleasant, Edwards mother desperately searching the newspapers for her sisters name amongst the lists of people who had managed to make it out of Singapore in time, and so they had taken to avoiding the house as much as possible.

“Excuse me, gentlemen,” Thomas called out politely as they reached the group of Americans who were inadvertently blocking the door. “Would you mind moving to one side, please?”

“Sure!” one of the young men, the one with the most strips on his arm, cried out loudly. “Come on guys, shift your asses and let the Limeys through! Joe, that means you, too!”

“Thank you.”

“…why are you holding his arm like that?” one of the soldiers asked suspiciously, a deep frown marring his otherwise handsome features. “You’re not a couple of queers, are you?”

“No, we aren’t,” Thomas responded, lying through his teeth, as he offered the soldier a disapproving frown. “My employer was blinded by gas during the last war and requires assistance when moving about. I myself lost the use of my left eye to the same attack which took my hand, killed two of my fellow stretcher bearers along with the patient we were in the process of retrieving from no-mans-land and took another of my colleagues legs. Now, if that’s all, gentlemen, we would like to enter the pub so that we can enjoy a pint of beer.”

Looking suitably chastised the soldier in question nodded, moving out of the way.

The others, Thomas noticed, were looking at them differently now as well.

“Why don’t the two of you join us for that drink,” one of the two men who had stripes on their arm signifying them to be of higher rank than the rest of the group suggested quickly, gesturing for some of the others to move so as to free up space for the two of them on one of the bench seats. “We only arrived in England last month so we’re not used to how some things work yet but I’m pretty sure that a drink is a suitable apology for Bill’s poor manners.”

“That sounds more than fair,” Edward murmured, squeezing Thomas’ arm as discretely as possible by way of an apology for their plan for a quiet pint being scuppered. “Thomas?”

“This way, Mr Courtenay.”

In the time it took the two of them to get settled on the bench seat at the centre of the group of Americans one of them had made it to the bar and back with two pints for them.

“Thank you,” Thomas nodded, accepting them one at a time with his good hand, placing his in front of him before pressing the other into Edwards hand. “Here you are, Mr Courtenay.”

As one the lovers lifted their glasses to their lips, taking identically long sips of their drinks.

“Hey, isn’t there a piece of land called that, Corp?”

So the two with two stripes were Corporals, same as they’d have been in the British Army.
“Courtenay Estate is my families ancestral home,” Edward explained once he’d swallowed. “I was supposed to take over the running of the estate but then this happened and, well…”

“Who runs it now?”

“My younger brother, with help from my father,” Edward explained readily. “We are only here for the duration. I live in London, you see, but it’s not safe for a blind man just now.”

“Did you serve together during the last war?”

“No,” Thomas answered the question which had seemed to burst out of the young man he was sat beside. “I was a stretcher bearer with the RAMC, the Royal Army Medical Corps, to begin with. Then, after I was wounded and came back to England, I became an orderly.”

“Thomas was one of the orderlies to care for me after I was brought back from France,” Edward added, pausing to take another sip of his beer. “And we got on well enough that when the war ended I offered him a position as my manservant. He’s basically my eyes.”

“Despite only having one myself,” Thomas snorted, much to the Americans amusement. “I suppose you men are something to do with the new airfield everyone’s been talking about.”

“That’s right,” one of them confirmed. “We’re here to build it. 215th Engineers.”

“Up at Hawthorn Cross, right?”

“It will be once the police stop the old boy from shooting at our equipment…”

Edward choked,

“I beg your pardon?”

“The land owner is proving to be a bit…tricky. Took a pot shot at the Captains jeep.”

“Who…?”

“David Barrett,” Edward answered before Thomas could even finish forming his question. “He’s never been the calmest of men but even then I can’t imagine he would go so far as…”

“Believe it,” one of the Americans muttered. “I was the one who had to fix up the jeep.”

“Farnetti…”

“At least that policeman on the case now,” the young man continued, ignoring his fellow soldier as he continued with a broad smile. “Along with that pretty little driver of his…”

Pretty little driver?

Well, there was only one person who fit that particular description in Hastings which meant,

“If the policeman you’re referring to is Detective Chief Superintendent Foyle then you’re in good hands. He’s a friend of ours,” Thomas explained with a smile. “As is his driver, Sam.”

“Sam?!” most of the Americans cried out in distress. “I thought you said she was a peach?!”

“She is!”
Thomas laughed out loud at how scandalised Farnetti sounded.

"Which is short for Samantha," he explained, his voice filled with mirth, prompting Farnetti to begin demanding apologies off of his friends for doubting him. "Her fathers a vicar…"

Half of them seemed disappointed by this last piece of information he shared whilst the other half seemed unaffected, obviously willing to put up with anything for a pretty girl.

"…so if you didn’t serve together who were you with?"

"I assume that question was directed at me?" Edward murmured, twisting in his seat to gaze sightlessly at the quit young man who had just spoken. A nod, unhelpfully, was his response. Thomas murmured a confirmation under his breath on behalf of the American. "Lieutenant Edward Courtenay, 2nd Battalion, Royal Sussex Regiment, at your service. Or at least I was. Nowadays I’m afraid that I’m plaid old Private Courtenay, Hastings Platoon, Home Guard."

"…how does that work then? I’ve seen reels about your Home Guard boys at the pictures and it doesn’t seem possible for a blind man to be a member of such an active group…”

"I man the phone at our platoons headquarters and make cups of tea," Edward answered honestly, offering them all a smile. "It was Thomas they wanted, for his medical training amongst other things, but as I didn’t want to be left out they kindly found a place for me."

"Amongst other things?" Farnetti repeated, frowning. "What does that mean?"

"Social standing, of a sort," Thomas answered, feeling a fraction reluctant as he didn’t like talking about his medals in case people assumed he was boasting. "I was awarded the VC for my actions during the war and it reflects well upon the platoon to have me as a member."

"…what’s the VC?"

"The Victoria Cross," Edward answered. "It’s the highest award you can receive."

"So it’s like the Medal of Honour?"

"I’m unsure what that is…"

"It’s the most prestigious personal military decoration you can get," one of the Americans explained for the couples benefit. "For, um, conspicuous gallantry and…oh what was it…"

"Conspicuous gallantry and intrepid its at the risk of life above and beyond the call of duty."

"Ah, yes, then that does sound similar to the Victoria Cross," Edward agreed, smiling around at the group of men surrounding them. "Let me see if I can remember this correctly. It’s…"

"…awarded for most conspicuous bravery, or some daring or pre-eminent act of valour or self-sacrifice, or extreme devotion to duty in the presence of the enemy…” Thomas recited automatically before draining the rest of his pint in one go. Edward glared at him fondly even as the Americans all looked suitably impressed. "You’re not the only one who has ended up reciting that so many times over the years that you’ve got it memorised, sir."

"…doesn’t that mean we should’ve saluted him?"

"No, you don’t have to salute me," Thomas hastened to answer the young man, going as far to reach out with his prosthetic as it was the closest limb and push his hand down. The man in question
wasn’t the only one to stare open mouth at his wooden limb. “Sorry. Sometimes I forget that not everyone is as used to seeing or touching prosthetic limbs as we two are.”

“My dad lost his arm during the last war,” a voice piped up towards the back of the group, thick with an unfamiliar accent. “He didn’t get no fancy replacement, tho, just has a stump.”

“I was lucky to receive a prosthetic quite soon after returning to England, although it was pretty much a solid piece of wood which meant it was very heavy at times and the leather straps holding it in place rubbed,” Thomas explained, fiddling with his prosthetic until another pint suddenly appeared in front of him. “Oh, thank you. This prosthetic is much better and I have Mr Courtenay to thank for it; something like this is quite expensive.”

Another pint was placed before Edward.

“Say, will you be coming to the dance?”

“…what dance?”

“Captain Kieffer’s idea,” the second Corporal piped up cheerfully. “To help us get properly aquatinted with a few more of the locals. Barrett’s not the only one giving us trouble, see.”

“I’m sorry to hear that,” Edward murmured sincerely, carefully searching out his second pint. Thankfully the beer was rather well watered down so having two pints wouldn’t do either of them any harm. “I imagine we must seem a rather strange people to all of you.”

“You got that right…”

“I mean, how can you drink this stuff?”

“Yeah. Warm beer? Out of everything I think that’s been the hardest thing to understand.”

Thomas and Edward chuckled, amused by the sincere if good natured complaining.

“Could be worse,” Thomas posed at length, smiling knowingly. “They could’ve run out like last summer. I’m sure you’ll agree that warm beer is certainly better than no beer at all.”

A grumble of, albeit reluctant, agreement spread throughout the gaggle of young soldiers.

The couple ended up sitting with the group of Americans until it was time for the younger men to return to their base, their afternoon off having come to an end, every one of them bundling in to shake Thomas and Edwards hands before they headed off down the road.

“…they really are young, aren’t they?” Edward sighed sadly, his head turned in the direction of the departing soldiers, thinking of some of the conversations they’d had with them. All of them had been curious about the last war, admitting that their parents didn’t really like to talk about it, and had been painfully naïve about the realities of war. The couple, always having been willing to share their experiences with others, answered as many questions as they could but a couple had been too much even for them. Just how much help their tales of battle fought between two entrenched armies would be in this new type of war they didn’t know but at least they had been able to warn them about the sounds and the smells, about how sometimes they were worse than the sights. “Damn and blast Adolf bloody Hitler…”

Thomas grunted in agreement.

That man had a lot of pain and suffering to answer for.
And answer for it he would, but at what cost?

That was the real question.

How many of those soldiers would survive to greet the peace they were fighting for?

A letter was waiting for them when they finally made it home, their walking speed a fraction slower than usual due to the beer and their slight melancholia. It was from Sybil who had, of course, returned to London once she’d recovered from her injuries and contained big news.

“Violet has joined up,” Thomas read the most important piece of news aloud to Edward as his lover sat with his family waiting for dinner to be announced, already having decided not to change for dinner, much to his mothers annoyance. “She’s quit her job at the factory and enlisted in the Women’s Royal Naval Service without giving any sort of prior warning at all.”

“That doesn’t sound like Violet,” Edward hummed, thinking of how Aiofe had done the same thing when she’d joined the ATS. At least they’d expected it of her. “How did Sybil react?”

“I understand her decision, I truly do, I just wish she’d given us a little bit of warning. She leaves tomorrow for her basic training; she even. Managed to keep her medical a secret,” Thomas read, aware that it wasn’t just Edward listening to the news. “Tom is furious but, given that I enlisted against my parents wishes in the last war, he too isn’t surprised. We’d have supported her decision if she’d told us. That’s what has upset us the most I think; my parents new for months what I wanted and eventually intended to do before I joined up.”

“You’d better not be thinking of doing something so thoughtless, young lady,” Elvira snapped at her daughter suddenly, all but spinning in her chair to glare at Margaret. “Because if you even think of behaving so selfishly I shall make sure you’re cut off.”

Thomas winced.

Even to him that seemed a little bit overdramatise.

Margaret, however, merely nodded as she murmured her response,

“Yes, Mama..”

He couldn’t imagine she’d ever do something of her own accord anyway, let alone join up.

Even Charles, who should have been in the forces by now, had managed to avoid it thus far.

He was definitely his father’s son…

“Does Sybil say anything else?”

“Aoife has a weeks leave coming up, apparently, and may pop down to see us,” Thomas summarised, deciding that he’d read the rest to Edward in private. “Oh, and she’s been promoted, apparently. It looks as though dinner is ready so I’ll read you the rest later, sir.”

And indeed, Wright had just stepped into the room and announced that dinner was indeed served. This prompted the group to rise from their various seats and head into the dining room, Edward going last with Thomas a step behind him; he didn’t need anything more than his cane for such a familiar journey but Thomas stayed close in case something had moved.

It wouldn’t be the first time that one of Edwards family had moved something without thinking about
how it’s new placement would affect Edward who relied upon everything staying exactly the same in order to keep a shred of his precious independence intact.

The days passed by in their usual fashion until, suddenly, the dance was upon them.

Thomas and Edward had made their intention to go clear all along, just as the rest of the Courtenay’s had made their intention not to go perfectly clear. In fact, the only surprise came from Margaret who, at the very last minute, decided that she would like to attend.

“…but Margaret, they’re Americans…”

Edward mother sounded positively horrified by her granddaughters decision.

In a move that was quite out character for her Margaret refused to change her mind, changing into her favourite dancing shoes, an emerald green dress and black cardigan.

“Barrow,” Jack called out as the car was being brought around. “If it’s not too much trouble I’d be grateful if you’d watch out for Margaret. She doesn’t understand what Yanks are like.”

Reluctantly, but only because he didn’t want to do anything to please Jack, Thomas agreed to watch out for the young woman who was less than thrilled to hear about the agreement.

“I don’t need anyone watching out for me,” she grumbled from her seat beside Edward as the families car navigated the dark roads by its limited headlights. Thomas, as a servant in her eyes, had been forced to sit in the front. “So you can forget all about that right now.”

Thomas offered no response.

The dance was being held at what was once ‘St Mary’s All Saints School for Young Ladies’ but was now being used a base of operations and barracks for the Americans. It was, Thomas had learned after giving the location to the driver, the private and rather exclusive boarding school that Margaret had attended before being sent away to finishing school.

They arrived at the base, the uniformed guard manning the gate smiling at Margaret, at the same time as Sergeant Milner who appeared to have walked despite having a prosthetic leg.

“Mr Barrow,” the policeman greeted them as they exited the car. “Mr Courtenay. And…”

“Sergeant Milner,” Edward greeted him with a smile, smoothing out his double breasted grey pin striped suit which was slightly rumpled after the car journey. “How lovely to see you here, if you’ll pardon the expression. May I introduce you to my niece, Margaret?”

Milner offered his hand which Margaret shook, albeit reluctantly, before excusing herself and heading up the steps into the building from which spilled more light than the blackout regulations allowed and the sounds of people chattering over instruments being tuned.

“How have you been?” Thomas enquired as the three of them followed her into building, Milner leading the way and holding the door open for the couple. Inside the building was already full of people, soldiers and civilians. “We haven’t seen you in a couple of weeks.”

“I’ve been investigating the death of a friend, actually,” Milner answered sadly, taking his coat and hat off so that he could hand them over to the young soldier looking after the makeshift cloakroom. “He carried me off the battlefield at Trondheim. We met up for a drink a couple of days ago and that evening he died after his bedsheets caught fire. It’s looking as though he was too drunk to get himself to safety but that doesn’t make sense.”
“…how so?”

“Well, he only had a couple of pints to drink when he was with me and his father gave a statement that whilst he was definitely worse for wear when he returned home he was nowhere near drunk enough for it to have stopped him unlocking his bedroom door.”

“What do you think could have caused him to be in such a state then?”

“I don’t know yet,” Milner confessed regretfully. “But I’m determined to find out.”

“Hello, again, Mr Barrow!” a distinctly American voice called out, prompting the three men to turn and face the oncoming group of smartly dressed soldiers. “I’m so glad you made it!”

“Hello, Corporal…?”

“Callaghan, sir,” the younger man supplied his name when Thomas struggled to remember it, not seeming at all bothered by what some would have taken as a slight. “Mr Courtenay.”

“Corporal,” Edward smiled across at him. “This is Sergeant Milner, Hastings Constabulary.”

An exclamation of delight overshadowed the greeting that followed, Sam literally crying out when she caught sight of the three of them standing together in the foyer of the building.

Mr Foyle was a step behind her.

“Thomas! Edward!” she exclaimed happily, shedding her stunning coat, made of a purple tartan fabric styled into diamonds, as she cross to them. “I didn’t know you were coming!”

“We met Corporal Callaghan and some of the others at the King’s Head the other day,” Thomas explained, taking the sight that was Sam Stewart dressed to impress. Her dress was a beautiful plum colour, cut to flatter her trim waist, and she’d pinned a red artificial flower above her left breast, the colour matching her lipstick perfectly. Her necklace, he noticed, was made of an assortment of blue, green and purple buttons, laid out in an artful pattern and was most definitely homemade. “You’re looking particularly lovely this evening, Sam.”

“Thank you, Thomas,” Sam preened, smiling at the young soldier who scurried forwards to collect her coat for her. Her hair was mostly down, unlike usual, with only the front being pinned up in a pair of victory rolls. “You’re looking very smart yourself. You too, Edward.”

Whilst Edward wore a double-breasted jacket Thomas had gone for a single-breasted one in a rich navy blue colour and subtle cross-hatch pattern that flattered his pale skin. They both wore ties with a simple pattern to them, not quite the same colour as their suits but close.

Mr Foyle, Thomas realised, was still wearing his work suit, shirt and tie.

Milner, on the other hand, was in a light grey singled-breasted suit which was cut in a pre-war style. Underneath the jacket he wore a somewhat garish tartan vest over his crisp white shirt and a maroon coloured tie and despite being out-of-fashion it was a good look on him.

There was no sign of Margaret by the time they stepped into the room where the dance was being held, just as the band swung into action with a fast paced number that was vaguely familiar to Thomas. A petite girl in a bright green dress was all but dragged onto the dance floor by one of the American’s, the two of them beginning to dance in an acrobatic fashion.

At one point he swung her up into the air so that her dress fell down to expose the tops of her
stockings, a murmur of disapproval spreading through the older villagers in attendance.

A soldier came over to them carrying a tray of large glasses filled with some form of punch.

Sam hummed in approval as she took a sip of her drink.

“I suppose that must be the jitterbug that Private Farnetti was telling me about when he invited me to the dance,” she posed after a little while, nodding to the energetic couple continuing to dominate the dance floor. “It doesn’t look like anything I’ve ever seen…”

Thomas, Mr Foyle and Milner all grunted in agreement.

“I still remember all the fuss there was when the Charleston came into fashion,” Thomas found himself chuckling as once again the woman’s stockings were on display. “Remember? It was deemed unfitting. Scandalous, even. Well, I wonder what they’d say about that?”

“Is it really that bad?”

“I’ve seen more of that young woman’s underwear than anyone but her husband has a right to,” Thomas explained for his lovers benefit. “Her partner keeps lifting her up into the air.”

“Oh,” Edward reacted, his surprise obvious. “I see. That’s…different…”

They enjoyed watching the dancers for a while, Mr Foyle eventually heading over to speak with Captain Kieffer who he seemed to be becoming good friends with if their easy smiles were any sort of indication. Shortly after, Milner took the opportunity to head over to the rather obscene buffet which had been laid on for the occasion; there was more food on display than any of them had seen in years, in Thomas’ case since he worked at Downton.

This left Sam alone with Thomas and Edward and after a long moment she blurted out,

“Andrew has thrown me over.”

“…what?”

Sam and Andrew Foyle had been walking out together for months, since before he received his new posting as we sent all the way to Scotland to train pilots for the RAF. They had been the perfect couple, complimenting each other well, so this news didn’t make sense to them.

It was Edward that asked the more important question,

“Why?”

“The distance between us,” Sam admitted, a hitch in her voice. “He says he was lonely.”

“…lonely?” Thomas spat out the word, a deep frown marring his forehead as he took in the hurt that Sam was desperately trying to keep hidden. He was moving before he even made the conscious decision to, pulling the emotional young woman into a fierce hug. “There was me always thinking so well of him. Lonely, indeed. Does his father know what he’s done?”

Sam nodded.

“I told him, just now, actually,” she explained. “Mr Foyle disapproved of…of my friendship with Joe, Private Farnetti, the soldier who invited me to come to the dance this evening.”

“Understandable, I suppose, when he thought you were stepping out on his son,” Edward
murmured. “But I hope he apologised to you once he realised the truth of the matter, Sam.”

“Not yet, but I’m sure he will,” Sam admitted, tipping back the last of her drink which left her cradling the empty glass in her hands until an American soldier passed by with the tray of freshly filled glasses, allowing her to reach out and swap it for a new drink. “Eventually.”

“I’d be careful of that punch, Sam,” Thomas warned her softly, noticing the light flush that was beginning to spread across her cheeks. “It might taste innocent enough but it’s strong.”

“This is only my second glass,” Sam reassured him. “But I’ll be careful. I promise.”

There was a brief disturbance a moment later, one of the American’s not having received a warning of his own and imbibing a bit too much in the alcohol that was freely available for all, resulting in him being carried out by one of his friends and Doctor Rogers, of Hastings.

He was the Courtenay’s family doctor, as it happened, and a friend of the family as well.

An American voice startled the three of them as they watched the action,

“Hello.”

Turning they found a rather handsome young man approaching them or, most specifically, Sam, an earnest smile on his face as she hastily turned towards him. Thomas was surprised to see his young friend duck her head in an uncharacteristic display of shyness, his frown deepening as she looked up through her eyelashes, responding with a more reserved smile,

“Hello.”

“I didn't think you'd come.”

It was said earnestly enough, the young man ducking his head so as to meet her eyes.

Thomas recognised him then, his jawline in particular, as one of the men from the pub.

Farnetti.

Of course, he realised, his brain finally making the connection.

He’d already met the young man Sam had been referring to.

“I said I would, didn't I?”

“You said you would and you said you wouldn't,” he answered, earning a more genuine smile from the usually vibrant young woman. “I'm glad you did. Who are your friends?”

“Oh.” Sam breathed, her smile becoming entirely different as she turned to introduce them. “This is Edward Courtenay and his manservant, Thomas Barrow. They’re friends of mine.”

“Pleasure,” Farnetti muttered, dismissively, before doing a double take. “Wait. I know you.”

“We’ve met before, Private Farnetti,” Thomas announced, offering his hand for the younger man to shake. “A few days ago at the pub. We shared our old war stories over warm beer.”

Realisation dawned in the American’s eyes before his bright smile returned.

“Mr Barrow,” he exclaimed, shaking Thomas’ hand far too enthusiastically before reaching out to
shake Edwards. “Yes, of course! And Mr Courtenay! It’s good to see you both again.”

The music shifted suddenly, picking up the pace again after a lull.

“So,” Farnetti murmured, turning back to Sam. “You want to dance?”

Sam hesitated briefly before responding with a somewhat uncertain,

“You’ll have to show me.”

The smile that Farnetti offered up in response was positively dazzling,

“My pleasure.”

Reaching out to take Sam’s drink off of her as she passed by them Thomas couldn’t help but think longingly of the nights he and Thomas had danced together at the Wishing Well, one of London’s most popular and carefully underground nightclubs which were a safe haven for men and women who harboured passions outside of those accepted by the normal society.

He and Edward had been welcomed there with open arms.

“Are you thinking of the Wishing Well?”

Edward’s question both surprised him and didn’t surprise him.

After so many years together it would have been strange for them not to be so well in tune.

“Yes,” Thomas responded, pitching his voice as quietly as he could so that no one else would hear the words exchanged between them. “I wish I could dance with you tonight, my love.”

“To this?” Edward chuckled, hiding his smile in his half-empty glass. “I don’t think either of us would survive. No, you and I belong to a gentler age, my love, one that perhaps we can visit when we are back in the privacy of my room. Perhaps a waltz? Or maybe a two-step?”

“Perhaps you’re right,” Thomas agreed, watching as Sam was taught the steps by her dance partner. Even the basic ones were fast and energetic. “A two-step is much more our style.”

They watched the dancing, well Thomas did, and enjoyed the lively music for a little bit before raiding the buffet table for a few treats that they hadn’t been able to have since before the war. It was probably three-quarters-of-an-hour later that Edward expressed a need to visit the gentleman’s facilities and so, after making enquiries as to their location, Thomas took hold of his lover by the crook of his elbow and lead him out of the busy room.

“This is the corridor, I think,” he murmured, taking them through a door which had been half-open. It led them into a surprisingly dark corridor with what appeared to be the mens dormitories, or mess’ as they were known in the military, leading off of it. “But it’s a bit…”

He was about comment on how dark it was when his foot struck something.

“What’s…”

A glance down had him letting out a sharp gasp of shock.

It was a girl.

Or, rather, it was a girl’s body.
“Oh…”

“Oh…” Edward called out, concerned. His hands sought out Thomas’. “What is it?”

“It’s…” Thomas choked out. “It’s a dead body… a girl’s dead body…”

~ * ~

A/N I had to re-watch this episode (‘Invasion’) before I could start writing this chapter so that I got the timeline right as it had been a while. And then I ended up splitting the chapter into two sections despite my plan originally having it all in one chapter. This just seemed to work as a suitably cliff-hanger-ish ending. Comments & Suggestions welcome. Marblez x
Chapter Seven

Disclaimer – I don’t own Downton Abbey, the Crimson Field or Foyle’s War but the Original Characters (of which there are too many to mention) are my creations.

Summary – Sequel to ‘There’s A Long, Long Trail’ following Thomas, Edward and all of the others through the course of the Second World War.

A/N Title taken from a popular song of the era.

~ I’ll Be Seeing You ~

Chapter Seven

March 1942

Thomas had, unfortunately, seen more than his fair share of dead bodies before discovering that of Susan Davies in the dimly hallway. She’d been strangled, the poor girl, that was plain to see given the ring of bruises blossoming on her neck and had died with a look of terror in her eyes. It wasn’t the first time he’d seen that look on the face of a dead body, not with his wartime service, but he had never expected to see it on the face of such a young woman.

“And that was when you came upon the body?”

“Yes,” Thomas confirmed. “I was attempting to find the facilities for Edward.”

If the situation weren’t so unpleasant Thomas would be amused how drastically different the Paul Milner who stood before him, armed with his notepad and pencil, was to the Paul Milner that he’d befriended since arriving in Hastings. Gone was the self-depreciating smile and the gentle manner, replaced by a professional tone of voice and commanding presence.

The change in Christopher was equally startling, their first friend in Hastings taking charge of the situation with an authority that reminded Thomas of Mr Carson and a sympathy for the young victim that reminded him of Mrs Hughes, his voice softening when he spoke of Susan.

“Did you see anyone else in the corridor?”

“No, I’m afraid not,” Thomas answered regretfully. “The corridor lights were off which, combined with my limited field of vision, meant that I was mostly looking at the floor.”

Paul nodded, writing all of this down in his notepad.

“And you, Mr Courtenay? Did you happen to hear anyone or anything?”

“I’m afraid that the music was too loud, Sergeant,” Edward’s voice was filled with an equal amount of regret as he stood beside Thomas, both hands resting on his cane. “I could barely hear out own footsteps let alone anyone else’s. There was a smell, though, like stale beer.”
“Thank you,” Paul murmured, his attention focuses on his notepad for a moment before returning to them. “We may need to speak to you again so please don’t leave the town.”

“Of course,” Edward agreed. “You know where the find us.”

“I’ve asked Sam to run you home,” Christopher announced as Thomas carefully led Edward away from the doorway where they’d been being interviewed, the door that led to the area that was now being referred to as the crime scene. Both of them were unsteady on their feet, probably due to a bit of delayed shock, and were grateful of his offer. “No need to make you wait for your own car to arrive when you’ve had such a distressing experience.”

“Thank you, Christopher,” Edward murmured, reaching out blindly to shake the policeman’s hand. “Please, let us know if there’s anything more you need of us. We’ll be happy to help.”

Christopher murmured his agreement before sending them on their way.

The discovery of the body had brought the party to an abrupt end, unsurprisingly, with the guests leaving as soon as they were permitted to and the American soldiers being ordered back to their barracks. It shouldn’t, therefore, have taken Thomas twenty minutes to find Margaret whilst Edward used the telephone to call for someone to come and pick them up.

And in the end he didn’t find her so much as she happened to stumble upon him.

“…where have you been?”

His sharp demand prompted the spoilt young woman to jump away from him, spinning to offer him a glare that was every inch her grandmother as she placed her hands on her hips.

“How dare you speak to me that way?”

“How dare I?” he repeated, his voice dripping with sarcasm as he returned her glare. “How dare you disappear like that? Are you even aware that a girl about your age was murdered?”

“…what?”

Her voice was still sharp only now it was with shock rather than anger.

“Your Uncle and I had the misfortune to discover the body of a young woman an hour or so ago which you would know if you hadn’t disappeared,” Thomas explained, frowning as he only then took in her appearance. Her skirt was wrinkled in ways that it shouldn’t have if she’d just been dancing or sitting. The top two buttons nearest her throat were undone, allowing him to see a red mark on her skin where her neck met her shoulder. A few pins were in danger of falling out of her hair, one previously perfect roll significantly deflated. And her lipstick was smudged. Oh, she’d tried to tidy it up but the evidence was there for anyone who looked closely enough to see. “…your mum’ll kill you if she sees you like this!”

Eyes going wide in shock she brought her hands up to her hair, patting at it uselessly.

“And your dad’ll kill you when he finds out you’ve been with a man!” Thomas continued in a sharp hiss, the colour draining from her face with each word. “What we’re you thinking?!”

“You can’t tell them!”

“I won’t need to tell them,” Thomas scoffed rather cruelly. “It’s written all over you.”
I met Chuck in town a couple of weeks ago,” she defended herself hurriedly, her eyes no longer filled with shock or anger. No, now they were pleading with him to understand. “He’s so different and so nice to me. He invited me to the dance. We didn’t mean to…it just…”

“…just?”

“…happened.”

“Well, I hope for your sake he took precautions or you’ll be up a creek with no paddle and no mistake,” Thomas huffed, his glare softening as she gulped and looked much younger than she really was. Bloody hell… “Look, go sort yourself out in the bathroom and then maybe they won’t notice. Hair. Dress. Lipstick. Nothing you can do about your wrinkled skirt. And then pray to God that you don’t fall pregnant or there’ll be no hiding it from anyone.”

“I…” the young woman began before thinking better of it. “Thank you, Mr Barrow.”

Ducking her head the spoilt young woman who may or may not be about to receive her comeuppance depending on how this evening played out in the long run scurried away.

Sam was stood alongside Edward when he returned to his partner.

“Did you find her?”

“I did,” he answered tersely. “She’s just gone to tidy herself up.”

“Tidy herself…” Edward repeated with a frown. “Why would she need to tidy herself up?”

There were no secrets between them.

There never had been.

It was one of the reasons that their relationship had survived this long.

And Thomas wasn’t going to ruin that for Margaret Courtenay…

“Because she’s spent here evening getting to know a Yank she met in town a couple of weeks ago,” Thomas answered somewhat cryptically, unwilling to speak bluntly of the subject in front of Sam. “If you’re brother had seen her he’d have given her what for.”

“She…” Edward trailed off into a disappointed frown. “Stupid girl…”

“Quite,” Thomas agreed shortly. “I haven’t made any promises, as such, regarding whether or not we will keep her activities a secret, merely offered some advice regarding her current appearance as when I came upon your niece there was no hiding what she had been up to.”

“Stupid girl,” Edward repeated, shaking instead even as Sam let out a startled sound as she figured out just what the young woman in question had been up to. He turned at the sound of rapidly approaching footsteps, Thomas turning a moment later to watch Margaret hurry around the corner, her footsteps faltering when she caught sight of her uncle. “Margaret.”

“Oh,” she mumbled, coming to a stop before them. “Mr Barrow’s told you…”

“Yes, he has,” Edward informed her, his tone of voice colder than Sam had ever heard him use before. Thomas himself had only heard Edward use that tone of voice a handful of times over the years, his lover normally the more even tempered of the two of them. “I hope you understand the position you’ve gotten yourself and the two of us into with your actions...”
Margaret nodded, her eyes dropping meekly in a way that Thomas had never seen before.

Not from her, at least.

“If your parents find out that we knew what you’ve been up to…”

“You aren’t going to tell them?”

“I should,” Edward muttered following her interruption, his words prompting her to let out a sigh of relief as he continued. “But I won’t. Your actions tonight will remain our little secret unless you decide to speak of it. We shall have to explain that you were no where near the scene of the murder so should anyone ask you were I think it best if you say you were…”

“With me,” Sam interrupted him, smiling at the other young woman. “Getting some air.”

“You shouldn’t have to lie for us, Sam…”

“There’s no harm in it,” Sam responded with a shrug. “And a female alibi would be best.”

“Thank you, Sam.”

“Yes, thank you,” Margaret hurried to echo. “I didn’t mean for this to…I mean…”

“Just make sure it doesn’t happen again unless you’ve got a wedding ring on your finger.”

Following his final statement Edward suggested that they make their move, wanting to get out of the way of the police investigation and the American military who we still trying to run their base of operations despite everything that had happened. As predicted news of the murder did not go over well with the rest of his family, Margaret’s parents reacting the worst, and the young woman in question wasn’t allowed to leave the estate for days for fear that something would happen to her. Her actions at the dance never came into question.

The investigation into Susan’s death progressed, Milner calling around to clarify a couple of details with them about what they had seen and heard on the night in question. Someone else, one of the American’s, had apparently heard Susan arguing with someone before she’d been murdered but they had no more information to give. He’d also shared the fact that the young woman had been pregnant, father unknown, and this was now the suspected motive.

A couple of days later they arrested the killer.

It wasn’t the father of her child, the young American called Taylor who had gotten sick at the dance, but Alan Carter, the pub landlord and more importantly Susan’s boss. Apparently they’d been running an illegal still out of the back room of the pub using the knowledge and skills she’d picked up working in a chemical factory but after their alcohol had brought about the death of Paul’s friend, causing him to go blind on the night that his room caught on fire, Alan had wanted to close it down. Susan, in need of money, refused and paid with her life.

It also came to light that Andrew Foyle had had the audacity to throw Sam over.

“…he’s what?!?”

Sam ducked her head, her lower lip wobbling as she repeated what she’d said before,

“Andrew has brought our relationship to an end.”

“In a letter?” Thomas clarified. She nodded sadly. “That…that…spineless…gutless…bas-”
“Thomas!” Edward hissed. “Language!”

“I’m sorry, but I can’t believe he could just…”

“We’re too far apart,” Sam explained. “And he’s…lonely…”

“Lonely!” Thomas spat with venom. “He’s lonely! How dare he? How dare he?”

“It’s fine, Thomas,” Sam hurried to point out. “I was heartbroken, of course, but now I…I don’t think I’m anywhere near upset as I probably should be so perhaps it was for the best.”

“I don’t suppose that has anything to do with Private Farnetti?”

This time Sam ducked her head out of bashfulness than sadness.

“Perhaps…”

Life returned to normal, or as normal as it could be in a time of war, after that.

Their duties with the Home Guard kept them busy, the regular patrols keeping them out of the house most evenings, and a couple of times the platoon was called upon during the day to assist the regular Army or even the Americans, most notably with some downed German airmen who had all managed to escape their burning plane before the bomber had crashed.

Unlike the last pilot they’d picked up these ones were ardent Nazi’s.

As March turned into April news of the successful raid on *St Nazaire* began to reach them, the figures of those lost during the action trickling through the official channels much later. Of the 346 sailors and 265 commandos who took part in the raid 169 were killed and 215 captured. There were no figures of the casualties and losses suffered by the RAF in the raid.

April brought concerning news from the Pacific, with Bataan and several others falling to the Japanese, and the stirring news that Malta, the British colony still besieged by the Germans and the Italians after almost two years, was to be awarded the George Cross to “honour her brave people… to bear witness to a hero is and devotion that will long be famous in history.”

It also brought news that George Crawley had enlisted in the *Duke of Manchester’s Own* regiment just as his father had before him and would shortly be starting his basic training.

May brought about more news of the Pacific, or Africa, of Malta but the news that caused the most reaction amongst the family was a piece of news that came from a source much closer to home. It was almost painful to watch, Thomas had admitted to himself, once he’d recognised the signs; Margaret went off her food first before being struck down by the flu, the nauseousness accompanied by dark circles of exhaustion under her eyes, and then when her appetite had returned at last she began requesting unusual combinations of flavours.

It was obvious to him if not anyone else.

Her actions at the dance had come back to haunt her,

She was pregnant.

He found it somewhat amusing that none of her family recognised the signs for what they were, only finding out when the father of her child Private Charles “Chuck” Burton came to do the “honourable thing” and asked her to marry him so that their baby wouldn’t be born on the wrong side of the
blanket. The American, who Thomas noted wasn’t what you would call classically handsome but was still strikingly attractive as most Yanks seemed to be, was lucky not to be hung, drawn, and quartered given the way her parents reacted to the news.

“You filthy little slut!” Elvira screeched, her hand moving before any of them could realise what she intended to do, slapping her daughter around the face. “How could you? How…”

“There’s no call for violence, Ma’am!” Chuck intervened bravely, putting himself between mother and daughter when Elvira moved to strike Margaret again. His accent was every bit as thick as his name, Chuck, suggested it would be. “I know this is sudden and it’s certainly not the way I planned it but I love your daughter and I intend to marry her, whether you give your permission or not. She’s a wonderful girl and doesn’t deserve you beating on her.”

Thomas wouldn’t have gone so far as to call the selfish and usually sullen girl wonderful but to each his own, he supposed. After all, Edward had fallen in love with him back when he was still somewhat bitter and spiteful, their love being the thing to finally soften his heart.

“Oh, you’ll marry her, sunshine, and soon!” Jack snapped, glaring at the young couple as his only daughter clutched at the sleeve of Chuck’s uniform with one trembling hand whilst the other covered the red handprint covering her pale cheek. “When’s the little bastard due?”

“Daddy, please…”

“When?”

“Sometime in the New Year, I think,” Margaret confessed. “I haven’t seen a doctor yet…”

Her mother’s eyes blazed with anger as she put the last of the puzzle pieces together.

“…I knew letting you go to that damned dance was a terrible idea!” she spat at her daughter who cowered behind her future husband. “Is that where you met him? What, did he offer you some nylons and you dropped your knickers like a good little whore? Is that what hap–”

“We met in town,” Chuck announced firmly, drawing Elvira’s attention back to him. “And I have tried to be nothing but a gentleman to your daughter. Yes, we got carried away once and both of us regret it but the outcome was inevitable to my way of thinking; I’d have still been here asking for your daughter’s hand even if there wasn’t the baby to think of, Ma’am.”

“Did you know about this?” Jack demanded, rounding on Edward. “About them?”

“Uncle Edward didn’t know anything,” Margaret piped up suddenly, finding her courage from somewhere deep inside her as she lied to keep her father from finding out that both Edward and Thomas knew what had happened. “They didn’t know what I’d…what we’d…”

Jack kept glaring at his brother, obviously doubting her explanation, but said nothing.

“I suppose, then, that the next thing to do is to arrange the wedding,” Ida spoke up for the first to from where she was stood with a hand resting on her husband’s arm, keeping him from joining in the conversation. “I shall have a word with Mr Wheeler at St Mary’s and…”

Excusing themselves softly Thomas and Edward left the rest of their family to plan the hasty wedding, retreating to Edwards room as his mother continued to make her intentions plain.

As much as Margaret had wanted to wear white on her wedding day her grandmother had put her foot down, ordering Elvira to find her “strumpet of a daughter” something in pale blue or pink,
perhaps yellow if there wasn’t anything else available. They ended up getting her a sensible jacket and skirt in mustard yellow, pairing it with a cream blouse that she already owned, a cream hat of her mother’s with a little bit of netting to act as a veil, cream gloves and a pair of sandals that were a mixtures of brown, red, orange and yellow leather.

Chuck wore his best uniform and did cut rather handsome figure in the church.

Her bouquet was a simple, designed not to draw attention to her stomach even though the bulge was barely noticeably at the early stage of her pregnancy, and she wore a blue garter, a gift from her bridesmaid and best friend, Rosie Carmichael-Smyth, for her something blue whilst the rest of her outfit conformed for the test of the traditional saying. Edward was the one to eventually provide the sixpence to go in her left shoe as no one else had any change.

As far as weddings went it was very simple, quick and efficient rather than a big spectacle, but the important moments happened and the couple emerged legally married. They had the reception in the church hall, most of the Americans attending to support their “buddy” and so Thomas and Edward were able to catch up with the young men they’d met at the pub. The rest of the brides immediate family kept to themselves, their disapproval plain.

After waving the young couple off on their honeymoon, a weekend in Bournemouth, the party came to an end and everyone returned home. Well, almost everyone as the Home Guard were called out to guard a downed German bomber just as they were leaving and so Thomas and Edward only returned home to change into their uniforms before heading out.

It was still aflame when they arrived, Edward joining them in the field for once as they would be remaining in one place and not tramping over uneven ground overly much.

“Were there any survivors?”

“Yes, three,” Thomas answered his lover. “They’re sat underneath an old oak tree.”

Edward hummed thoughtfully,

“Do they required aid?”

Only one did, as it turned out, the youngest who had come down hard on his ankle. Thomas checked it over, finding it badly sprained rather than broken, and Edward then assisted him in applying a bandage to the limb, all the while reassuring the young man that he’d be fine.

They then joined their Home Guardsmen in keeping the prisoners and the wreck secure until the regular Army could relieve them which wasn’t until light was beginning to fade.

It was a long day and a relief to get back to the Estate, sharing a simple supper in Edwards room as they had missed the family dinner by then, and then because they were able to get away with it as none of the family would know they spent the night together, refamiliarising themselves with each other’s bodies as they shared their passion together after a good few weeks of only being able to steal the odd hug or kiss from each other. After such a long time apart, in terms of pleasure, it was a challenge for the two of them to remain silent lest they draw unwanted attention to their activities, muffling each other’s cries with their mouths.

They remained curled in each other’s arms throughout the night, Thomas’s prosthetic resigned to it’s usual home on the bedside table so that his stump was free to rest over Edwards heart, and awoke to the first rays of the sun filtering through the ancient glass.

There were few sights that appealed more to Thomas than that of his lovers naked form bathed in
sunlight, the contours of his flesh creating oddly shaped shadows that grew and shrank with the movements of the sun. He loved the way that Edward’s hair seemed to be made of fire when it caught the sunlight in such moments even as its colour faded with age.

“You’re staring at me again…”

“I am,” Thomas confirmed with a slight chuckle. “I cannot help it.”

Edward smiled, reaching out to stroke his fingertips across his partner’s face, tracing across the familiar features, following the laugh lines around his eyes before moving down his nose to the fullness of his top lip, following the curve of his smile up to the dimples in his cheeks.

“Finding all my faults?”

“You have many, my love, but your looks could never be one,” Edward reassured him softly, their breath mingling between them even as his fingers continued to roam, stroking across the apples of Thomas’ cheeks. “You are every bit as handsome as the first time I saw you.”

Thomas chuckled once more.

“You’re a liar,” he informed his lover. “But I won’t argue with you.”

They lay abed as long as they could get away with before rising to begin their days.

~ * ~

A/N This chapter annoyed me greatly as it refused to flow properly but I fought on and got it out in the end. A few bits were quite predictable, I think, but it couldn’t be helped as it is all part of my original plan for this story. As always comments and suggestions are welcome. X

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