How do I love thee?

by Whydidtheydothis

Summary

An AU where Drummond does not die but does marry Florence

Edward Drummond is an ambitious young man who sees marriage as important for his career as a politician even though it does not greatly interest him. He becomes engaged to Florence Kerr the daughter of the Marques of Lothian and only then does he meet Lord Alfred Paget who awakens in him feelings he has never had before. As his and Alfred's relationship grows, Edward becomes increasingly worried about his impending marriage and when he and Alfred finally kiss he decides he cannot go through with it. Sadly though life is not that easy......
going from the beginning of their relationship in 1841 and finishing in 1854 covering marriage, children, love, death, Russians, politics, illness, and war, and going from London to Wales to Russia to Italy, HDILT explores what would have happened had Edward lived and got married while still being in love with Alfred.

Notes

I did not expect to still be going 80 odd chapters later so I did not organise HDILT into separate parts from the off – my bad! So if you might be thinking of reading but going OMG its huuuggee, the chapter division is below
Part 1 chapters 1 – 21
Starting from when Edward meets Florence, through the story as told in the show before departing canon with Edward’s wedding and honeymoon
Part 2 chapters 22 – 48
Edward’s marriage places pressure on Alfred and Edward’s relationship, Alfred has a serious accident, 2 become 3 and Septimus Paget arrives on the scene
Part 3 chapters 49 – 70
Edward’s marriage to Florence comes under increasing strain as he continues to live a double life, and Florence begins to question her feelings about Edward.
Part 4 chapters 71 –
A shattering discovery turns Edward’s life and those who he loves upside down
Great things

“Private Secretary to the Prime Minister? Well done my boy well done!”

Edward’s father seized his hand and pumped it up and down rapidly. He was so proud of him. He’d always known that his beautiful boy was destined for great great things. Here he was not even 25 and already Private Secretary to the Prime Minster of Great Britain. He grew slightly misty eyed as he remembered Edward as a small boy with a shock of dark hair tottering down the garden path towards him when he’d arrived home from the bank

“Papa” he’d called out wavering on chubby little legs “papa, eddy is here” and he’d reached up his arms to be picked up.

That adorable little boy was now in one of the highest positions in the land but then Edward had never given them a moment’s worry. A bright boy with a calm and happy nature, his tutors had nothing but glowing reports of his work. They’d sent him away to Eton at the age of 7, Edward's stoic little face under his cap, brown eyes solemn, telling his mother not to cry and that he would be back home soon, probably in time for tea.

Oxford, where he had graduated with first class honours, had followed on from Eton and there he had joined the Tory party, already clear that he wanted his future to lie in politics rather than banking and now here he was closest advisor to the most powerful man in the United Kingdom. And this was just the first step, one day his wonderful son would be Prime Minister himself, he was sure of it

Edward smiled at his father; they’d always been close with similar views on the important matters of the day.

“I think perhaps a drink papa” he said “to celebrate”

“Absolutely” said his father warmly “I am so proud of you Edward”

They sat down either side of the fire with a glass of whiskey and sat in companionable silence for a few minutes

“So then” said his father “the next thing I think is a wife my boy. A successful man needs a wife to get on, you cannot properly entertain without one plus of course she will provide refuge and comfort to you after your long difficult days at work”

“A wife” Edward mused, truth be told he’d never really considered getting married. Women were not something that he’d been particularly interested in. It wasn’t that he disliked them as much as he never really given them much thought but yes, his father was right. He was a man who intended to go places and to do so he needed a wife, besides he quite liked the idea of a comfortable home of his own and a sweet pretty wife to look after him. Yes a wife would be just the thing!

He nodded at his father “indeed papa, a wife is a fine idea though it does mean attending a lot of balls and dances” he grimaced; he found such things frivolous and rather tedious but needs must. He wasn’t going to find a wife any other way.

His father laughed “you dislike them as much as I did I know but consider, once you have found a suitable woman to be Mrs Drummond you may safely absent yourself from them if you so choose”

“I shall do my best to find her with all speed then” smiled Edward “I’ve no doubt mama can secure us invitations to the right occasions”
“Of course” said his father knowing full well that there was no drawing room, country house party or ball room that wouldn’t welcome Edward Drummond. Young, eligible, extremely handsome, scion of one of the richest and most powerful families in Scotland, once it was known he was in the market for a wife, the problem would be less getting invitations as choosing which ones to accept as he had no doubt they would be deluged with them.

And so it proved. Edward could if he had chosen dined at 3 or 4 houses a night and danced till dawn every single day. It had only been a month and already he was wearying of the whole experience. If he could just find a woman acceptable enough to marry, he’d just get it over with but so far he couldn’t even contemplate spending 30 minutes with the ladies he’d been introduced too late alone 30 years. Endless shallow conversations with insipid girls with it seemed not a brain cell between them interspaced with arch conversations with mamas who felt the need to let slip just how much their darling girl couldn’t wait to settle down or papas who would casually drop in just how big a dowry their dearest child would bring. Edward was bored, so bored of it all, until one day he was invited to a ball at the home of the Marques of Lothian.

Florence Kerr sat at her dressing table as her maid dressed her hair; she smiled at her reflection, she knew she was generally considered a pretty girl but she was also clever enough to know that that was in fact not her biggest asset. Pretty girls were two a penny but she also had money, connections and charm. She intended to deploy all of them tonight for she was determined to secure a husband as soon as possible. She had been so frustrated to miss the start of the season while she was away in France recovering from a bout of flu (the doctors had said the warm coastal breezes of the Rivera would do her good). She was already feeling left behind, 2 of her friends were engaged and Florence worried if she didn’t secure a husband soon she would be an old maid, why she was nearly 22! She was particularly intrigued to meet the new beau of the season Mr Edward Drummond. In the letters she’d had from her friends to keep up her spirits and bring her the gossip of the town, he was the main topic of conversation. So handsome, they had said, so rich but seemingly shy and somewhat reserved. Florence smiled ironically; rich men were always of course handsome while girls with large fortunes were almost entirely beautiful. How fortunate she thought wryly that they so often went hand in hand! She glanced at her dance card; Mr. Drummond was her second partner. Soon she would find out if the stories did him justice.

Edward did not have high hopes of the evening. He had danced with 2 ladies already both of whom were very eager to tell him how much they were interested in politics. A few simple questions however had quickly established that they knew not even the first thing about it and that their interest was purely in him as a husband. It was not that he minded this, what else were women for if not to get married? But he did mind that they pretended. He would much rather they confessed that they were not interested in it than lie about it. Now he was engaged to dance with the daughter of the house, Florence. He sighed and braced himself for another dull conversation.

Florence was talking to her friend Wilhelmina and the news that she was soon to go to court with her aunt, and did not see Edward approaching

“Miss Kerr” he bowed over her hand and then raised his eyes to her face. Oh my goodness thought Florence, indeed her friends had not lied for standing before her was the most handsome man she had ever laid eyes on; tall and broad shouldered with thick dark hair, level chocolate brown eyes, sculpted face and a generous mouth, Edward Drummond looked as if one of the Greek statues in their garden had come to life. She laid her hand eagerly in his and he led her to the dance floor as a waltz struck up. He put his hand on her waist and began somewhat mechanically she thought to lead
her though the steps

“Do you like to dance Miss Kerr?” he asked clearly making polite conversation

“Of course” she replied “it gives one the chance to have interesting conversations”

“Hmmm” he did not look as if he agreed; they danced in silence for a few moments more

“I understand you have been unwell” he said obviously trying to dredge up something he’d heard

“Yes I have had the flu”

“I trust you are recovered now?”

“Quite recovered thank you”

They danced a little more; Florence was growing bored with him. He may be handsome she thought and rich but he seemed to be making little effort. Perhaps he thought women should be grateful for his time, well she was not inclined to be so. If he was going to make little effort than neither was she

“I hear you are in politics Mr. Drummond” she said

“I am”

Edward braced himself to be told how interesting she found it but she did not, instead she gave a little moue of boredom

“I confess I have no interest in it, I find it attracts rather dull people” and she looked at him challengingly

Edward was taken aback; this was not what he had expected.

“You find me dull Miss Kerr?” he asked

“You seem little interested in conversation sir” she replied

He paused and then he smiled and his whole face was transformed by a wide boyish grin. Gone was the somewhat stuffy looking reserved young man and in its place was a charming youth

“I fear we have not got off on the best foot Miss Kerr” he said “allow me to dance with you again and I promise to rectify my dullness”

She smiled “I would like that sir” she said
Edward arrived home after the ball and for once he’d enjoyed himself. Florence had turned out to be
good company; very different from the other milksop’s that had been paraded in front of him. Her
frankness about being uninterested in politics along with being clear that she had found his lack of
effort to be sociable unacceptable was such a contrast to the other ladies he’d met, all of whom had
seemed eager to agree with his every word. He’d danced twice more with her and found her to be an
engaging conversationalist. She might not be keen on politics but she seemed to have a lively and
interested mind about other topics. She was also very pretty a fact he could appreciate though she did
not stir anything within him in that way as yet; he supposed though that would come with time. If he
must marry someone like Florence would be quite suitable. He would discuss it with his parents.

Florence had also enjoyed herself. Although of course she could not dance with Mr. Drummond too
much (3 dances was the acceptable limit) she had allowed him to accompany her to get some
refreshment and had agreed that as they were both attending the Duchess of Grafton’s ball the
following week that she might reserve a dance for him there. Truth be told, she’d happily had danced
with him all night. No other man there was as handsome, and once he had unbent a little, he was
charming company. The morning after the ball she let it be known to her parents that she found “that
Mr Drummond to be quite an agreeable young man” who took that to mean that they should
definitely include him in any future social occasions they had planned.

And so they progressed their relationship as was customary. Drummond’s mother paid calls on
Florence’s mother with Drummond in tow, Drummond was invited to soirees and balls at the
Lothian mansion, included in a weekend country house party at their estate in Scotland and invited to
dine with them on a regular basis. Of course they were never alone together but that was quite usual.
The more time he spent with Florence, the more Drummond became convinced she would be the
ideal wife. She had a happy knack of being able to make conversation with anyone, eminently useful
in a politicians wife who would need to entertain many people she would not particularly care for,
she could sing, play piano and draw so she would not find herself without diversions when he was
busy in Parliament, she was interested in what he did but had the good sense not to venture her
opinion on it, all in all she was extremely satisfactory. His friends told him he was a lucky devil, for
that as well as being charming and rich, she was also very beautiful. Drummond laughed and agreed with them though her beauty to him was just a back drop to her other qualities. He wondered occasionally about the other expectations being married would place on him, he was somewhat ignorant of what exactly went on in the bedchamber but he was sure his papa would explain, after all he and mama had had him had they not? If he had been asked whether or not he was in love with Florence he would have replied that he was but the truth was, he did not know, he did not know what love was meant to be like. Of course he had read of it but he believed that love as it was portrayed in novels and poems was something that women felt for men because they were designed that way and not something men would feel back. Women were so emotional after all while men were calm and rational, which was as it should be.

After some 6 months, Drummond believed he was ready to propose and he called on his father in his study

“Papa I have something important I would like to discuss with you”

“Oh?” Mr. Drummond senior waited though he half suspected what was coming

“I believe... that is to say I would like to marry Miss Kerr and I wondered if you and mama would give me your blessing to propose?”

“Of course my boy of course!” his father came round the desk and clapped him on the shoulder “she will make you an excellent wife!”

“Thank you. Of course I must call on her father first to ask his permission and he may not grant it”

Mr Drummond senior laughed “well if he doesn’t, he’ll be the most enormous fool I’ve ever laid eyes on but I think you’ll have no fears in that direction” he didn’t add that he had seen the Marques at their club and they had talked of how it would be if their darling girl and dearest boy wed and it was clear that the Marques would like nothing more.

Drummond smiled “then I shall make haste”; he summoned a page and scribbled a note to the Marques requesting permission to call on him that afternoon at 1 o clock

Although he fully expected the Marques to grant his proposal, Drummond was still not without apprehension as he waited in the library. Eventually the Marques arrived some 10 minutes late

“My apologies sir, some last minute business I had to attend too. Please sit” he indicated one of the red leather armchairs by the window

“I would prefer to stand if I may your lordship” said Drummond “I have something momentous to ask of you”

“Ah” the Marques smiled and nodded “then I feel we must definitely sit”

They sat and Drummond twisted his glove in his hand “I have come sir to beg your permission for Florence’s hand in marriage”

The Marques looked at him “I feel I should ask what your prospects are and if you can keep my daughter in the manner to which she is accustomed but I know that the answer to these is excellent and most definitely, therefore I must ask you another question, do you love her?”

“Of course sir, she is a wonderful charming girl, a jewel amongst women” answered Drummond; of
course he loved her, they could talk, they enjoyed similar things, and they understood their obligations, that was love was it not?

“Then I happily grant my permission” the Marques rose as did Drummond and they shook hands “but my permission is nothing if Florence says no, I suggest you go and ask her. I believe I saw her in the conservatory”

Florence was in the conservatory pretending with trembling hands to trim the roses. She knew that Edward had asked permission to see her father and what he would have been seeing him about. She heard the door open, felt a rush of cooler air and then footsteps

“Miss Kerr”

She turned to face him

“Mr. Drummond”

“Miss Kerr….Florence” he took both her hands in his “I wonder if I may ask you to do me the highest honour in the land and consent to being my wife?”

“I…Edward” Florence knew that for girls of her station, some reluctance was generally seen to be acceptable but she could not bring herself to feign any not even for social convention “yes, yes my dearest, I will”

Drummond’s gorgeous life affirming smile was all the thanks she needed as she nestled herself into his arms. Drummond was somewhat taken aback but he dropped his arms round her shoulders and held her like he understood she wanted to be. She was very small he thought idly, compared to him

“Edward” she turned her face up to him, tears glistening on her lashes and he realised that he was meant to kiss her. He pressed his lips against hers gently wondering if this was what all the fuss was about. He didn’t really feel any of the things he was told he should physically, his heart didn’t race, he didn’t feel faint, he just felt, well nothing really, just rather awkward. Fortunately none of this seemed to convey itself to Florence who gasped and then began to cry in earnest against his chest.

“I am sorry” she said between sobs “I have just waited so long for that moment my dearest”

Drummond didn’t really know what to do so he tightened his hold around her, she was a dear thing, she really was and he was sure that once they were married, he would feel those things he was meant too, he was sure of it.
A most handsome handsome man

Chapter Summary

Drummond and Alfred encounter each other for the first time

Chapter Notes

Historical stuff :)  
Victorian engagements we typically between 6 months and 2 years  
Now they are engaged Drummond and Florence are permitted to be alone together, hold hands and use each other's Christian names  
Lord Alfred was actually in the Royal Horse Guards who wore blue tunics (hence their nickname the blues) but as the show has in the uniform of the household cavalry, he's in that

The wedding date was set for a year hence, enough time for Florence and her mother to assemble her trousseau and to book the finest caterers and musicians demanded by people of their status in society. It would also give Drummond time to focus on his new important role in the party. Although not an MP, there were few who had more influence than the Prime Minister's private secretary. Every letter, every message, every petition, every draft bill came across his desk, he knew the inner working of both Peel's mind and that of the Party and was oft regarded as a buffer between the two. It was therefore no surprise that once Peel had he his first formal meeting with the Queen to kiss her hand and ask permission to form a government that it was Drummond who accompanied him to the palace to meet with her.

At first due to the Queen's delicate condition in being pregnant with her first child, they had worked primarily with the Prince Consort. They had found him a pleasure to work with, very much on their wave length, sensible, rational, able to weigh up evidence and make decisions quickly. Drummond knew Peel was not looking forward to the queen returning and was still hoping that now she was a mother, she would focus her energies on that, after all wasn’t that where women were for? It still seemed unnatural to many in parliament that this tiny young woman was their sovereign to whom they must all defer.

These hopes were dashed, when Victoria made it clear that she was returning to her duties and that the red boxes which Prince Albert had been taking receipt of, were to be returned to her.

Drummond had been dispatched to the palace with an urgent box for Her Majesty concerning matters about the army. He thought it wrong that she should have to concern herself with such male affairs, he could not imagine his Florence having to read about such things but his was not to reason why. The Queen had taken the boxes back and that was that. He arrived at the palace, was escorted to an ante chamber to wait and told that someone would see him presently.

At length the door opened at the far end of the room and a young man dressed in the bright red and gold uniform of the household cavalry walked towards him. Drummonds first thought was ‘thank
goodness, a military man, at least there was someone with some expertise who could advise her majesty', the second as the man got closer, was that he had never seen anyone whose hair seemed to actually be spun out of gold before. His Florence had blonde hair but it didn’t seem to catch every shaft of light in the room and gleam the way this man’s did

“Mr Drummond?” The man bowed and then looked up at Drummond who was taller by perhaps 2 or 3 inches and Drummond was confronted by the bluest eyes he’d ever seen

“Lord Alfred Paget. I understand You have boxes for Her Majesty? Perhaps I may relieve you of them?” And he held out his hand

Drummond stared at him wordlessly for a few seconds, his heart had done the most peculiar irregular thump

Lord Alfred looked at him quizzically “the boxes” he repeated

Drummond mentally shook himself “of course” he handed them over “they contain some military information Her Majesty may find difficult to comprehend, perhaps you…someone…could be with her as she goes through it”

Lord Alfred nodded “thank you, I shall mention it to the prince though her majesty will I’m sure prefer to do the initial reading alone. Is there anything else?”

Drummond stood there thinking that he honestly could not recall if there was or there wasn’t, all he could think of was that he might be unwell for along with these peculiar heartbeats, he was feeling somewhat warm, far warmer than would be expected inside a draughty palace

“I do not believe so” he said

“Then I will not detain you” said Lord Alfred and Drummond knew he was being dismissed “I am sure you have much work to do”

“Indeed” said Drummond “It was good to make your acquaintance Lord Alfred, I am sure we shall meet again”

Lord Alfred bowed again “likewise mr Drummond and I am sure we shall” and then he turned and walked back up the room and out of the door

Drummond slumped back down on one of the chairs, he really must make an appointment with the doctor, he really had no time to be ill, he had far too much to do.

That evening he called on Florence

“Edward” as always she was delighted to see him, he knew now that she expected him to kiss her cheek which he did and then they sat down. Now that they were engaged, they were permitted to be alone together though with the door left open.

“Tell me of your day” she said

Drummond knew by now that that meant ‘tell me of any interesting things you’ve done, do not bore me with the details of plans for amendments to obscure bills’
“I went to the palace” he said; he knew Florence loved to hear of when he did that, for like all young women she was fascinated by the queen. The idea that a young woman ruled the country and that man had to defer to her was something they could hardly understand. Florence found it both shockingly against the natural order of things and also secretly thrilling! How wonderful to have so much freedom she thought yet at the same time she found the idea frightening. She would not even begin to understand how she would manage without her dearest papa and now her dearest Edward to care for her and ensure she was protected from harm.

“Did you see Her Majesty?” She asked “how wonderful that she is now a mother!” And then she blushed and murmured “just as I hope I will be one day”

“Mmmmm” said Drummond noncommittally; he knew of course they would have children after they were married but he was unable to imagine being a father when he had so many other things he wanted to do first.

“Alas I did not see the Queen but I did meet Lord Alfred Paget Her Majesty's equerry”.

The first thing Drummond had done when he got back the the House was make discrete enquirers about Lord Alfred. He liked to know who he was dealing with. The information had come back: son of the somewhat scandalous Marques of Anglesey, lieutenant in the Royal horse guards, the queens preferred dancing partner before her marriage and a member of her inner circle of friends. A man definitely worth cultivating thought Drummond especially as he foresaw there would be difficult times ahead with Her Majesty. Cordial relations with a man who knew and understood her might help smooth the way forward.

“And was he agreeable Edward?” She asked

“Very agreeable” he replied “I hope to become better acquainted with him as I believe it will help Sir Robert and myself in our meetings with the queen”

“I am sure you are right Edward” she said, “would you like me to play for you?” This was also a sign Edward had learned that she had now had enough of discussing his day

“I would” replied Edward, Florence playing always soothed him after his long days working hard in the House

She smiled at him and went gracefully to the piano by the window and sat down

Edward watched as her fingers danced over the keys, she was pretty he thought but her hair didn’t shine with the light the way Lord Alfred’s had earlier.

In his room, changing for dinner, Lord Alfred was also thinking on their brief meeting. A handsome man he thought, really the most he’d ever seen. A Tory alas but he knew the Prince spoke highly of him while he had been deputising for the Queen. He’d turned and looked back as he’d left the room and seen him slumped on the chair, staring at the floor as if deep in thought and he’d felt strangely cheated that he wasn’t looking back at him. He would have liked one more glimpse of that face. He sighed and went down to dinner to find Her Majesty was not in the best of moods

“Is anything wrong ma’am?” he asked

“I am extremely vexed Lord Alfred” she said “it seems I must be churched”

“Churched your majesty?” Lord Alfred looked puzzled; Victoria put down her soup spoon
“Sir Robert told me that it was customary for a woman who had given birth to be churched before they re entered public life” the Queen's annoyance was still written all over her face several hours after the meeting “and that secretary of his told me I had to be purified, purified! As if there is something sinful in having had a child”

Alfred was lost for words, not only did such an idea seem archaic but the fact that Peel’s Mr Drummond had actually said that to Her Majesty, and on their first meeting too! Alfred didn’t know whether to be horrified or applaud the mans bravery!

“So I will need you to arrange it Lord Alfred”

“Of course Ma’am” he paused delicately “I assume this is not a public ceremony?”

“Goodness no Lord Alfred! It is quite bad enough that I am forced to go through this charade, I will certainly not do it in public”

“Very good ma’am”

“It is all most humiliating! To be told by a man scare older than myself the first time I meet him that I need to be purified; he has certainly not endeared himself to me”

“I am sure he meant well ma’am” said Lord Alfred irrationally anxious that the Queen should not be too cross with Mr Drummond

“Well perhaps next time he can keep his well meaning thoughts to himself!” And she picked up her spoon again

With hindsight thought Drummond possibly he had been a little rash in saying what he had to Her Majesty but he had looked up all the protocols relating to a royal birth and he firmly believed things should be done properly. One of the reasons he felt the royal Family had lost a lot of support in the country over the past few decades was a quite deplorable lack of decorum, probity and the ignoring of tradition. He had to admit though that when the Queen had turned her steely gaze on him and said

“But I am not a woman, I am a Queen”

He had quailed inside and thought of backing down but no! Back down now and she would always have the upper hand so he had stood his ground. Luckily the Prince Consort had also backed them otherwise he suspected they would have a real battle on their hands.

Nevertheless that didn’t mean he wasn’t highly nervous at the thought of seeing Her Majesty again especially as he knew from Sir Robert that she was on the warpath about what was happening in Afghanistan. They were all doing their best to keep the dire situation from her, such thing were not for ladies ears (though he knew Wellington strongly disagreed)

“Is there any news of my troops?” She asked him directly

He hedged his bets “not to my knowledge ma’am” which was technically true, least ways there was no new news

“When there is news I wish to be informed at once do you understand? At once mr Drummond”

He bowed “very good ma’am” and backed out rapidly and turning on his heel nearly bumped into Lord Alfred
“Drummond” he said, his voice low looking directly at him and what was this? There was that heart thump again! He’d been absolutely fine for weeks and then there it was again. Lord Alfred paused as if he wanted to say something and then nodded at him and passed on in to see the Queen.

Drummond stared after him, really this was all most odd.
very much in common

Chapter Summary

Alfred & Drummond meet to discuss the guest list for the soiree

Chapter Notes

one of the great unanswered Drumfred questions was always what happened that
meeting where they discussed the guest list for the soiree so here is my interpretation of
it along with a little bit of Alfred's back story. It's always puzzled me as to why despite
being the least subtle flirt ever, it was always Drummond who made the major moves -
lets get naked in a pond, diving in for the kiss so this explains why that is :)

After that Drummond began to notice Lord Alfred more and more as he went to the Palace. He was
often just there with her Majesty either dressed in his uniform which looked most becoming on him
or in his everyday clothes usually in delicate shades of blue or lavender or grey. Drummond told
himself that there was nothing unusual in admiring another man’s wardrobe. He himself was always
very devoted to his appearance, wearing those earthy colours of burgundy or deep brown that he
knew suited him best. He was merely appreciating that Lord Alfred was clearly of the same mind
when it come to appearances.

Occasionally they would speak, not much more than just passing the time of the day in a corridor and
Drummond soon found he was searching out eagerly with his eyes to see if the other man was there
every time he went to the Palace. He found Lord Alfred most agreeable company and he clearly
understood the Queen very well plus he had intimate knowledge of the court and its politics which
he was able to keep Drummond abreast of. He told himself that the little drop in his stomach he felt
on the odd occasion he went to the Palace and Alfred wasn’t there was merely because that meant
the meeting was likely to be a tedious one. Lord Alfred had a way of lightning the atmosphere in the
room even when he didn’t say much. It was clear the Queen was very fond of him and the Prince
had a high regard for him too.

For some reason that he did not quite know, Drummond had not mentioned his engagement to Lord
Alfred. It seemed that Lord Alfred himself was not promised to anyone and Drummond welcomed
the opportunity not to have to discuss wedding matters. As they were due to marry in Scotland,
Florence and her mother spent much time there and his work meant that Drummond could not spend
days travelling back and forth with them. The Lothian’s of course had a house in London where he
would see Florence when she was in Town. It had to be said that the wedding had begun to seem
strangely unreal to Drummond. With Florence away so much and all discussions taking place by
letter, it was almost as if the wedding was happening to someone else. She would send long effusive
letters declaring her love for him and outlining in tiny detail their ideas about the wedding, whom she
had been seeing and the latest gossip. Drummond would dutifully write back saying how he missed
her, which of course he did but as he was slowly coming to realise, perhaps not as much as he
should.
And then one day, he began to realise that he was thinking of Lord Alfred more than he was of Florence. It was another day at the Palace and found himself in her majesty’s study when Prince Albert returned from visiting Sir Charles Babbage’s analytical machine. He had spied Lord Alfred in the corridor on the other side of the room, looking somewhat wistfully out of the window. He wondered what he was thinking about and had been pondering this when he knew he should have been listening earnestly to the conversation. It was not until he heard the Queen suggest that they leavened the scientists with some other talents that he looked up to see Lord Alfred coming towards them holding Dash in his arms and kissing her fur. It should have looked ridiculous but it was in fact the most charming tableau Drummond had ever seen. He heard him suggest that someone dance for them but he hadn’t caught the name as he couldn’t focus on anything but Alfred

“And you can pick the scientists Mr. Drummond”

“With pleasure ma’am” he said smiling realising with his insides fluttering in a most peculiar way that that would mean he would need to be alone with Lord Alfred for a private meeting. He looked at Lord Alfred who gave him a shy smile in return and Drummond’s heart skipped the innumerable beats in a way he could never recall it doing with Florence

One week later, Drummond was getting ready for his meeting with Lord Alfred. He told himself he was of course not taking any additional care with how he looked, he never left his room without looking immaculate, but possibly he didn’t check his mirror quite so many times if he was just on the way to the Houses of Parliament. He felt strangely nervous and excited at the same time which was ridiculous as it was just a meeting to discuss the guest list for a soiree, the kind of activity he’d done a hundred times before. But not his brain said very quietly, with Alfred.

At the Palace Alfred was sitting in one of the many ante chambers deep in thought awaiting Drummond. His initial instant attraction to the man was growing every time he saw him. He was unsure though whether Drummond was like him or not. He had always known that the fairer sex did not appeal to him; when his brothers and their friends had fought to secure the attentions of young ladies at parties in Plas Newyd the Paget country estate or their house in Grosvenor Place, he had only joined in half heartedly. It was not until he was 15 that he had truly understood just how different he was when during a game of sardines, he had found himself locked into a very small cupboard with William, the 16 year old brother of one of their friends. In the small space their arms and legs had begun to touch at first by accident and then it seemed by design. Then William had taken his hand and kissed it before gently pressing his lips against Alfred’s. Alfred’s initial surprise had quickly given way and he had kissed William back, only stopping when his brother George had eventually identified their hiding place. He and William had managed a few more kisses on other visits before suddenly William didn’t come to the house anymore. Later at the age of 18 when he had gone away to the army, he had developed an intense friendship with a fellow officer named Henry. One night he and Henry had become separated from the others whilst carrying out a training exercise in the woods. He had never forgotten how Henry had raked his eyes over his body and pulled him into a breathless kiss, unbuttoning his tunic and mouthing at his skin. Alfred didn’t think they had been seen but Henry was transferred to another regiment just 2 weeks later. When he returned to Plas Newyd, he had become friendly with another George the younger son of one of their new neighbours. They spent many hours together riding, talking, sharing looks and discrete touches. Alfred was absolutely certain that George shared his feelings and then one terrible day, George had confessed to him that he was to be married and had to leave.

What Alfred had learned from these instances was that people he cared for were taken away from him. He came to Court determined never to be in a position again where he could be hurt. At Court his job was to be pleasant, diplomatic and ensure her Majesty’s life ran smoothly and he was very good at it. There were a very few people he could be himself with, Harriet Duchess of Sutherland was an old old friend who understood without being told that he would not be interested in any
efforts at matchmaking with her friends, similarly Emma Portman with her calm grey eyes also seemed to know what he really was and did not judge. However, he had almost resigned himself to spending his life more or less alone; better than be caught for what he was and face the ignominy of a trial and jail. He sensed though that Drummond was going to test the decision he had made. Drummond with his handsome, but also open and honest face troubled his thoughts far more than he should.

Drummond arrived and saw Alfred sat there thinking

“Penny for them?” he said shyly

“Drummond” Alfred’s face lit up with a smile and Drummond’s heart did that peculiar bouncing thing again

“I trust you are well Lord Alfred” said Drummond

“Quite well” he gestured at the table by the window “please sit” and they sat down.

Drummond who had mentally rehearsed on the way over what he was going to say found that now he was here all his words had flown out of his head. He fell back on his administration skills which had never failed him. He removed a list from the document holder he was carrying and handed it to Alfred

“I’ve prepared this” he said handing over a beautifully scribed neatly laid out piece of paper

Alfred took it and smiled “you are so organised Drummond, I feel quite ashamed at the jottings in my notebook”

Drummond felt himself go red at the compliment and he looked over at him bashfully

“It is my job to be” he said

“Then I hope Sir Robert realises how lucky he is to have you”

Drummond felt himself go even redder and he coughed

“What names do you have?” he asked “I confess I am rather ignorant of the ballet and the theatre though I do enjoy the opera when I have time to go”

“We can soon remedy that” said Alfred “I am sure Her Majesty would not mind if you accompanied us to the theatre on occasion if the Prime Minister can spare you”

“I would like that” replied Drummond “the House can be somewhat tiring at times and I feel it would do me good to have a change of scenery”

Alfred cocked his head to one side “tell me Drummond, why politics?”

Drummond gave a half laugh “sometimes I wonder” he said “with all the headaches it brings, managing party squabbles and so many discordant personalities but I believe only through politics can I really make a difference and that is what I want to make, a difference to this country and the people in it”

“That is very admirable” said Alfred “I fear that I would not find it to my taste though my father has suggested it”

“You preferred the army?” asked Drummond
Alfred grimaced “not especially but when one is the 6th son with so any brothers, ones options are rather limited. Politics, the Army, Court or the Church and I do not believe I would make a good Bishop” and he gave Drummond a broad grin that sent Drummond’s insides all a flutter again.

“Court life seems to suit you” said Drummond in an effort to quell the rather disturbing feelings he was experiencing

“It does” said Alfred “I am of help Her Majesty who has a very hard task, to be a Queen, a wife and a mother, to balance the needs of all and to remain neutral” he shook his head “hard enough for a man past his fiftieth year but for a young women like Her Majesty it is surpassing difficult. I am here to arrange her life so it is as easy as it can be given the demands of her position”

Drummond nodded “then we have similar roles, I do the same for Sir Robert though I confess his role is less demanding, at least I do not have to live with Sir Robert” he said smiling

“I believe we have much in common Drummond” said Alfred “very much in common indeed”
The soiree had been an immense success; Drummond couldn’t remember spending a more enjoyable evening for many a time. Alfred had introduced him to the artistes performing for them “this is Mr. Drummond, the Prime Minister's Private Secretary, keep an eye on him, he's destined for a great future and he had introduced Alfred to the scientists feeling a thrill of pride every time he said “may I introduce you to my friend Lord Alfred the Queen’s Equerry” my friend, yes they were friends. He told himself that his friendship with Alfred was exactly as it was with anyone else even though he was finding more and more reasons to go to the Palace carrying inconsequential messages or papers that any one of the dozen or so messengers at Parliament could have delivered.

And then one day he faced the prospect that his friendship with Lord Alfred might not be exactly the same as those he had with others.

Despite the lateness of the hour, he had insisted on carrying some papers to the Palace. He hadn’t seen Alfred for several days and he found that he missed him to a degree completely out of kilter with the amount of time he’d spent with him. It puzzled him greatly, why this man of all the men he knew, should seem to leave such a gap in his life when he didn’t see him. There were other men he knew better, were more attuned to his beliefs (Alfred alas was a Whig), were more interested in politics, more driven just as Drummond himself was and yet despite all that it was Alfred’s face he first sought in any crowd.

The Palace was quiet with many corridors in darkness, as he paced quietly towards the Queens private apartments, he glanced to the side as a flash of red caught his eye and saw that Alfred was standing there trying vainly to light a cheroot. He was clad in his uniform which meant he had been out with the Queen but there was something in the way he stood, shoulders tense, jaw set, quite at odds with his usual sunny demeanour that suggested all was not well

Drummond’s heart lifted at seeing him there and he approached him filled with a desire to make the tension in his body disappear
“Is the Queen back?” he said as a way of opening “I have some papers for her from the Prime Minister”

“She is” replied Alfred and then perhaps feeling he needed to explain the cheroot and his expression he said “it’s been a very trying day”

“This might help” said Drummond eagerly pulling out his tinderbox and striking the flint; at once a tall flame leapt up lighting Alfred’s cheroot

Alfred blinked at him “how well equipped you are” he said. There was nothing in the manner of how he said it that anyone could have called attention to and yet the strange thump that his heart did when he saw Alfred suddenly seemed to move, there was no other way of putting it, further down his body and his whole being flared up with pleasure. He beamed at Alfred

“I never go anywhere without my tinderbox” he said, not perhaps the most witty remark he could have made but he could think of nothing better to say consumed as he was with the feelings in his body.

Alfred looked at him quizzically, almost it seemed on the verge of saying something and then he just nodded. Drummond felt the moment pass and suddenly he felt odd and awkward. He gestured with the folder and left.

He lay awake all night thoroughly ashamed of himself. He was not a boy of 14 to get suddenly aroused without cause because there had been no cause to become suddenly inflamed. There had been no women there only Lord Alfred who was already a good friend but he refused to countenance for one minute he had those sorts of feelings about him; it was simply out of the question! Worse than that it was actively against the teachings of the church, it was illegal, immoral and wrong. Oh he knew of boys in school who had “spooned” as they called it though he himself had never indulged but that was different, they had been boys and he was a man, a man of nearly five and twenty who was soon to be married.

At that thought he rolled on his side and contemplated his marriage. He had had another letter from Florence asking when he was coming to Scotland as she missed him. All of a sudden he felt a wave of affection for her. Florence did not cause strange and confusing feelings in him. She was a clever, kind, and good girl who would make him a wonderful wife. In fact he would write to her this instant telling her that he would come to Scotland that very weekend to see her.

“Mama!” said Florence excitedly “Edward is coming to Scotland this weekend”

“Goodness” exclaimed her mother “we must arrange a dinner to celebrate, that is if you would like that my dear” she added “if you would not prefer to spend time alone with him”

Florence laughed “we are to be married mama; we have all the time in the world to be alone together besides I would like him to meet more of my friends”

“Then I shall send out invitations straight away”

“Edward” Florence came out onto the drive with her hands outstretched “I have missed you”
Drummond took her hands in his “and I you” he said and he bent down and kissed her lips waiting for something to happen in his body but….

Nothing, there was nothing. None of the heart thump he felt when he was with Alfred, none of the heat, none of the sensations, just nothing.

She took his arm “come you must be tired after your long journey” she said and she led him into the house

At dinner, Drummond met a number of Florence’s friends all of whom were delightful people. The women chattered animatedly about the wedding while the men rolled their eyes conspiratorially at Drummond and said afterwards over port and cigars that there was nothing like a wedding to truly excite the ladies.

After all the guests had departed and her parents had tactfully withdrawn to the other side of the vast drawing room, Florence came to Drummond by the fire

“I hope you enjoyed yourself Edward” she said taking his arm

“It was a very pleasant evening” he said smiling at her

I’m so glad” she paused “I am sad that business keeps you in London so much”

“I’m afraid we don’t yet have our own Parliament here my dear” said Drummond “sadly politics demands that I be in London with the Prime Minister”

She nodded “perhaps I might contrive to spend more time in London then”

Drummond hesitated; unbidden the image of another face swam into his mind, with hair that was gold rather than just blonde and the most sparkling blue eyes he’d ever seen

“ alas I fear even in London my time is so limited I could not promise to see much of you” he said “when we are married it will be different” thinking he ought to add something positive at the end as he saw her face fall

“You are right of course Edward” she said “I was just being silly once we reside together as husband and wife, we will have all the time to be together”

Drummond returned to London with a feeling of relief. He had been particularly pleased at how quickly Florence had fallen in with his wishes. It wasn’t that he wanted some dull miss who would just agree with him on everything but equally men were head of the household. Florence would of course have free reign over things like décor of the house, the supervision of staff, social engagements and the children but the important matters would always rest with him. He had spoken at length with her father to discuss his career, developments in the party and where they might purchase a house to live in after their marriage and spent hours indulgently listening as Florence and her mother alternately chattered about the wedding and then shhhhhhd themselves giggling as the bridegroom shouldn’t know too much about what was going on. Whatever these feelings were he had when he saw Lord Alfred were probably a symptom of overwork he told himself; as soon as he as married and especially once Florence was truly his wife, they would go away.

“Ah Drummond” said Sir Robert “good to have you back. I trust you enjoyed your sojourn in
Scotland?”

“It was most restful” replied Drummond

“I am glad to hear it as I fear this morning’s meeting with Her Majesty may not be. She is of a mind to discuss the Corn Laws”

“Ah” said Drummond his heart already beating faster, (well he had walked very fast to be here), a meeting with the Queen meant almost certainly seeing Lord Alfred.

It was as if the gods were playing with him. The Queen was sat on the sofa, the Prince was to the side of the room and in front of the window almost as if he had stood so the light would catch him just so was Alfred. He looked ethereally beautiful, delicate and sweet like a sugared violet and in that moment Drummond knew that whatever he had told himself and no matter how much he tried to put it down to the heat in the room, or a bilious attack or being over tired, it was Alfred and only Alfred that caused those heart thumps, those rushes of pleasure, that heat in his body. Denying it was as fruitless as trying to walk on water. Just then Alfred’s eyes which had been focused on the Queen slid to his and Drummond raised his eyebrow slightly at him.

The Queen it seemed was less than happy with Sir Robert’s attempts to defend the Corn Laws and both of them seemed close to losing their tempers. Filled with an urge to solve the problem and it had to be said impress Alfred with his political nous, Drummond decided to make a suggestion

“Ma’am as the leader of fashionable society, you could make it known that you will only wear spitalfields silk”

Alfred’s whole body seemed to become alert and he came to stand next to Drummond

“Indeed ma’am if you presided at an occasion where all the guests were required to wear it that would bring attention to the matter as nothing else could”

And they exchanged a conspiratorial glance and smile

The Queen seemed very enthused “an excellent notion! What about a ball?” she said

Sir Robert however wasn’t going to give up without a fight and made a reference to Marie Antoinette which made Drummond wince internally. Suggesting to the Queen she might face the same end as the ill fated Queen of France did not seem to him the way to win the Queen’s support. Her Majesty however was equal to him

“If I were a member of the lower orders” she said fixing him with a gimlet look “I might blame the Prime Minister who supports the Corn Laws that make bread unaffordable”

And Drummond couldn’t help it, he and Alfred turned as if one towards the prime minister and looked at him questioningly almost daring him to disagree but Sir Robert clearly thought silence was the better part of valour this time and he closed his mouth.

Sir Robert left in high dudgeon ordering Drummond to wait at the palace for the papers the queen was signing; Drummond took that as a strong signal he was in trouble. While the queen was adding her signature, Alfred approached him

“Will you attend the ball?”
“I will do all I can” said Drummond “though I fear Sir Robert may not like it or attend himself”

”I am sure the Queen will be most disappointed” said Alfred, blue eyes laughing

“I believe she will manage to bear it” said Drummond solemnly and then he smiled seeing his smile reflected back at him in Alfred’s eyes.

Scotland suddenly seemed a very long time ago
Chapter Summary

Drummond goes to the ball and asks a favour of Florence

Chapter Notes

we all wanted to know how they ended up at the ball dressed identically and so here's my explanation fwiw

Sir Robert grudgingly gave his permission for Drummond to go to the ball

“One of us should be there I suppose to observe this folly from close quarters” he scowled at Drummond “and do not think I have forgotten your role in this foolery”

Drummond realising the better part of valour was to keep silent said nothing. Sir Robert had been right the ball was immensely unpopular in the House and although the Prime Minister defended the queen publicly, in private he was furious and had even approached the prince to try and get him to put a stop to it all to no avail.

Drummond couldn't wait to tell Alfred he was coming and eagerly approached him next time he was at the palace

“Sir Robert has said he would like me to attend the ball” he said

“I am delighted Drummond” said Alfred with a smile “the queen has decided on a medieval theme to encourage everyone to order new costumes”

“Oh” the idea it might be a fancy dress ball had not occurred to Drummond

“What’s the matter Drummond?” said Alfred “medieval history doesn’t appeal to you?”

“It is not that, it is just, I wouldn’t know what to wear” he gazed at Alfred worriedly “what will you go as?”

Alfred shrugged “I haven’t given the matter much thought, it is my experience at balls that people are very rarely discussing what the men are wearing”

“No that is generally the truth”, they both paused and looked at the floor for a few seconds

“Though it would be nice to make them talk for once” grinned Alfred suddenly “we could consider matching our costumes”

“Matching our costumes?”

“nothing too elaborate of course but it might be amusing to see if people notice plus I have heard talk
that the prime minister is unhappy about the ball and while we may know that he is, publicly that
can’t be seen to be the case” he looked shrewdly at Drummond “if people saw the prime ministers
secretary and the queens equerry in harmony then that may put an end to the speculation”

“What a splendid idea” said Drummond warmly “of course it would help to allay suspicions of a rift
between the queen and the prime minister”

“Then it is agreed” smiled Alfred “if you go along to my tailor, he will take your measurements”

“We have yet to decide what to go as” said Drummond

“If you are happy to leave that to me, I would like to surprise you” said Alfred

Drummond smiled and nodded “of course” Alfred always look superbly turned out so he had no fear
they would end up looking ridiculous.

He had of course been right to trust Alfred. He had designed a beautiful pair of matching knight’s
costumes in blue and gold. When Drummond arrived at the palace wearing his, he felt somewhat shy
waiting for Alfred which was soon dispelled when Alfred appeared in his costume smiling broadly

“Drummond! How fetching you look!” he grinned “are you looking forward to the evening’s
entertainments?”

Drummond nodded feeling somewhat giddy. He had been working very hard, his engagement was
becoming a source of some disquiet to him and he still had no idea how to process his feelings
regarding Alfred. He really needed a night where he could forget his cares for a few hours

No expense had been spared for the ball. There was an astonishing amount of food & drink, the best
musicians, priceless medieval tapestries brought from Windsor to give authenticity. Drummond was
much in demand as a dance partner and he made sure whenever he could he was dancing next to
Alfred, beaming far more at him than whomever he was dancing with. Their matching costumes had
been noted with Ernst laughing that if he had known they wanted to be identical he would have hired
them as his Merry Men.

As the night wore on and it had to be said, he drank more and more champagne, Drummond started
to feel melancholy. He really was enjoying himself and yet he was so confused by his feelings. By
rights he should have been here with Florence and he knew that in years to come, he would be
attending balls with her and certainly not Alfred. The thought left him feeling sadly dispirited. He
didn’t understand why Alfred was causing these emotions in him and he also didn’t know if Alfred
felt them too and he certainly couldn’t imagine asking him! Asking another man if his heart beat
faster or his pulse raced at the sight of him, the very absurdity of it almost made him smile. He was so
deep in thought starting at the painting in front of him without really seeing it, that he did not hear
Alfred approach him

“Oh what can ail thee knight at arms” quoted Alfred “alone and palely loitering. Why aren’t you in
there delighting the damsels?”

“I don’t know Lord Alfred” he riposted “why aren’t you?” perhaps it was the effect of the
champagne but Drummond stared at Alfred in a way he knew it was not appropriate to look at
another man. It probably didn’t help that Alfred had undone his jerkin and shirt and his face was
flushed from dancing but still he knew it was really no excuse, if he had looked at a woman like that,
her father would have called him out
Allred looked back at him and Drummond’s heart banged loudly in his chest as Alfred did not look at all shocked, upset or even remotely concerned by the way Drummond had looked at him. Instead he looked him up and down, quirked a smile at him and walked off with Drummond staring after him.

He spent the next week in an agony of indecision. The look he had given Alfred and that had been returned was the type of look usually exchanged by a man and a woman not two men. He had never though wanted to exchange such a look with Florence. He couldn’t face the idea that he was attracted to men, he had not been attracted to men in the past and he didn’t find himself looking at other men. No it wasn’t men per se he was attracted to, it was Alfred. And he didn’t know what to do.

Letters flowed regularly from Florence; the wedding plans were speeding up. It seemed to him entirely wrong in every way that he should be getting married soon not when he was so confused. He didn’t want to call the wedding off, he wanted to be married at least he thought he did and anyway it was the right thing to do for a man in his position but equally, he didn’t think he could marry in 4 months time. He needed time, time to work things through in his head, time to understand himself, time to come to terms with whatever his feelings were for Alfred.

With a sense of dread he wrote to Florence

“My dearest Florence

I find I must throw myself on your mercy and your love and beg a favour of you. I need to ask that we postpone our wedding for a further 6 months. Matters in Parliament and at Court are such that my absence even for such a joyous occasion as this will cause significant difficulties to the prime minister.

I hope my dearest that you understand that I would not ask this of you if it was not of the greatest importance”

He sent the letter and prayed that Florence would understand.
Drummond didn’t think he had ever felt so terribly uncomfortable and downright bad in his life. Inside her bedroom the Queen was giving birth and her screams and howls echoed round the wing of the Palace. It seemed to Drummond terribly wrong that they should be here, this room of men, listening to a young woman screaming in pain. He knew why they were there, it was customary to ensure that the baby was indeed produced by the Queen and a legitimate heir but that didn't make it any less unpleasant for them and certainly not for the Queen. The doctor was clearly very concerned and he reached into his bag and pulled out a terrifying metal set of forceps.

The Queen begged piteously “no no” in between her screams and Drummond almost wept at the terror in her voice. The Prince, his face stark with fear shut the door and they waited in silence.

Eventually the Prince opened the door, his body sagging with relief.

“Gentlemen we have a Prince of Wales”

Drummond joined in the rapturous applause but really he felt somewhat ashamed. Obviously as an unmarried man he'd never had any encounter with childbirth and what a messy, bloody, painful business it was. He couldn't imagine putting Florence through such an ordeal. Frankly he wondered now having witnessed it even at a distance, how husbands could bear to see their wives like that and how women bore it. As for the Queen he thought, the least she deserved was that she went through such an experience with some privacy.

A few weeks later, he received a letter from Florence with some unwelcome news. She had been upset about postponing the wedding but she had agreed to it; she had intimated though that her mama, and especially her papa, were not happy.

Dearest Edward
As I suspected mama and papa are very unhappy about the postponement though they have fallen in line with my wishes as you know, however papa is coming to London in a month’s time and wishes to meet with you to discuss it

She then went on to talk of going to Paris to order clothes for their honeymoon; she had her heart set on a tour of the Italian lakes and mountains and ended with a wish that he not work too hard and to write soon

He sat at his desk and rubbed his face, events were getting so very complicated and he couldn’t control them which he found particularly hard. Control had always been his watchword but now he felt he had none at all; he was at the mercy of his feelings and it made him deeply unsettled. Far from clearing his head about Alfred, he found thoughts of him were invading his head more & more. He would find himself staring out of the window thinking of Alfred’s smile when he should have been amending papers or his mind would wander to a remark of Alfred’s when he should have been listening to Sir Robert expound his latest domestic policy. He would deconstruct their smallest encounter for hours, turning over what Alfred had meant when he said *that*, even if *that* was just “good morning Drummond”. He was also dreaming of him, dreams that on some occasion were most improper and led to him waking up needing to furtively clean his sheets in a way he hadn’t had too since he was 14. Drummond knew he was sinking in deeper and deeper and not only did he not know how, to stop himself he wasn’t sure he even wanted to.

He sighed and headed over to Parliament only to intercept a fraught looking Sir Robert

“Ah Drummond” he said “I’ve just heard the Prince's father has died. I need you go to the Palace to express our immediate condolences and to find out when he leaves for Cobourg and if the Queen will accompany him”

Drummond nodded, it would of course be likely he would see Alfred and he still wasnt sure how he felt about that. Florence agreeing to postpone the wedding had been what he wanted but he knew now that he had to try and sort out his head about Alfred in the intervening 6 months. He could not carry on like this

After expressing the Government’s official condolences to a distracted Queen (the Prince himself did not wish to see anyone), Drummond was in no mood to hurry back to Parliament or to do much at all. He missed Alfred who had not seen in some days and though he knew he shouldn't, he couldn't help himself. Feeling very despondent and in need of some air, he stepped out through some glass doors onto a balcony overlooking the gardens. He thought back to a few months ago and how complacent he had been about his life which he had so carefully mapped out; ‘now look at me’ he thought ruefully

“Drummond” said a familiar voice “what brings you to this corner of the palace?” and Alfred stepped out onto the balcony

“A dark day for the Prince” said Drummond knowing that was the correct thing to say “do you think the Queen might accompany him to the funeral?”

Alfred lit his cigarette “I think not” he said “the Queen has been out of sorts since the birth”

“I would have thought she’d be happy to have secured an heir” replied Drummond somewhat puzzled, producing an heir was the main job of a Queen, regnant or not, and now she had done it, surely it was a matter for rejoicing

“Well I suppose we shall never understand the fairer sex will we?” said Alfred and, there was no other way to describe it, he winked at Drummond and the tone of his voice suggested that it wasn’t
Drummond wasn’t prone to blushing but he nearly did then as he realised that Alfred almost certainly did feel the same as he did and he couldn’t help a small shy smile lighting his face.

It soon became apparent the Queen was not coping well with either the loss of Albert by her side or the aftermath of becoming a mother again.

Sir Robert was anxious to draw the Queen out of herself

“It does her no good to sit fretting” he said to Drummond “she needs to be out amongst the people, seeing their regard for her could only help her spirits”

Drummond agreed and suggested that perhaps he discuss with Lord Alfred the best way to do this as he was such a good friend to Her Majesty

“Excellent idea Drummond” said Sir Robert warmly “he is a good man to know”

Drummond sent a note to Alfred asking to meet and Alfred asked him to come to the palace as he didn’t like to leave the Queen by herself too long

“the Prime Minister and I are most concerned for Her Majesty” began Drummond “her spirits seem so low; sir Robert feels it would do her good to get out amongst the people and see what high regard they hold her in”

Alfred nodded “I agree Drummond but Her Majesty” he paused “I have never seen her quite like this. She feels the loss of the Prince so keenly “he put his head on one side and fixed Drummond with a wide eyed blue gaze “it is hard when one misses the person they care for greatly” he finished softly

Drummond flushed red and his heart soared, there was no mistaking the undercurrent in Alfred’s voice

“It is” he said quietly “very hard” and they exchanged a long look before they were interrupted by a maid coming to stoke up the fire

“Perhaps we should discuss Her Majesty, Drummond” said Alfred “do you and Sir Robert have any ideas as to how we could get Her Majesty to show herself?”

“Isambard Brunel has completed his tunnel under the Thames” said Drummond, his voice speeding up with excitement “it is a marvel! People can now walk from one side of the Thames to the other under the river”

Alfred shook his head with wonder “he is an extraordinary man!”

“There is to be a gala opening and Sir Robert and I thought the Queen might attend”

Alfred wrinkled his nose as he thought which made Drummond absurdly want to reach out and stroke it and then he said “it would be ideal but a tunnel may hold some fears for Her Majesty I understand there have been accidents”
“It is perfectly safe” said Drummond “I have a model of it which explains how it was made”

“Then bring that along to see Her Majesty” said Alfred “I believe it will help her see the marvel of it”

The meeting with the Queen did not go as hoped. The Queen was clearly distracted and unhappy, when Drummond finished explaining about the tunnel there was a pause and then Sir Robert said

“I expect you would like to attend a matter of such national significance ma’am”

“I….I can’t” said the Queen

Alfred and Drummond looked at each other and Alfred gestured almost imperceptibly towards the model Drummond had bought

“Perhaps you might take a look at this ma’am” he said.

The Queen clearly was not enthused by the idea but she nevertheless allowed Drummond to open the side of the box and she peered at it

“Goodness, what are all those people doing down there?” she asked with interest

“They are walking beneath the water ma’am” said Drummond

“Well!” said the Queen in an impressed tone of voice and Drummond looked at Alfred with the ghost of a smile on his face, he had been right

However their optimism proved short-lived

“I shall keep it” she said “but nevertheless I cannot attend”

Drummond looked taken aback and even Alfred was frowning, things were definitely worse than they thought

The gloomy atmosphere hung heaving around the palace as the Prince remained in Cobourg and the Queen sunk into ever more melancholy spirits

Sir Robert despatched Drummond regularly to the palace to keep an eye on things and he found himself repeatedly dining with the Queen and her court.

One particularly dreary evening had dragged past with the Queen almost silent meaning no one else could talk until she retired. The company withdrew gratefully and Drummond and Alfred found themselves alone by the fire with their cigars

“Such a shame no one wanted to join us” said Lord Alfred, his tone suggesting it was the complete opposite

“What are we going to talk about?” said Drummond with a smile raising his glass to Alfred thinking that at last this was the chance he’d been waiting for. He could talk to Alfred alone, in a relaxed calm manner about what exactly their feelings were for each other when suddenly Miss Coke appeared

Immediately the 2 men rose to their feet, Drummond inwardly cursing her as she burbled on about looking for her copy of Chopin
Lord Alfred as always immaculately mannered said “please miss coke why don’t you join us?” in a
voice that said he’d really rather she said no and went off to play the piano but frustratingly she sat in
the seat vacated by Drummond and started to talk about Prince Ernst. Drummond moved over to get
more port wanting to hit his head against the wall, everyone knew miss coke believed herself in love
with Prince Ernst and everyone also knew he had eyes for only Harriet Sutherland. She began to talk
about whether Prince Ernst would find a bride and Drummond couldn't help the feeling of guilt in his
stomach. It wasn’t long till he would have to see his prospective father in law and he had still not
mentioned to Alfred about his engagement which he knew he should but couldn’t bring himself to do

The meeting with his prospective father in law was every bit as awkward as he’d expected

“Drummond” said the Marques I am not inclined to beat about the bush, I am very disappointed at
your request to postpone the wedding”

“I understand sir” replied Drummond “believe me no one is more disappointed than me but my
responsibilities are such that it becomes harder and harder to devote the time to the wedding that I
should”

The Marques looked at him levelly “wedding planning is women’s work, there is no need for you to
be involved and you know that well”

“I hesitate to contradict you sir” said Drummond “but I would like us to have a modern marriage and
I believe it is my duty to support Florence on planning the wedding”

“Except sir you do not and have not done so, you have given Florence carte blanche to do as she
likes so I ask you what is really going on. Is that you do not wish to marry Florence at all?”

Drummond hesitated and the Marques ploughed on

“Because if that is the case sir, I give you fair warning that I will sue you for breach of promise, no
respectable family will have you in their home or trust your word again. My daughter loves you and
so I am delighted to welcome you as my son in law as that is the case but if I have cause to believe
for one second you are playing false with her feelings I will have you branded a liar in court and I
will personally horsewhip you up the Mall. Do I make myself clear?”

Drummond heart was beating so fast he thought it might burst out of his chest but all he said was
“perfectly clear sir. I do wish to marry Florence and I wish I could confide in you the exact nature of
the work I am doing for the government that makes my time so limited but alas it must remain
completely secret. Be assured though that I will marry Florence in 6 months time as I have promised
to do”

The Marques sat back “good, then we will speak no more about it, now can I press you to try the
kidney pudding? It is most damnably good”

Drummond nodded relieved it seemed he had got through it and the Marques summoned the waiter.
Neither man mentioned that at no point had the word “love” been said

Drummond left the lunch with a feeling of despair. There was no possibility he could not marry
Florence, he saw that now but he also knew it would not be the love match Florence believed it was
and lord only knew how he was going to break all this to Alfred. Then as if his day wasn’t already
dreadful enough he saw a familiar figure bounding up the stairs towards him
“Drummond” said Alfred his happiness at seeing him plainly written across his face “I didn’t know you were a member”

“I’m not” said Drummond wishing the ground would swallow him “I was meeting the Marques of Lothian”

Alfred looked puzzled by the deadness in Drummond’s voice “is he a friend of yours?”

His whole stomach shuddered with shame and his heart pounded as he said “he’s going to be my father in law”

He saw Alfred immediately almost shrink in front of him “you’re engaged?”

Drummond said nothing, he knew the guilt was etched on his face as he watched Alfred’s composure almost slip before he recovered himself “may I offer you my congratulations” he said his voice almost breaking “excuse me” and he hurried off past Drummond
France

Chapter Summary

Edwrad and Alfred enjoy an idyllic time in France before real life comes back with a vengence

Chapter Notes

So off our boys go to France. I am trying to speed through the recap of what's already happened as fast as I can so we can get onto the actual point of the story which is Drummond being married and what happens after but without revisiting what's already happened, it won't make sense so I hope you don't mind having to relive the pond shenanigans and obviously next time the kiss!

At first Drummond thought Alfred had been determined to have no more to do with him over the matter of his engagement. He had pointedly ignored him at the Palace whenever he was there and on the boat over to France sitting there reading the Iliad, his whole demeanour shouting 'leave me alone'. However in the carriage, somewhat squashed in as they were, listening to the Duchess expound at length about her dislike of France and the French referring to it as Sodom and Gomorrah, it seemed that Alfred could not help but smile at him. The relief had flooded him and he had smiled back, wishing that they were alone so he could apologise properly for what had happened.

The change had continued on their arrival at the chateau, Alfred seemed to be in a most playful mood, gently teasing Prince Albert that the French king might also wear make up after he'd expressed his disapproval at how much the French ladies painted their faces. Drummond had struggled to maintain an entirely straight face especially at the look on Albert's face when he said it. There were of course many many beautiful ladies in the room but he and Alfred paid them no mind despite the admiring glances they both received from behind fluttering fans. He had eyes only for Alfred and he only for him.

At dinner, they were placed opposite each other and Alfred treated him and Miss Coke to a sotto voce commentary on the people around the table and the French customs. When they came to hold the napkins in front of their faces to hide them from the sight of god as they ate the Ortolans, Alfred had raised his eyes heavenward and said that as there seemed to be so many sinful things going on at the French court that perhaps it would be better for God to have a large napkin to shield himself from the French court. Miss Coke had gasped and tapped him with her fan

"You shouldn't say such things Lord Alfred" she said with a smile "imagine what the Duchess would say if she could here you"

"I consider myself fully reprimanded" he said "I would never upset the Duchess for anything" and he winked at Drummond
By the time the dessert arrived, a large cone of profiteroles covered with spun sugar, Drummond himself was feeling light headed partly from the glasses of champagne and partly because Alfred’s foot seemed to keep finding its way to his leg and running up and down it.

The servant placed it on the table with a flourish and there was a round of applause

“look at that!” said Alfred his eyes most definitely on Drummond and not the dessert, making him look down shyly; the look in Alfred’s eyes was making his insides feel really most peculiar! “Such a shame the Duchess had to retire with a headache”

“I believe she would consider it the devil’s work” laughed Miss Coke who seemed to be enjoying herself hugely without the presence of her forbidding aunt

“Well I’m prepared to be led into temptation” said Alfred picked up his dessert fork “what about you Drummond?” he asked almost casually, looking away at his plate and not at Edward whose heart was almost bursting out of his chest at the implications behind Alfred’s words

“I think to refuse such a creation could cause a diplomatic incident” he said raising his eyebrows at Alfred and Alfred grinned back his eyes sparking with mischief.

Maybe it was the air in France or being in another country but the next day brought a continuation of Edward’s feeling of freedom. He didn’t even make any pretence of talking to anyone else, instead he spent his entire time with Alfred, talking, laughing, and exchanging flirtatious glances and smiles. Alfred did at least try and keep an eye on the Prince Consort who seemed to bristle with disapproval more and more every minute but not as much as the Duchess of Buccleuch who was quivering with outrage at the food she was offered. Alfred did manage to tell the endlessly patient but entirely French speaking servant that the Duchess wanted some tea and some bread with grilled cheese. The Duke of Montpensier who’d clearly been told to try and entertain the Prince was struggling to find common ground until Albert asked about the upkeep of the forest and the Duke seeing a possible chance of escape seized the moment and suggested they went on a walk to find the head gardener. Alfred and Drummond trailed behind keeping an eye on the Prince but also relishing the opportunity to be away from people so they could continue in the private world of just the two of them that Drummond felt they had been living in since they arrived. It was a world he would happily have lived in forever.

By the time he saw Albert strip off and dive into the pond, Drummond was no longer giving any thought to his life in London or his duties on the mission, the only thing he was thinking of was Alfred. Nevertheless even he found himself surprised that he blurted out

“Shall we?”

Alfred looked at him in surprise and then a delighted grin crept across his face

“I don’t see why not” and they began to eagerly undress

Drummond tried not to look obviously at Alfred as they disrobed, giving him one huge grin but although he was not looking, he of course saw. Fortunately they threw themselves into the water before his body had too much time to react and the shock of the cold water dampened his response, at least at first

However, Alfred immediately jumped at him and ducked him under the water. Drummond’s brain took a few seconds to register that he was naked and so was Alfred and for the first time they were
touching each other. He surfaced spluttering and Alfred’s laughing face was a few inches from his
own. He immediately sought revenge and pushed his hands down on Alfred’s shoulders, shoving
him under the water. Under the water, Alfred’s hands reached out, deliberately or not, Drummond
wasn’t sure and trailed across Edwards’s thigh before he bobbed up his hair sleeked to his head.
Drummond felt giddy with excitement and he began to splash Alfred continually, giggling as he did
so. Alfred ducked under the water to escape the onslaught and then Drummond felt a hand grab his
leg and pull him under. His hands stretched out seeking a part of Alfred to touch and his hand
brushed deliberately across his chest before he came up for air. He pushed his hair out of his eyes
laughing, and reached out almost unthinkingly to put his hand around the back of Alfred’s neck and
pull him in closer. Their legs tangled around each other under the water and their eyes met.

Unfortunately the Prince called a halt to their activities by getting out of the pond which meant they
had no choice but to follow him. This time Drummond drank in all the opportunity he had to look at
Alfred as he exited the water behind him. He was not as tall or muscular as Drummond himself was
but he was lithe and compact with well muscled thighs and legs, and surprisingly broad shoulders.
Drummond hastily grabbed his clothes because out of the water there was now no denying the
reaction of his body to what he was seeing. He deliberately kept his back to everyone as he rubbed
himself down and dressed.

When they had their clothes back on, they began the walk back to the castle, looking at each other
half shyly, half with a new found knowledge about their relationship and what it meant. Once at the
chateau, they headed back to their rooms to get some dry clothes and make themselves look
respectable.

In his room Drummond threw himself face down on the bed and then rolled over to lay on his back.
He barely knew how to begin to understand how he felt; he wanted to laugh, he wanted to cry but
most of all he wanted to go to Alfred’s room, strip him naked again and do those sinful delicious
things to him that he had improper dreams about. He could not deny any longer than he and Alfred
were more than friends but he had no idea how to describe what they were or how he felt. All he
knew was that being with Alfred made his heart sing, lit up his soul and now he could no longer
deny it, caused such rushes of desire in him that he could barely stand it. Now freed of the need to
control his body for the sake of proprietary, he laid his head back and let the feelings flood his body.
Not since he had been in his early teens had he felt the need for self abuse, knowing as he did that it
could lead to physical weakness and possibly even madness. However, that was preferable to
spending hours in a constant state of near permanent arousal whenever he was around Alfred.

His hands almost had a will of their own as they slid downwards and then inside his breeches. He let
his head fall to the side and he closed his eyes reliving being in the water with Alfred. The touch of
naked skin for the first time, the way they’d brushed against each other, the feeling of Alfred’s limbs
beneath his hands. In his mind’s eye he saw himself and Alfred alone at the pond kissing. He
imagined holding Alfred against him tightly as he did so, feeling their bodies touching, his hardness
brushing against Alfred’s thigh as he sighed and moaned in his arms. Months and months of self
denial meant that this time at least, he was not going to last and biting his fist to stifle his groans he
came hard, hot liquid spurting onto his stomach.

On the journey back, he and Alfred could barely look at each other, seemingly equally aware that
both were poised on a knife edge and that one lingering look too many, could have them behaving in
a way that would probably send the Duchess to an early grave. Of course they would be sitting next
to each other rubbing up against each other as the carriage rattled over the uneven roads. Alfred
could hardly keep the smirk off his face as if he knew exactly what Drummond had been doing in his
room after the swim and in fact had probably been doing the same.
Sadly though of course their idyll had to come to an end. The 5 days he had spent with France had been like a dream of another life but now his real life rushed back in with a vengeance. Florence was absolutely determined that they set a new date for the wedding. Despite Parliament being in recess for most of July and all of August, Florence was insisting that they be married in June while the House was likely to still be debating the Irish question. He tried to talk to her but to no avail.

“The Irish question may well not be settled by then” he said one evening as they sat in the drawing room of Lothian house “I know you have been patient but could you not wait a little longer?”

But Florence who generally had been most amenable refused.

“Edward I shall be beyond 24 if we wait until then, I cannot marry at 24! I will be practically an old lady”

“But my dearest”

Florence fixed him with steady blue eyes “do you not want to marry me Edward?” she asked “have your feelings changed?”

“of course not” he took her hand realising with a pang of regret for himself and for her that touching her had not the slightest effect on him “it is just the prime minister…”

“I am not marrying the Prime Minister Edward” she said “I am marrying you and I wish to marry in June and that is that” and she set her face in a firm frown.

Edward sighed and felt the walls of his prison closing around him.

In his rooms at the palace Alfred was brooding over Drummond. He had come to a decision in France. He knew the time he had with Drummond would be short, once he was married then that would inevitably be that. He could continue to fret and be sad as he had with his other nascent relationships that had come to nothing or he could try something different. He could try to enjoy the time he had, revel in its preciousness knowing that it would end. He was absolutely convinced from Drummond’s face and body language that he did not want to get married, that it was something that he had got into and now could not get out of. However, his whole now approach did depend on Drummond being willing to reciprocate but after their joyous days in France where they had existed in a bubble of sunshine and happiness with no responsibilities, everything had crashed down to earth with a resounding thud. Drummond was spending more time with Florence and with the Irish question being such a hot and difficult topic, he was extremely busy in the House. He had virtually no time to spare for Alfred and he tried hard not to resent it but it was very difficult. Sighing, he left his chambers to go to dinner and as he turned the corner and began to go down the stairs, his heart leapt into his throat, coming towards him with Drummond.

Drummond’s first thought on seeing Alfred was wild happiness but then he realised how things were now; his future pressed in ever closer and he had to disentangle himself from his feelings about Alfred though how he was meant to do that when Alfred looked at him with such naked love and sadness he wasn’t sure.

“Drummond” he said “I didn’t know you were at the palace”
“I had some papers for the Queen” replied Drummond thinking of how often their conversations had started this way and they stood there staring at each other.

“I should go” said Drummond wishing with every beat of his heart that he didn’t “there’s a debate on the Irish question”

“Yes the Queen talks of little else”

Suddenly all the frustration and sadness Drummond felt spilled over

“the Prime Minister’s doing his best” he almost snapped at Alfred “he can’t change his policy just because the Queen has read some letters in the times”

Alfred looked at him puzzled and almost disappointed “the Irish are starving” he said stepping closer to him. Drummond could smell him, that scent of Alfred that would always no matter where bring to mind his laughing face and china blue eyes

“Then the Queen should reach into her own purse!” he paused and then burst out “Women are so damn emotional”

Alfred’s eyes briefly dropped down his body and onto his lips before he looked at him with heavy lidded wounded eyes

“Women like your fiancée?” he asked flatly

“She’s insisting on setting a date right in the middle of the session”

Alfred nodded politely, hurt almost beyond endurance as Drummond murmured

“Sorry you don’t want to hear about that do you?”

Alfred looked down and then up at Drummond with huge sad puppy dog eyes and Drummond nearly, oh so nearly, threw the folder he was carrying onto the floor and swept him into his arms. Instead though given where they were and knowing it was hopeless anyway, he just looked sadly back at him

“I must go” he said “goodbye Alfred” he said and he stressed the goodbye with as much finality as he could. Better that Alfred understood this could not continue than have their hearts ripped anymore apart than they already were.
Scotland

Chapter Summary

Edward and Alfred go to Scotland and finally share a kiss

Chapter Notes

hurrah it is finally time for THAT kiss. It is impossible to improve on how they did it so when you read it just let that scene wash over your mind the perfect little kittens :))))

Alfred’s face as he’d said goodbye to him haunted Drummond for days. He knew forgetting about Alfred was the right thing to do, he could no longer be in denial about the fact he was getting married and he should never have behaved as he did in France. It had been unforgiveable he told himself sternly to allow Alfred to have any hope about them. However, it didn’t matter how much he said all that internally, the reality was he could no more get Alfred out of his head than he could fly in the air. All he could do was try and avoid encountering Alfred as much as was possible given their respective jobs and hope that time would work its magic.

Of course fate was not kind enough to Edward that this could happen. Instead he found himself on a boat bound to Scotland with Alfred and the rest of the court. The attempts on the Queen’s life had everyone extremely worried. Not only would it be a great personal tragedy if the Queen were to be assassinated, but what also concerned Sir Robert greatly was the potential effect on the country. Not only would they have lost their beloved monarch but Prince Edward was obviously far too young to rule leaving them no choice but a Regency with his father in charge. Although on a personal level Sir Robert was a huge admirer of the Prince, he knew the public would regard having someone they saw as a foreigner as their ruler insupportable. When the Queen had suggested to Sir Robert that in an attempt to escape her prison as she called it, she went to Scotland, he’d been hugely supportive of the idea. There was no question that both Queen and Prime Minister could leave London so packing Drummond off to go with her was the next best thing.

On the boat, Alfred was wary of him, pointedly sitting alone and reading the Iliad which seemed to be the only book Drummond saw him with. It made Drummond’s heart ache to see Alfred avoiding him but in his place would he not do the same? Twice now he had hurt him badly even though he would have given anything not to have had to, it was not unreasonable to expect that Alfred would safeguard himself now.

Naturally when they docked in Edinburgh and changed to the coaches they would travel the rest of the way in, he found himself sharing a carriage with Prince Ernst, Miss Coke and Alfred. He laughed bitterly in his head, the carriage of broken hearts he thought – he and Alfred unable to be together, Miss Coke pinning over Prince Ernst and Prince Ernst himself yearning for Harriet Sutherland. He half thought for a mad moment of pointing it out; there were some days he felt he was clinging on to his sanity by a very thin thread. The wedding preparations were ramping up, every day he received letters from Florence, sometimes 2 or 3 of them, outlining the people who had sent them presents, honeymoon arrangements and details of houses she was looking at with her father who was buying...
them a property as a wedding gift. He felt as if he were being buried alive under the weight of propriety, family expectations and his future. Only Alfred knew how it felt to pretend as he had too and even that avenue was cut off from him as he could not discuss this with Alfred. He felt more alone than he ever had in his life.

Alfred was staring out of the window clearly to avoid looking at Drummond and Miss Coke was chattering on as she always did without her aunt there to snap at her. He wasn’t really listening to her until he realised she was addressing him directly to congratulate him on his engagement and to inform the rest of the carriage how lovely and accomplished Florence was. Edward cringed inside at this explicit reference to his fiancée and looked guiltily at Alfred who looked at him sideways. He fought for something appropriate to say as he could hardly say ‘be quiet be quiet! she is nothing compared to Alfred’ but instead he said

“She has many virtues” at which Alfred’s lips almost twitched into a smile as if he knew exactly what was behind Drummond less than effusive praise.

“My felicitations” said Prince Ernst “I hope she is as pretty as she is talented”

Drummond wished he could hit his head on the side of the carriage; he did not want to discuss his fiancées looks or talents in front of Alfred

“I believe she is considered quite erm personable” he said stiffly, Alfred’s face this time was even more amused at Drummond’s desperation to get off the topic

Ernst laughed “oh you English!” he said “I am sure if you saw Cleopatra bathing in assess milk I believe you would blush and say ‘oh I believe she is considered quite personable’

Drummond smiled despairingly wishing everyone would just stop talking and then luckily they turned into the Drive for the castle and talk turned to Blair Athol and what it would be like.

The Duke was determined to entertain the Queen in the manner he believed would show both his deep loyalty and pay homage to his Scottish ancestors. Consequently everywhere they went they seemed to be accompanied by the wailing sound of bagpipes. At dinner, Drummond found he was seated at the opposite end of the table to Alfred which meant he had no chance to talk to him with one of their coded conversations but he could at least glance up the table and look at him without it being too obvious.

After dinner they progressed with more bagpipes into the salon where the Duke announced that Dr Beatty was going to recite his poem the Heliotrope. The Queen looked momentarily taken aback, it was hardly the sort of after dinner entertainment she liked but she seated herself on the sofa as Dr Beatty began. The poem was worse than Drummond believed possible, fortunately Parliament had given him much experience of listening to dull speeches and he managed to maintain an expression of polite interest. However, the Queen’s face, by now one Drummond could read so well, was one of barely held in exasperation as Dr Beatty continued to recite his very long poem. Prince Ernst had clearly had enough and he crept out patting Alfred’s shoulder in sympathy as Dr Beatty reached heavenward to dramatically declaim

“Announce impending dangers to our crew”

And then Drummond heard Alfred laugh, a sound he quickly smothered and he couldn’t help but turn and look at Alfred who was looking at him with a mischievous expression on his face and he felt his heart beat faster all over again.
The next day, they set off to explore the countryside, the Queen having tactfully put off the Duke from showing them around the local almshouses. Drummond loved the countryside; he had spent much time roaming woods on his holidays from school and had a passion for outdoor pursuits. The Duke had brought fishing rods for them all and as Alfred was being monopolised by Miss Coke and was showing no signs of wanting to fish, Drummond went off to fish alone standing on a rock in the rock and casting his line into the river. The Prince was trying to teach the Queen to fish and once or twice Drummond winced as a line seemed to whip by somewhere close to his head. Eventually they all packed up to head back to the castle for lunch, the Queen insisted that she and the Prince would ride back, something that no one was happy about but which no one felt strong enough to stop. Alfred travelled with the Duke and Drummond was in the carriage with Miss Coke and Harriet Sutherland. After about 15 minutes travel, the coach came to a stop, Drummond waiting a few minutes to see if they moved and then climbed out to find out what was happening. He met a very concerned looking Duke and Lord Alfred coming towards him; it seemed that despite their best efforts, the Queen and Prince had given the company the slip and gone off alone. Drummond knew the weather in these parts was unpredictable and he was gravely concerned.

“I think we should waste no time in looking for them” he said “Lord Alfred?”

And Alfred nodded and set off with him. It said a lot to Drummond that in a moment of crisis, he had immediately turned to Alfred. As they made their way through the forest they walked in companiable silence; Drummond felt almost hyper aware of everything around him, perhaps at last he could actually talk with Alfred about what was happening between them. They approached the edge of a deep gulf and looked down.

“If we fell, it could be months before we were found” he observed.

If he did slip and fall, at least his problems would be solved he thought.

Alfred looked at him curiously “you seem very calm at the prospect”

“I’m more afraid of going back to London” said Edward feeling himself at the edge of an entirely different kind of precipice.

“Really?” said Alfred his tone suggesting that he too knew that finally they were to have a discussion that they should have had a long time ago.

Drummond however still wasn’t sure how to proceed and changed tack.

“I saw you reading the Iliad on the boat” he said.

“No in the original I’m afraid” said Alfred staring at the trees in front of him “I find the death of Patroclus most affecting”

Drummond folded his arms “yes the length of Achilles went too to honour his friend”

“You believe they were friends? asked Alfred

“I wouldn’t know what else to call them” said Edward realising that he was slowly but inexorably sliding out of his depth.

Alfred looked at him as if waiting for him to say something else and then patted his arm before heading off. Edward looked after him feeling that he had come so far, he had to keep going. He caught up with Alfred.

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“Even if I disliked Florence my family wouldn’t consider that an obstacle”

“And do you?” asked Alfred “dislike her?”

“No” said Edward sounding confused “in fact I care for her deeply, I just don’t think I’ll ever err….” He trailed off

“Love her?” supplied Alfred

Edward stopped and looked at him “mmmmm” he said

Alfred looked at him with thoughtful sympathy “w should be heading back” he said

Edward looked after him as he left, he felt he’d finally toppled over the edge of the precipice in his mind and he didn’t know how he was going to stop falling.

Back at the cattle there was no sign of the Queen and the Prince and everyone was severely on edge. The Duchess was holding forth about how inadequate their care for the Queen had been. Drummond was feeling more worried and guilty by the second. If he hadn’t been so preoccupied with his own problems he might have made a more determined to stop the Queen riding back

“I should have stopped the Queen and the Prince going off on their own” he said

“Indeed you should” snapped the Duchess

Alfred immediately sprang to his defence “you’re not to blame Drummond, no one, not even you Duchess can stop the Queen when she puts her mind to something”

Unfortunately this didn’t stop the Duchess who continued on with her complaining and sighing that the Queen was probably at the bottom of a loch with her neck broken at which point Harriet Sutherland stifled a sob and left the room.

As the night wore on the company became increasingly alarmed as the Queen and Prince did not return. Drummond was profoundly worried about events and as time went on and there was no sign of the Queen and Prince, he found he only wanted to be with Alfred

“I’ll be remembered as the private secretary who let the Queen die” he said to him with his head in his hands

“Her Majesty and the Prince are very resourceful Drummond” said Alfred gently trying not to let his own worry show “I am sure they have found shelter”

Drummond stood up and began to pace again “I feel so useless” he burst out

“The Duke has sent out all the people he has” said Alfred “there is nothing more we can do”

“I know, it’s just….”

“Would you prefer to wait in the hall?” said Alfred “to be there when any news arrives?”

Drummond nodded, they went into the hall and Drummond insisted on waiting by the door. Alfred said nothing but it didn’t matter, just his presence was a comfort but as twilight turned to ink black night, it seemed clear the Queen and Prince would not be back.
The Duke was waiting in the hall by the fire when they came back “any news?” he asked anxiously

Drummond shook his head and the Duke’s expression became even more fearful

“Duke” said Drummond quietly but firmly “I feel it is my duty to inform the Prime Minister”

The Duke looked even more worried if that were possible and then Drummond heard Alfred’s calm voice suggesting that they wait until daybreak. The Duke nodded with relief and Drummond more reluctantly

They settled themselves down to wait; Drummond would have liked to have despatched a messenger because he felt sure Sir Robert would want to know as soon as possible but equally if he sent one and it turned out to be a false alarm and her Majesty was in fact safe, he’d have sent the government into uproar for nothing.

“Drummond” Alfred was at his side “Drink this” he gave him some whiskey “you must not assume the worst, there is still much hope”

Drummond took the whiskey gratefully brushing his fingers against Alfred’s “I am glad you are with me” he said “it makes this easier to bear”

Alfred smiled at him “I will always be here for you Drummond” he said “even when…” he paused, swallowed and then went on “when you are married”

They looked at each other wordlessly

“I wish it was not so” said Drummond “I wish I was not promised, I wish I could turn back the clock, I wish…”

“Shhhh” Alfred looked at him gently “you cannot change what is Drummond, you cannot wish it away, but we will always be friends” he laughed softly “just like Achilles and patroclus”

Eventually Drummond prevailed on Alfred to sleep but he could not, he paced and paced fretting about the Queen, his marriage, Alfred and what he was to do about any of it. Occasionally he would pause in his perambulations to watch Alfred sleeping; his face in repose was so beautiful to him that it almost hurt to look at it and realise that he would never wake up next to him, that the only person he would see sleeping was Florence. Dawn broke and there was still no news, Alfred had woken up but the Duke was still sleeping. He looked at Alfred who nodded, it was time. He woke the Duke to tell him that there were no new developments and therefore he would need to send a message. The Duke nodded looking stricken. Drummond went upstairs to compose the message; he couldn’t even begin to imagine what to say. Suddenly he heard footsteps hurrying up the stairs and Alfred rushed through the door

“They’re safe” he said with a huge grin on his face

Oh! Drummond wanted to cry with relief. He took 3 steps and without even stopping to think threw his arms around Alfred, who started in surprise and then put his arms back around him.

This whispered his mind; this is how it should be. He had of course embraced Florence but his body had never sparked like this, feeling as if he had fire in his veins. He drew back quickly almost afraid of what was happening; Alfred was looking at him with longing in his eyes and Drummond struggled for control
“Good” he said fighting to subdue his feelings “good”

They all gathered outside to applaud the Queen and the Prince as they returned. They both looked in love and carefree, and Drummond felt a bolt of envy at their happiness. He knew he would not have what they had, not with Florence and it saddened him greatly that he would miss out on love because he knew now that, not only did he not love Florence, he would never love her because his heart belonged to Alfred and it was useless to deny it.

The Duke had a surprise for her Majesty to celebrate her return announcing he had invited Dr Beatty to come back and finish his poem. Drummond groaned internally at being subjected to more of that and then he heard Alfred say very quietly next to him

“You know Drummond, I think we’ll have more fun if we join the servants”

Drummond knew he shouldn’t agree with him, but dammit they would and he needed some relief from the worry of the past 24 hours and more honestly of the past 2 years! They followed the sound of music to a clearing in the forest where the servants were gathered, drinking, dancing and generally making merry. They seemed completely unfazed at their presence, handing over cups of whiskey and encouraging them to join in

He and Alfred toasted each other and then Alfred said “right after you” and gestured to the ring of dancing people. Drummond laughed and joined hands with Alfred and the other people in the circle, going first one way and then the other and then swinging each other round in a mad whirl. They danced and drank and sang wile while the sun shone late into the midsummer night.

Eventually they left the party seeking by unspoken agreement a quieter place. Drummond was still swigging whiskey, something he’d been doing on and off all night. Both of them had long ago discarded their cravats and jackets though Drummond still carried his which he flung over a sculpture as they wondered down to the lake.

The late evening sunbeams crept across the grass painting everything with a mellow sleepy glow. Dragon flies danced across the lake and the grass seemed greener and the water more blue than anything Drummond could ever remember seeing. He stood by the lakes edge looking out at the water, time had stopped for him this evening and it felt as if there was nothing else in the world but him and Alfred and this moment by the lake.

He was aware of Alfred coming to stand next to him and he turned to him as Alfred said

“These midsummer evenings are so enchanting don’t you think?”

Drummond looked down into Alfred’s face. The sun light lit up Alfred’s hair, eyelashes and eyes making him radiant and golden and when he looked back at Drummond there was no mistaking the love in his eyes, or the question they asked. For Edward the next few moments happened in slow motion, all he could think was that he needed more than anything to kiss Alfred and that if he didn’t do it now, he never would. He leaned forward and pressed his lips against Alfred’s and immediately it was as if an iron weight had been removed from his heart. He quickly drew back to be sure Alfred did not mind but it was clear from the look on Alfred’s face that he did not so he kissed him again, his hand on his shoulder and waist and then Alfred pulled him in for a third longer kiss curling his hand up around the back of his neck.

This, THIS was how it should be he wanted to shout! Now at last he understood all the poems and the songs and the novels and the plays, it was this feeling of bliss and peace that he had never
experienced before in his life. As their third kiss finished, he smiled almost wanting to shake his head with wonder and rested his forehead against Alfred who with his eyes still closed gently rubbed his nose against his. It was that final act of sweetness and love that unmanned him and he felt a tear fall and splash against his cheek. How could he have waited so long? Known so late that this here with Alfred was all he would ever need?
the boathouse

Chapter Summary

Edward and Alfred seek more privacy to be with each other

Chapter Notes

Soon I have to write about sad things like that bloody dinner scene and Edward getting married so I've given our lovely boys a little chapter of making out together for the first time before they are separated again

After they kissed for the third time, Drummond thought his heart would burst from happiness.

“I didn’t know” he whispered to Alfred “I didn’t know it would be like this” afraid to even speak normally for fear it would shatter the fragile moment.

In response, Alfred reached up and stroked his face “my beautiful Edward” he whispered “I have waited for you for so long”

“But why did you wait?” asked Edward “why did you not speak before or or or kiss me yourself” he blushed slightly, it seemed somewhat forward to ask Alfred why he had not kissed him but he wanted to understand

“how could I?” replied Alfred “by the time I was sure you felt the same the opportunity didn’t present itself and then when I knew you were engaged, it felt wrong to press my affections on you in such a way”

“But in France” said Drummond puzzled “at the dinner, you said you were prepared to be led into temptation, you swam naked with me” he said flushing with heat at the memory

“Edward I am only human” smiled Alfred “while I would not presume to have kissed you as you were the one” he paused “already promised, it did not mean I did not want it, and as for the swimming, you were going to be naked!!! Wild horses would not have stopped me joining you”

Oh said Drummond and then he smiled sadly “I fear we have wasted so much time Alfred, so much time that we should have had together”

“Perhaps then” said Alfred softly “we shouldn’t waste anymore. There is a boathouse the other side of the lake where we could be more private, that is if you would like that”

Drummond nodded “I would”

They walked quickly around the lake to the white painted boathouse on the other side inside as well as the ropes, oars and general boating paraphernalia, there were cushions for the rowing boats on the
lake and Alfred gathered them up and threw them on the floor and then sat down holding his arms out to Edward. Edward sank down into them, his lips already seeking out Alfred’s again. This time their kisses were firmer, their hands starting to slowly explore the hollows and planes of each other’s bodies. Edward slid his hand tentatively down Alfred’s back and stroked it feeling Alfred quiver against him and press closer. Alfred’s hand moved from the back of Edward’s head where he had been tangling his fingers in his hair as they kissed and trail down his neck to dip inside the collar of his shirt and touch the bare skin beneath. Edward almost jumped at the contact and then moaned softly as Alfred caressed his shoulder. No one had ever stroked anywhere on his body before, and that alongside the taste of Alfred in his mouth and the feeling of Alfred in his arms meant he was already light headed and stiff with arousal.

“Edward” Alfred was sighing his name in between kisses and pushing against him even harder, his hand moving from his shoulder trying to undo the button’s of Edwards’s shirt. He fumbled with them clearly trying not to break off the kiss, but without being able to see his fingers were clumsy and he grumbled with annoyance against Edwards’s mouth as he pulled at the fabric

“Let me do it” gasped Edward letting go of Alfred’s back and rapidly unbuttoning his shirt

“oh god” he heard Alfred groan as he plunged his hands under the fabric running his hands across Drummond’s chest and shoulders and then he was kissing him frantically almost crushing his lips as they fell back on the floor. Alfred was on top of him and began raining kisses down on his body, his hands touching and stroking. Edward clutched at him, his head spinning, it was all too much, much too much sensation after so so long with nothing. He grabbed at Alfred’s hand scarcely knowing what he was doing only that he needed before his body exploded and moved it across the front of his breeches, Alfred understanding at once kissed him, rubbing at the hardness through the material though to Edward it was as if all the layers had disappeared and he could only feel Alfred’s hand

“Oh oh oh” he moaned “Alfred.....” and then he was coming, his head thrown back, his cries swallowed by Alfred’s kisses

“Edward please” Alfred seized his hand “touch me too” and Edward still dazed from his own orgasm, let Alfred guide his hand to rub it frantically across his trousers as he too climaxed in a matter of seconds.

Eons seemed to pass as Drummond lay there panting listening to Alfred next to him catching his breath as well. He knew by rights he should be feeling guilty, ashamed of himself and what he had just done with Alfred but he did not. Instead he was filled with such joy as he had never known.

“Alfred” Edward turned on his side towards him and reached out to stroke his face “I…thank you”

Alfred turned towards him and began to laugh, catching a stray curl from Edward's in fingers “oh my love, you thank me? I have wished to do that with you for longer than I can even remember”

Edward smiled at him and drew him close in his arms “can we stay like this forever?” he whispered

“If it were up to me we would” responded Alfred

Edward closed his eyes and rubbed his cheek against Alfred’s hair inhaling the scene of him sadness slowly beginning to ebb into his body; he knew they could not stay like this for even a few hours let alone forever

He pulled back so he could look into Alfred’ eyes “what shall I do?” he asked sadly “how do I marry
Florence now after this?"

He saw the worry in Alfred’s eyes “do not think of it now” Alfred said “tomorrow is soon enough”
Edward and Alfred have dinner on their return to London

arghhhhhhhh so I had to revisit THAT dinner scene an attempt to make sense of why the flirty sweet adorable hopelessly in love Lord Alfred morphed into "what that kiss? meh! just an indiscretion" after inviting Drums out for oysters & champagne (yay for aphrodisiacs) le massive huge huge sigh...

this scene for me has always been the absolute worst because its so totally out of character for Alfred to be so cold and hard when he's always been a complete darling to everyone. Edward is willing to give up everything for him and its thrown back into his face and not even nicely waaaaaaaah

so I've done my level best to make sense of such terrible writing, I'm sorry I can't do better and at least now its the last of me having to try and make sense of what on earth Daisy was thinking.....

historical notes
breach of promise gave women the power to sue men who broke engagements for up to £1000
£500 in 1843 is the equivalent of around £250,000 in modern money

The journey back to London had been torture; if Edward had found it difficult before, now he was fully awakened to his feelings it was even worse. He could hardly tear himself from Alfred’s side, the urge to touch him or kiss or preferably both paramount in his mind. On the boat, he cornered Alfred in his cabin pressing him up against the door and kissing him unrestrainedly

“Edward are you mad?” whispered Alfred when his mouth was finally free “what if we are seen?”

“I don’t care” panted Edward “let them see”

“Edward you are not yourself” said Alfred gently “if we are seen we could be arrested. It is dangerous for people like us, we have to be cautious; we will find a way but you must be patient”

“I cannot” he leaned forward again

Alfred held him away “you must” he said “what would happen to you? To your career? What would your family say if we were caught? Please my dearest, you must try harder”

And Drummond hung his head “I just want to be with you” he said sadly

“And I with you but this is not the way” he said “now go on deck before people become suspicious”
When Drummond left Alfred sat on his bed, he was very seriously worried that Edward’s unrestrained joy at his new understanding would get them both in trouble. One of Edward’s dearest qualities was his openness and honesty; it was also now sadly one of his most dangerous. How would he be able to keep his feelings hidden from the world the way Alfred had? He at least had learned to do it over a period of years unencumbered by marriage but Edward would have a wife. He sighed and ran his hand through his hair, he was determined that he would not lose Edward the way he had other men he had cared about. If that meant he had to be a little bit harder with him to get him to see that he couldn’t express his feelings so openly then he would. Better to do that than lose him completely. He was confident he could manage with time and patience to get Edward to learn to be more discrete.

On deck Edward was leaning on the railings staring out to sea. He knew Alfred was right, what they were doing was illegal and for god sake he was engaged but as soon as he looked at Alfred all of that was swept away. He’d never felt like this before, he wanted to tell everyone how much he loved him, to talk endlessly of his perfection, to be with him every hour of every day and night. He knew now that he could not marry Florence he just couldn’t do it. He would tell her when they got back to London, it was the right thing to do, the honest thing to do. How could he marry her knowing that not only did he not love her but his natural inclinations lay entirely elsewhere? Nevertheless he would do what Alfred asked for now and be more circumspect.

Alfred remained deep in thought on their return to London. He’d never felt about anyone as he felt about Edward. Yes he had kissed other men but what he’d shared with Edward had not just been a kiss it had felt like a pledge, a promise to each other but it was a pledge that in the cold light of day he didn’t think Edward would be able to keep. He knew Edward believed himself in love, he knew for certain that he was but Edward was to be married and therefore it wasn’t just about the two of them, a third person was involved, Edward’s intended Florence. That changed everything.

He needed space to think which he couldn’t do at the Palace so he took himself to his club. There in the library he sat in a chair in one of the alcoves overlooking the terrace, it was a favourite place of his and rarely disturbed by others. As he stared out over the garden trying to decide how best to proceed, he heard voices, two men had come into the room though they couldn’t see he was there

“I hope this isn’t necessary Lothian” said a voice “but it is best to be prepared”

Alfred stiffened; it could only be the Marques of Lothian, Edwards’s prospective father law

“I just have my suspicious, twice he has asked to postpone this wedding, once I have allowed it, I do not trust him”

Alfred’s heart began to beat faster; he must be talking about Edward

“I have drawn up the papers in preparation; if he tries to withdraw from the engagement I will lodge them immediately and sue for £500”

£500!!! Alfred nearly dropped the paper he was holding, that was a vast sum! He knew Edward’s family was wealthy but even so, £500 was a lot of money and would attract a lot of very unwelcome publicity. Even if they did settle out of court, enough MPs were lawyers that the news would get out. Edward might not be ruined financially but his political career would be over which would be a tragedy for Edward personally, but also Alfred believed for the country. Although he did not share his politics, he truly believed Drummond had the ability to bring about great good. It would be sad beyond measure if that promise and ability was snuffed out; he prayed that his wonderful but somewhat impetuous Edward was not entertaining thoughts of breaking off the engagement. Perhaps
to be sure, he should discuss it with him over dinner at Ciros, one of his favourite restaurants.

Edward was delighted to go to dinner with Alfred, he couldn’t wait to tell him all about his plans to call off the engagement.

He could barely stop himself from blurting it out the moment he sat down instead rambling on about the Corn Laws before stopping himself

“I have something to tell you”

“You’ve set a date for the wedding haven’t you” said Alfred determined to ensure right from the start that they were going to discuss Edward’s marriage

“I’ve decided to break off the engagement”

Edward waited for Alfred’s face to break into a smile but he did not, instead he looked at Drummond almost crossly and said

“Why? She seems an eminently suitable wife for a man with prospects”

Edward couldn’t quite believe what he was hearing

“But surely you all of all people know why it cannot be” he said

“Cannot be? How dramatic you are Drummond” said Alfred trying to contain his absolute horror at what Edward was saying. It was worse than he thought. It had never occurred to him that Edward would actually break off the engagement, he thought he might be wondering whether to but there was finality in Edward’s voice as if his very next action would be to visit Florence’s father and tell him.

“But after Scotland it is only right”

Alfred wanted to put his head in his hands, of course Edward would feel like this. So black and white, so honest, so trusting that he could bend things to his will. How little he knew! He began to lecture Edward about how he couldn’t possibly do this, that a successful politician needed a wife and that he was going to be a successful politician and make a difference to the world watching Edward’s face falling with every word but he couldn’t stop himself, he was terrified of what Edward would do. Did he really think that the Marques wouldn’t investigate exactly why he had decided to call off the engagement? And how much would it take to unearth from witnesses about his “close friendship” with Lord Alfred? Could they even be sure they hadn’t been seen in Scotland? He had to stop him before he ruined his life, both their lives forever.

“You cannot jeopardise that for an indiscretion”

“an indiscretion?” now Edward’s blood was up too, how dare Alfred dismiss their beautiful moments by the lake like as an ‘indiscretion’?, what was worse Edward knew, he just knew, that Alfred was lying and no more thought of it like that than Edward did, he just didn’t know why he was saying it.

“I can’t let you jeopardise your career” said Alfred determinedly

“Surely that is for me to decide” said Edward still trying to understand what had gone so very wrong tonight and angry at Alfred talking to him like he were a child who didn’t know his own mind “You are not thinking clearly, Drummond” snapped Alfred horrified at the turn of the conversation but
finding himself unable to find a way to retrieve it.

Their oysters arrived but Edward stood up “I find I am not hungry” he said and he stormed out leaving Alfred at the dinner table.

Edward rushed blindly through the streets to his rooms. Fortunately the restaurant was not far from parliament so it was only a matter of 10 minutes but it felt like eternity as he crashed past acquaintances and fellow politicians greeting him. He fumbled with his key in the lock of his room, staggered inside and threw himself down on the bed and began to sob as if his heart would break. In fact from the way the pain physically tore through his body, he thought, it was already broken. He felt as if Alfred had ripped a hole in him, reached in and torn out his heart. He didn’t believe it was possible to feel so utterly broken, so destroyed by grief.

Hours passed and Edward was still curled up on his bed. He had cried until his throat was raw and his eyes felt as if they had been rubbed in salt. Every time he had thought of all their moments together, their looks, the laughter, the tenderness he had wept all over again. He could not understand why Alfred had done this to him. He had thought he loved him, that he cared but it seemed he had been wrong. He was going to give up everything for Alfred, **everything** and his response was to refuse it and not only to refuse it but to make Edward feel stupid and small and young. Why? It made no sense! Why why why? Well one thing was certain, he was not going to end his engagement now, he needed to try and make some sort of life for himself and at least Florence was his friend and would be kind to him, unlike Alfred who seemed happy to take his heart and smash it to pieces. If Alfred didn’t want him, then he could only try and pick up the pieces of his life and move on and hope that in time his shattered heart would heal.
do not leave me alone

Chapter Summary

alfred invites Edward to dinner again and this time they are able to talk

Chapter Notes

at last i can begin to repair the arse badgery that was inflicted upon us by the show!

“Mr Drummond ma’am”

Florence started up as Edward came in

“Edward this is not your usual time, is something amiss?”

She looked searchingly at Edward whom she had never seen look so wan, he had big dark circles under his eyes and he was pale and seemed somehow deflated

“Florence” Edward put his arms round her and clung to her tightly

“Edward are you sure there is nothing wrong?” Edward had never held her as hard as this

“I found I had to see you” he said his voice muffled in her hair.

After his terrible night with what little snatched sleep he had had, Edward was in desperate need of comfort and knew of only one place to go. Florence would be his refuge. She was kind and excellent company, and best of all she did not cause these horrible feelings of love and need that Alfred did. With Florence he would have peace, she would never smash his heart as Alfred had, and she loved him even if Alfred did not.

She drew him down onto the sofa next to her

“Edward you really look most unwell” she said "perhaps you should not go to work today, I’m sure the Prime Minister can spare you”

It was on the tip of Edwards tongue to automatically refuse but then he thought, why not? At least then he’d be spared any chance of meeting Alfred

He smiled at her “can the footman take a message?” he asked “I will tell Sir Robert I am unavoidably detained with my fiancée”

For the next few days, Edward threw himself into wedding preparations and work. He crammed his mind with the honeymoon, plans for furnishing the new house his father in law had purchased, his own outfit for the wedding and of course parliamentary business, anything to stop there being a spare
inch of space in his head for Alfred. Of course he could not control his dreams and he dreamt of him every night, waking with tears on his cheeks after dreams of running after Alfred who disappeared into the distance not listening to him or who laughed at him as he declared his love. He told himself that these dreams would stop, he just had to give it time and in the meantime Florence was balm to his wounded and aching soul.

He knew it was inevitable that he would see Alfred again, he just hoped that when the time came, he would behave civilly to him even though actually he would rather like to strike him for his actions and then kiss him because try as he might, he could not stop caring about him and wanting him. Every mention of his name no matter how casually in conversation made his heart stop and had him teetering on the edge of a precipice. He had not heard from Alfred; he assumed this was because all along Alfred had merely been pretending to care for him, and he Edward was certainly not going to contact him. Alfred’s care may have been a pretence but his was real and he still smarted from being so completely foolish as to think Alfred would have been interested in him. Alfred was a Lord, a close friend of the Queen, as exquisite as a rose and armed with the same sharp thorns and he? he was the Prime Ministers lackey trying to make his way in the world without a title and acutely aware that for all his family’s wealth, he was seen as not quite out of the top drawer.

Sir Robert had asked him to go riding in the park with him; this was not that unusual, he knew that sometimes the Prime Minister just needed space to think especially after the huge difficulties assailing him in the House about the Corn Laws. It was not until they were half way there that Sir Robert mentioned quietly that he expected to see the Prince as he knew he went riding at this hour. Edward went cold, he knew that if the Prince was out riding it was likely Alfred would be with him and so it proved to be true. The Prince trotted into view and next to him was Alfred, looking so deeply sad that Drummond’s heart almost smote him until he remembered how Alfred had behaved at their dinner. Alfred looked at him hesitantly and Edward looked back at him and then deliberately looked away but not too late to see Alfred’s stricken face.

Edward scarcely heard a word the Prime Minister said on the way back. He was in an agony of indecision. He wanted to hate Alfred for how he had treated him he really did, but the moment he saw him, he knew he wanted nothing more than to be with him and that he would still give up anything and everything for him. He did not want this he told himself angrily he did not want these feelings! If this was love then it was for fools! But he knew Alfred would only have to reach out his hand and he would take it, he just did not believe Alfred would ever reach out his hand to him again.

Back at the house he tried desperately to immerse himself in work. There was a vote on the Corn Laws bill that evening and he was being kept incredibly busy trying to ensure it passed when a messenger arrived

Mr Drummond a message for you

Drummond took the paper and his heart began to bounce rapidly in his chest, it bore Alfred’s handwriting

'Drummond I have been thinking about our interrupted dinner. I understand I have no right to determine your future, but it would be a shame if you never tasted the oysters at Ciros.

I will be there this evening.Yours, Alfred

He knew at once the sensible thing to do would be to crumple the message into a ball and throw it aside, to leave Alfred sat there alone in the restaurant but he could not. Instead unbidden a wide smile spread across his face. Alfred did care, he had known he did and tonight he would be there waiting
for him and he would not wait in vain.

Alfred sat in Ciros his hear thumping, praying he had not utterly destroyed his relationship with Edward. He had asked himself a thousand times why he had behaved as he did. Why had he not just told Edward honestly what he had overheard? Or told him of his fears? But no, instead he had behaved like the worst kind of overbearing older brother or father, treating Edward as if he were a child who didn’t know his own mind. Yes he knew he had had the best intentions, to stop Edward ruining his life but the way he had gone about it. Every time he thought of it he closed his eyes with horror against the images of Edward’s face, his dear beautiful wonderful face, crumpling as Alfred aimed blow after blow with no quarter. If Edward deigned to appear tonight he could consider himself the luckiest man alive

3 hours had passed, Alfred had pulled off every peal of the rose on the table and torn it asunder, one tear for every piece of his heart. Edward had not come and he thought bitterly, that is exactly what he deserved. Why would Edward who had everything and was prepared, had offered, to give it all up, come to have dinner with the man who had thrown it all in his face? Well he had had his punishment and it was no less than he deserved! He’d sat here alone, other people staring waiting for the man who had loved him and who he had treated abominably. All he could do now was leave and attempt yet again to try and get on with his life though how he was meant to that with his soul torn in two he didn’t know. He had just summoned the waiter when he heard footsteps almost running down the room, he turned and there was Edward

“Lord…Alfred…” Drummond was gasping for breath, his coat dirty and his clothes somewhat askew “my apologies for my lateness…there has been…that is to say”

Alfred gestured to the waiter “brandy”

“Drummond sit” Alfred had never seen the usually impeccably turned out Drummond look like this, the waiter returned “drink, catch your breath and tell me what has happened”

Drummond grabbed the glass gratefully and downed the shot in one

“Now breathe” said Alfred "and tell me"

Edward had been on tenterhooks in the house, he had worked so hard using both persuasion and threats to get the bill through but he had not been sure, not until the speaker had announced “the ayes have it” and he had sank back on the bench with relief. They had done it, they had won. Sir Robert beamed at him and shook his hand asking if he would care to join him to celebrate but Edward had other things on his mind

“I have an engagement” he said smiling and Peel nodded

“Another time then”

Together they left, the winning MPs cheering them as they made their way through the crowd. Sir Robert turned to him to say one final thing and Drummond noticed a man in the crowd raise his arm. He pushed Sir Robert out of the way and then there was loud bang and he felt something whizz past his face. He staggered back and fell reflexively and there was a huge commotion as the man was grabbed.

“Drummond” Sir Robert had seized him and pulled him upright, “are you well sir? Are you hurt?”
“No I am not hurt replied Edward only then beginning to understand that the man had fired a live bullet at him

“Thank god” said Peel “thank god!!! You could have died sir and you to be married in only a few weeks time”

Yes he could have died thought Edward and he would not have been reconciled with Alfred.

He had been beyond impatient to leave but there had been statement to be made, Peels men had wanted all the details and Edward almost cried with frustration as the clock ticked by, surely Alfred would have left by now. Eventually he escaped and ran all the way to the restaurant, pausing he stared in and saw Alfred sitting there alone and he almost sobbed with relief and ran in

Alfred sat there almost turned to stone as Edward recounted his tale

“You could have been killed” he said wonderingly “Edward you could have died”

“But I did not” said Drummond trying not to let his heart sing out at the use of Edward rather than Drummond

“I need to explain to you about our last dinner” said Alfred glancing at the waiters ostentatiously clearing up around them

“It is of no matter Alfred” said Drummond and indeed to him it wasn’t, he was alive, Alfred cared, what else mattered?

“It is of matter” said Alfred firmly “please I must tell you but not here” he glanced around “I fear they will tip us off our seats soon”

“Come to my rooms then” said Drummond “we can be alone there”

Alfred nodded and they left the resturant together and headed to Drummond’s rooms.

Edward felt very shy as he unlocked the door. Apart from anything his maid wasn’t due in till tomorrow morning and his clothes were tossed over a chair and his books scattered on his desk. He surruptiously kicked a damp towel under the bed and gathered up a dirty glass from the bedside table. Alfred appeared not to notice any of this, his bright eyes peering around and then smiling at Drummond as he poured them both some wine. There was not room for them to sit next to each other anywhere except the bed so they perched there. Alfred took a long swallow of his wine and then said

“Edward, I must apologise unreservedly for my appallingly asinine behaviour at our first dinner. I was graceless and clumsy”

Edward opened his mouth to speak but Alfred held up his hand “however I did have a reason and I would like you to hear it. I should have told you that night but I did not want to alarm you”

And so he told Edward what he had overheard at the club

When he’d finished Edward sat with his arms across his knees staring at the floor

“Do you understand now why I was so afraid? Asked Alfred “He will ruin you if you break the
engagement”, there was no response “Edward…..” Alfred reached out and touched his arm

Edward raised his head and looked at him

“Why did you not tell me this before?” he said “you should have told me”

“I did not think I would need to responded Alfred sadly “It did not enter my head that you would give up all for me, for me” he repeated quietly “I am not worth that”

“what are you saying Alfred?!” said Edward “you are worth everything, *everything* to me, I would live in a hovel with you if you asked me, gave up my family, my wealth, my position, all of it, none of it means anything without you”

Alfred touched his face “and how could I live my dearest knowing you had given up all that for me? I do not want you to hide as I have had to, to participate in society but never quite be part of it. You must live a wonderful full joyous life my love because I cannot and so you must do it for both of us”

Edward looked at him with eyes brimming with tears “you cannot ask that of me” he whispered “to live a life for both of us”

“I know I have no right to ask that of you Edward but nevertheless I do ask it. Marry, have children, achieve great and wonderful things knowing that all the time you do it for me too Every time you succeed, every time you look contentedly at your family, every time your newest child smiles, it is for both of us my darling, both of us. My greatest happiness will come from knowing you are happy”

Edward gripped his hand “how can I be happy without you?”

"You will not be without me my dearest, I will always be with you but you must marry Florence, you know that there is no other choice”

There was silence in the room, the weather had turned and rain beat against the window panes

“If I do this” whispered Edward “you must promise that you will not leave me here alone”

“But you will not be alone with Florence”

“NO! “ Edward turned to face him and sized him by the elbows “you cannot leave me alone, I cannot bear it. If I must endure this for both of us that you cannot leave me to do it alone. Promise me!!!!”

Alfred looked at him “I promise” he said

Edward released Alfred’s arms and looked at him his heart pounding. He reached over and cupped his face looking at him searchingly and then leaned in and kissed him. At once Alfred arms came up around his neck and then Edward was pushing him backwards down onto the bed, his kisses becoming hungrier and hungrier as his fingers fumbled with Alfred’s clothing

“Do not leave me he said desperately “Alfred do not leave me”
Drummond suffers a series of blows as his life gets more difficult

Poor Edward! With the fall of Peel's Government, he's out of a job plus his father has turned up to explain his marital duties to him.

The comments about women on their wedding nights all come from advice books to Victorian brides and young husbands to be - its amazing anyone ever had children!

It was also generally believed that women who were prostitutes did so because they were of low moral character & not because they were poverty stricken/oppressed/coerced & lacking in options.

Edward lay on his bed staring at the ceiling; this time next week would be his wedding night. Alfred had left his room as the first fingers of dawn had crept across the sky, a final lingering kiss and then he was gone. They had spent every night together since Edward had nearly been shot, sometimes Alfred didn’t arrive till 1 or 2am, sometimes as early as 11, but he always came. Their shared delight at exploring each other’s bodies had only grown with every hour they spent together. He smiled as he recalled how he had kissed his way down Alfred’s body, across his chest and along his stomach and then instead of administering to him with his hands as he usually did, he’d gently kissed the tip of his cock looking up to see Alfred’s reaction. Alfred had gasped and stroked his hair, so Edward had done it again and again and then putting out his tongue had gently licked it. Alfred’s reaction had been gratifying as he twisted and arched his back, clearly wanting to try and push into Edward’s mouth but not wanting to rush him into anything he was not comfortable with. Eventually though Alfred could stand no more.

“Edward” he groaned “Edward I am going to...” and Edward had moved his head away and finished him with his hand, thinking that next time perhaps he would not move his head away.

As they lay there together, curled around each other, they talked idly of this and that, anything and everything to avoid the subject of Edward’s impending marriage. They both knew it was inevitable and that discussing it would only bring them unhappiness but equally Edward knew that at some stage they did have to discuss it and more importantly what would happen afterwards.

After snatching a few hours sleep, he went to the House where there was a message from Sir Robert asking to see him urgently.

“Drummond” he said as he entered the room “I am afraid I have serous news to impart to you sir”
Drummond stood waiting

“I have tendered my resignation as Prime Minister to the Queen this morning”

“But sir…”

“It is done Drummond” said Sir Robert quietly “and now we must think of your position. As I’m no longer Prime Minister, I will not need a principal private secretary”

Drummond’s mind was reeling; on top of everything else was too much! the wedding, Alfred and now he had lost his position He clamped his mouth firmly shut as he felt he was at the risk of some inappropriate emotion

“Come sir, you will not be in want of employment” said Peel gently seeing how much the younger man was struggling, “I thought perhaps the diplomatic service? A young man like you not yet a father but with a new wife would be an asset to any embassy abroad”

Abroad?? I’m not going abroad! Thought Drummond he was not going to leave Alfred so soon after having found him

He found his tongue at last “thank you sir but to expect my soon to be wife to travel so shortly after our wedding may be too much to ask”

“perhaps you are right though keep it in mind for later sir. Possibly there may be a job at Court? you spent much time with the Queen and the Prince and I know he thinks very highly of you, perhaps Lord Alfred could put a word in for you, I know you two are great friends”

At the mention of Alfred’s name Edwards heart bounded uncomfortably in his chest as it always did

“I will mention it to him” he said

“A position at court?” said Alfred that night “Edward I….I don’t know”

“Oh” Edward rested his head down on Alfred’s chest feeling stupid for having asked

“No it’s not for the reason you think” said Alfred at once realising that Edward was embarrassed “you would be a fantastic asset at the Palace; I know the Prince would employ you in a heartbeat. He was grievously upset at the fall of Sir Robert’s government, no I was thinking about us, I mean my darling would it be wise?”

“Wise?” Edward raised his head and looked at him

Alfred wrapped a few strands of Edward’s hair around his fingers, it always felt so soft “I fear that if you were to have a position at court that the Queen may feel it necessary to include ….. your wife ” he hesitated as he always did over the phrase “amongst her ladies, certainly her rank is high enough. You know how keen the Prince is on promoting marriage as the ideal state of being at court and you and and and she” he could never bring himself to say her name “would fit well with that. It would make it very difficult for both of us”

Edward made a small groaning noise “I had not thought of that” he said

“Could you not work at your father’s bank?” asked Alfred gently “at least for a time until we can decide what we are to do?”
Edward raised his eyes and looked at him with bleak eyes “At the bank?” he said “after all my hard work, Alfred that would be difficult to bear”

“I know my love” Alfred stroked his hair “and possibly we could work something out at Court but we have to plan, we don’t have the luxury of being free anymore Edward do we?” he said sorrowfully

Edward shook his head sadly and then said “my father will arrive the day after tomorrow to transact some business and then I will travel back with him for the erm, the errr” he could never bring himself to say “wedding” but Alfred knew exactly what he meant

“Will you come Alfred?”

“I do not know” said Alfred feeling sick as he always did whenever Edward mentioned the wedding “it is a lot to ask of me”

“It’s a lot to ask of you” fired back Edward all at once furiously angry “you are not the one having to get married! Which as you so helpfully pointed out I’m doing for both of us”

Alfred wanted to snap right back ‘you’re the one who’ll have the respectable wife and life, you’re the one who’ll have a family, you won’t be alone’ but he didn’t because he also knew that Edward would never be free again, not in the way he Alfred was free and though his heart was in agony at the thought of Edward bedding someone, anyone who wasn’t him, he also knew that going through that was the last thing that Edward wanted and that he was doing it for them. Edward being married would make it easier for them to keep their love secret. Therefore he said quietly

“Would it help you if I were there Edward? Or would it make it worse?”

Edward looked at him with pain filled eyes “Alfred! How could it be worse? I’m marrying a woman I don’t love and once I am married I don’t know what will happen to us, how will we manage? Will this “he waved his arm at the bed “carry on? If it does I’ll be breaking all my wedding vows, if it doesn’t how I will live without you, so please tell me! In gods name how could it be worse?”

Alfred looked at him, his eyes filling with tears “I’m sorry” he whispered “I’m sorry you have to do this, I’m sorry we can’t be together”

“Then be there for me” begged Edward “be there in the church with me, I can’t do this alone Alfred, I really can’t”

Alfred sighed and nodded “I will” he said

“Edward!” his father embraced him “my boy I’m delighted to see you. Not long till you’re a married man” and he clapped him on the back

Edward smiled in genuine pleasure at seeing his father “it does not seem real” he said wishing with all his heart that it wasn’t

“A few more days and it will be real enough which reminds me” he coughed “we need to have a talk my boy about your erm duties in the marital chamber”

Oh no, oh no! thought Edward in panic

“I am sure I will manage to erm fulfil them adequately papa”
“I am sure that you will too but I would not like you to be as unprepared as your mother and I were” said his father firmly

“But…” said Edward sensing that he was on the losing side of this battle

“Edward it would reassure me greatly if you would allow me to explain, it would set my mind at ease”

Edward sighed inwardly “I suppose it is as well to be properly prepared” he said somewhat grudgingly, of all the things he had to go through, he had not expected this

“It is my boy, if not for your sake, then Florence’s”

Edward nodded

“Excellent! We can discuss it after dinner”

Edward barely ate anything at dinner, the thought of his father, his father explaining his marital duties to him filled him with horror, partly because it was his father! And secondly because it meant he could no longer block out that he had to consummate his marriage which meant having sex with Florence. He could only think of it as having sex since making love was what he did with Alfred

After dinner they adjourned to his father’s study with port and cigars

“Sit Edward” said his father “I just need to find something” and he pressed a button on the middle drawer of his desk; there was a soft clicking sound and then a second hidden drawer was visible behind; Edward’s father reached in and took out a slim magazine which he laid face down on the desk

“Now my boy, the first thing you need to understand is that the act of love although pleasing to men is something that women suffer as a means to get children” he paused “therefore do not be surprised if Florence does not share your enthusiasm for it, that is entirely to be expected, indeed” and he fixed Edward with a meaningful stare “a respectable women should never enjoy the act of copulation”

Edward tried hard to assume a neutral expression as he thought of the automatic locking device installed on the Queen’s bedroom door

“It is your duty as a good husband to guide her gently through her fear so that she may be able to endure the act with minimal discomfort. Remember that women are delicate fragile creatures and must be handled with care at all times. She may weep during the act the first time as her maidenhead is taken but in time this should cease”

Edward wondered if it were possible to cut his own ears off as his father talked on, explaining that it was best not to show her his manhood at first as she may faint in terror at the idea of such a thing invading her womanly parts and that although he may need to caress her in order to make entrance easier, he should be careful not to do this too much as it could lead to hysteria and eventually insanity.

“Once Florence is with child you should at once cease marital relations and then you may” he coughed “seek comfort from less respectable ladies who do enjoy the act of love” and he handed Edward the magazine

Edward took it wishing more than anything his hand could slip and he could throw it in the fire as his
father encouraged him to leaf through it. In it were a number of lithographs depicting ladies in varying states of undress and erotic drawings of gentleman and ladies in a range of positions.

“There are a number of houses in London where a respectable gentleman may seek comfort in the arms of women with loose morals to spare his wife his attentions”

“You mean I should break my vows papa?” said Edward, wishing to cut the conversation short as soon as it was feasible and rush back to his rooms where Alfred he knew would be coming to him

His father gave an annoyed exclamation “gentleman have needs Edward, you will soon find this out. It is best to have them satisfied elsewhere rather than make demands on your wife”

Edward stood up blood pounding in his ears “thank you papa but it will not be necessary”

“I understand” said his father “you are a good boy, you think you will not have these urges but you will, all men do”

He locked eyes with Edward, his expression defiant but also slightly shamed and Edward understood, his father used these women and he did not think it was wrong.

“I have to return to the House papa, I have things that must be arranged before I leave”

Was it his imagination or did his father look slightly relieved ”we do leave tomorrow for Scotland so you do not have much time”

Edward bowed his head “then I will see you tomorrow” he said

His father nodded and Edward turned to leave

“Edward” Drummond paused his hand on the door handle “I told you these things tonight because I want you to be happy, your happiness matters to me”

Edward smiled at him “I will be happy papa, just perhaps just in a different way”
the day before the wedding

Chapter Summary

Alfred arrives in Scotland and meets Florence for the first time

Chapter Notes

they have to get married.....arghhhhhh that this must be written!

Monteviot House is still lived in by the kerr family and can be found in the scottish borders http://www.monteviot.com/

Alfred was grateful on the journey to Scotland that he had learned a long time ago to conceal his true feelings otherwise it was quite possible he may have thrown himself out of the carriage as miss coke chattered on and on about the wedding.

“I cannot believe you have not met Florence Lord Alfred! You and Mr. drummed are such close friends” Alfred’s heart skipped a beat, was she insinuating something? But no she couldn’t be. Miss Coke was the sweetest most innocent of girls.

“I believe he wanted to keep her all to himself Miss Coke” said Alfred politely at which Miss Coke clasped her hands together “oh yes of course! How romantic!”

Alfred wanted to shout and scream at her, there was nothing romantic about Edward and Florence at least certainly not from where he and Drummond were standing

In Monteviot House, Edward was feeling as if the weight of the house was pressing down on him. He’d arrived yesterday and had already endured dinner with both sets of parents and his brothers. It wasn’t that he wasn’t fond of them, he was, desperately, but sitting there smiling as they toasted him and Florence and talked excitedly about their future life together, he’d felt like the world’s biggest fraud. He’d tried to calm himself by thinking of Alfred but that only made him miserable.

He was in an agony of impatience waiting for Alfred to arrive. The house was full of a quite bewildering away of people and presents. Every 10 minutes something else seemed to arrive. Florence and her mother seemed to be in their element alternately directing a plethora of footmen carrying flowers, decorations, furniture and the like and weeping in each other’s arms and the arms of the bridesmaids about the wedding. There were, thought Edward crossly, far too many women around!

And now here was another one, Miss Coke, scampering girlishly towards Florence for an embrace and behind her looking somewhat pale, was Alfred

“Alfred...Lord Alfred” Edward tried to keep his voice normal but he knew his happiness shone
“Ed…Drummond” Edward shook his hand “congratulations” his face was a taunt mask of politeness.

Florence broke away from Miss Coke and came over smiling

“Edward, are you not going to introduce us?”

“Of course” Edward strained to keep his voice neutral “this is my very good friend Lord Alfred Paget”

“Lord Alfred! Oh but I am delighted to meet you at last! Edward has talked so much of you” and she smiled and held out her hand

“Madam” Alfred took her hand and raised it to his lips the way he always did when introduced to women, “I can only apologise that Drummond has been boring you with such a dull topic of conversation as myself” and he smiled.

Drummond noted two things, the first was that Alfred didn’t actually touch his lips to her hand nor did his smile reach his eyes, and secondly that Florence blushed and simpered the way that all women seemed to when Alfred was wearing his court charm persona.

“Having met you I fear he has not done you justice at all sir” she said smiling and ‘is she fluttering her eyelashes at him? My god she actually is’ thought Edward in anger and astonishment; he cut in

“Lord Alfred perhaps I can show you to your room?”

Florence frowned at him “Edward the servants can do that”

“I would be grateful to see Drummond alone for a few moments Miss Kerr” said Alfred smoothly “I have something to discuss with him about the wedding which I fear cannot be said in front of you” and he smiled at her again

“Ah well in that case, of course Edward should escort you. Edward we have put Lord Alfred in the Blue Room, I hope you like Lord Alfred” she added “it has a charming view of the lake”

“I am sure I shall” he said

“Come then” aid Drummond “I shall return soon my dear” he said to Florence

Be sure too” she tapped his arm gently “there are guests arriving by the minute”

Drummond and Alfred climbed the stairs to the blue room behind the footmen carrying Alfred’s luggage. They entered the room and the footman began to undo the straps around the cases

“Leave it” said Drummond “you can unpack it later”

The footman started, it was not like the usually polite Mr. Drummond to snap so impatiently but he shrugged inside, his was not to reason why his betters behaved as they did, and he left the room closing the door behind him

Immediately Edward threw himself into Alfred’s arms
“Oh thank god, thank god” he groaned into his hair “oh Alfred I have missed you so, and this” he laughed slightly hysterically “this is a living nightmare!”

“Shhhhh” soothed Alfred stroking Edwards hair “I am here, you’re not alone”

They clung to each other for a few more moments and then their lips were crushing together

“I can’t bear it” moaned Edward between kisses “Alfred you have no idea”

“You can my darling” said Alfred “we will bear it together, I will always be with you”

“Promise me” said Edward his kisses becoming harder and more desperate

“I promise”

They continued to kiss, passion rising as they pushed against each other, hands roaming freely until

“Mr. Drummond sir, Miss Kerr has requested that you join her downstairs”

Drummond closed his eyes and replied “tell Miss Kerr I shall join her momentarily, Lord Alfred and I are just finishing our discussion”

“Very good sir” and then he heard the servant depart

“You see” Drummond whispered to Alfred “you know this is how it will be! snatched kisses, no time, hiding away, Alfred what are we to do?”

“We will find a way Edward and my dearest you have to remember, even if you were not marrying, it would still be like that” he looked at him with sad blue eyes “for people like us, hiding away is what we do”

Edward sighed and released him “I know” he said “it is just so very hard Alfred”

Alfred smiled at him “well at least miss Kerr seems quite personable” he had meant to make a joke, alluding back to the awkward time in the carriage in Scotland when miss Coke had forced Edward to discuss Florence in front of Alfred but it was the wrong thing to say

“She certainly seems to find you quite personable” snapped Edward angrily “I saw how she looked at you”

“Don’t be utterly ridiculous Edward!” said Alfred in astonishment “you are over tired and seeing things that simply do not exist”

“I saw her simpering at you”

“For god sake stop it!” Alfred glared at him “I have no recollection at all as to how Miss Kerr was or was not looking at me because I was only thinking of you”

They looked at each other and then Edward dropped his eyes ”my apologies” he murmured and then he rubbed his face “Alfred I fear I am losing my reason”

Alfred took his hand and held it tightly for a few moments “I know my love, I know how hard this is, I will do all I can to make it bearable for you…but I fear we must return to the company before miss Kerr sends another servant after us”

Edward sighed and nodded “you are right”
As they descended, they could see Florence talking with Edwards’s parents

“Edward” she said when he appeared “what have you and Lord Alfred been doing up there?”

“I am sorry madam” said Alfred “it is my fault, I was telling Drummond of how much the Queen and the Prince are missing Sir Robert’s, and of course Drummond’s, wise counsel”

Edwards’s parents beamed at him “it is of course the way of democracy that Governments change but I believe it was a sad mistake for Sir Robert to resign”

Florence laughed “now papa in law, did I not say no politics this weekend?”

Edwards’ father smiled at her “you did my dear, you are quite right”

Florence put her arm through Edwards “come my dearest, several people have arrived while you were upstairs and I need to introduce you to them, please excuse us” and she led Drummond away

Alfred watched them for a few seconds, bile rising in his throat. Upstairs he’d hid his feelings for Edward’s sake, trying to calm him about the future and the impact on their relationship, reassuring him all would be well but even his Edward couldn’t always tell when Alfred was dissembling. The fact was that he was almost sick with fear and jealousy. Watching Florence casually take Edwards arm, call him Edward, say “we” and “us” call him dearest, none of which Alfred could ever do in public made him want to vomit with rage and pain. When he’d bent over her hand earlier, his skin had crawled at the thought of actually touching it with his lips knowing that it was a hand Edward had held. He didn’t know how he would get through tomorrow and he couldn’t even bear to contemplate how he would get through the rest of his life watching his Edward belonging irrevocably as far as the world was concerned to someone else.
the night before the wedding

Chapter Summary

Its Edward's last night of freedom and of course he wants to be with Alfred

I am completely indebted to animateglee from tumblr who allowed me to include her amazing fic in this chapter and has been a wonderful sounding board for this fic

Chapter Notes

Thank you everyone who has been reading this and leaving kudos and comments, they really do keep me going. Im so glad there are people out there sharing my arrrghhhhhness that Drummond getting married was an opportunity for a wonderful plot line that could and should have been explored!

Victorian weddings were very different from modern ones and there was no equivalent of stag or hen dos because men and women were kept so separate anyway so Edward's men only dinner is a bit of an invention.

The Grand Tour was something older early Victorian men would have done as part of their education where they travelled around Europe, seeing the sights, broadening their horizons and learning about sex

That night, there were separate dinners for the male and female members of the party. Edward didn’t know if this was an improvement or not. It did mean that he didn’t have to spend another night sitting next to Florence with a fixed smile as people discussed their future his job prospects and how many children they would have. Florence always blushed at that point as if it was an unseemly topic but quietly she had confided to Edward her wish for a large family.

“I would love at least four Edward”

“Four?”

He knew of course somewhere in the recesses of his mind, that she would expect children all women did, being a mother was their raison d’être after all but somehow he had thought the children would just appear as if by magic. It was another way he realised now that he’d been blocking the reality of marriage from his mind. If he could go back in time now, there was no earthly possibility that he would have let Alfred talk him into going through with this. Losing everything he had would be infinitely better than what he was going to have to go through and the worst thing was, there was no end to it. It wasn’t as if he would have to endure this for a few months, or few years, this was for the rest of his life. The years rolled out ahead of him, dark and blank, years of pretending, of hiding, of lies.

The all male dinner meant no Florence but it did mean Alfred sitting there amongst his father, father in law to be, his brothers, Florence’s brothers and their friends, listening as the wine, brandy and port
flowed and the conversation became increasingly ribald. Of course no one directly referenced the ladies they were related to but there was much talk about how Edward would be discovering the delights of Venus, reminiscing over youthful adventures with housemaids or governesses or being introduced to “life” through the grand tour. Edward was impressed at how well Alfred kept up appearances, not directly joining in with the talk but never letting it been seen by one momentary flash of disapproval, how much he must be hating every minute. He himself despite spending so much time as a politician could not dissemble so well and he felt his face flushing with embarrassment and anger as the conversations continued.

Then abruptly there was a loud scrape as Alfred pushed his chair back

“Forgive me gentlemen” he said “I am somewhat tired after my trip here and wish to be fresh for tomorrows…celebrations. I wish you goodnight” and he bowed his head, shot a pleading look at Edward and left the room.

Edward wished he could run after him but he had to soldier on for a couple more hours for the sake of his family, the mood of the banquet, and his reputation. Eventually however the company broke up, some heading to the billiard room, others to the library or to walk in the garden. Edward invoked bridegroom privilege and said that he would retire as tomorrow would be a very big day for him. His father embraced him and nodded and his brothers slapped him on the back

“Last night of freedom Eddy” said Charles his eldest brother and best man (he couldn’t have expected Alfred to play that role) “make the most of it!”

Edward fully intended to as he fled up the stairs and along to Alfred’s room

“Edward?

Alfred opened his front door with a slightly stunned expression. He had felt satisfied with the act he had managed to put on at the dinner for not only others’ sake but for Edward’s as well but now he would see him as he really was: a mess. His attire loosened in the privacy of his room, his eyes bloodshot from crying, his breath full of the smoke of cheroots that he had smoked far too many of to ease nerves he had not been admitting to.

Alfred stepped aside and let him, locking the door; the key turned in the latch with a loud, heavy clank in the silent night, sealing their privacy, a blessing that was music to Edward’s ears. Now he was here, he couldn’t think what to say to explain his unannounced visit. But there was no need for any of that. Alfred read him like an open book. He was reading him now, staring down to his very soul, as did Edward in return. And then they were kissing with a thirst that was pure torture to suppress whenever they saw each other. They never knew, they never could plan, therefore the stretches of deserts between their oases were uncertain, and so whenever they had the chance to be alone, alone at last, they wasted no time and no pretence to make the most of the little the Heavens blessed them with.

Edward was desperate to commit to memory the feel of Alfred’s skin, the taste of his lips, the blissful weight of his body entwined with his own. He was utterly exhausted by now. People have taken everything out of him: his work, his family, the wedding, society. He was well and truly spent in every sense of the word. He found it hard to hide his feelings at the best of times, being as impulsive as he tended to be, but on this night he knew he would not be able to be strong, not even for Alfred. So he hid his face when he felt hot tears in his eyes and instead rested his head on Alfred’s chest, hoping he would not notice how devastated he was feeling. But the effort it took to hold it back, he simply didn’t have any more of it in himself.
For a few minutes, all that existed was the sound of Alfred’s heartbeats.

‘Don’t fall asleep. It’s almost dawn, I’m afraid,’ Alfred said into the night softly, playing with Edward’s hair.

That was it; Edward couldn’t keep it in anymore. Surely, Alfred would have felt fat wet tears on his chest? Edward held Alfred close, clinging to his body with nothing separating them, and he found himself shaking his head as if he could wish away the daybreak he dreaded.

‘Edward?’ came Alfred’s voice, alarmed.

‘I can’t do this,’ Edward uttered. He felt short of breath, like he was suffocating. And it was a confession so impossible and truthful that he only dared to outright say this as a whisper against the skin on Alfred’s neck, a shameful admission that only he understood.

‘I can’t make time stop,’ Alfred replied sadly. ‘I wish I could, but…’

‘Alfred. I’m serious. I cannot do this.’

‘Yes, you can, my love,’ Alfred said. His voice and his touch were meant to be comforting but nothing could help at this point.

‘No… no, no… I can’t…’

‘You must. You’re strong and brave, and you will go to your room and get dressed in that marvellous frock coat you had made for the occasion and you will make your parents proud and…’

‘And get married to someone else.’

‘Precisely.’

Edward found Alfred’s lips in the dark again. This, this was right. He found he could breathe again.

He felt he had never known life before Alfred. Before him, he had been… content. He was fortunate he didn’t have to beg or fear the workhouse. He was lucky to go into a career that was not only sensible but allowed him to make a difference in the world. He had gone along with social occasions and customs laid out for him as one did, not being allowed the chance to think twice about them before one danced too many times with a girl enough to give a certain impression and he went along with it because… well he had never really doubted it all. He mistook his contentment for happiness.

Until he met Alfred and came to realise he had been a blindfolded fool in Plato’s cave seeing the real Sun for the first time in his life.

Until he was shown what it really was that all those sentimental novels were about.

Until he learned people weren’t just exaggerating when they talked about love.

Until he fell in love.

‘You know we could go away… leave it all behind… go to France… burn our bridges… be together…’ he foolishly grasped at straws between kisses.

And amazingly, Alfred laughed.
'Don’t say that or I might allow myself to imagine it,’ he said not unkindly.

‘Money wouldn’t be a problem,’ Edward continued slightly madly. ‘We could even go elsewhere. Wherever you like. To America, to India for all I care.’

‘And do what? Hide like criminals all our lives? We’ve been through this before…’ Alfred said. Somehow he didn’t sound patronising, for which Edward was grateful. The sadness in his voice, however, was apparent.

‘My life is over either way,’ Edward pointed out.

‘I don’t see it that way.’

‘I do.’

‘See? It’s not so hard. You’ll repeat that in the church today and everyone will leave you alone.’

‘Alfred,’ Edward said, demanding his lover to be as serious as he was. Always trying to ease tension and lift others’ mood, Alfred now dropped his attempts and shared Edward’s pained demeanour.

They settled on the bed, facing each other on the soft pillows, limbs entwined under the embroidered covers.

‘What are you so scared of, my darling?’ asked Alfred. He knew the answers to his questions but he also knew Edward needed him to ask them.

‘I won’t be able to pretend.’

‘Pretend what?’

‘That I love her.’

‘She hasn’t seemed to notice so far. She’s very fond of you. Too fond to notice anything amiss.’

‘That will not last long.’

‘It has lasted long enough.’

‘We have barely spent time together, she and I. I don’t believe we have ever been completely alone. That will change from now on.’

‘So it will.’

‘I won’t be able to do it. To pretend for her. She’ll know I don’t love her.’

‘Forgive my cynicism but most spouses do not love each other. Most barely tolerate each other.’

‘But that is not how we are.’

‘I thought you said you cared for her deeply.’

‘In a way you care for the Honourable Miss Coke or the Duchess of Sutherland.’

‘Forgive me but why did you ever propose to her if you know you will not able to love her? Other than because it is expected of a promising politician.’

‘Do you know, I can’t remember now? I believed we could be quite happy together. Everyone said
so.’

‘What changed?’

‘What changed? I met you. Happiness, true happiness is what I feel with you, Alfred. Everything else in comparison is a lie. You’ll say that’s melodramatic, of course…’

‘I won’t. I feel the same. I am myself only to your eyes, only alone.’

‘But you see now that I have known real love, I cannot get myself to pretend it for someone else,’ Edward said. ‘It’s not possible, nor is it right, to perform a bastardized version of the real thing.’

‘You’re an unusual politician… Well, women are easily satisfied with a bit of attention. Wives even more so. You will be busy working your way up to becoming the leader of your party, perhaps even the Prime Minister one day. Everyone will understand the time and effort that will be sacrificed for that. As for other, more delicate matters… no virtuous woman would dream of seeming… wanting, if that’s what you’re worried about.’

‘It’s not that… although… no, it’s not that she’s a woman, it’s that she’s not you.’

‘Well spotted,’ Alfred joked but their hearts were so heavy they could hardly be lifted. ‘You do know you will eventually have to find a way.’

‘But… I feel I am cheating on you when I am with her. Let alone…’

‘Well, she is going to be your wife. Even I have to understand that.’

‘I can’t…’

‘You’ll have to. I’m so sorry, my love, but you will. You won’t have to be by her side all day every day; you don’t even have to have…tonight. But there will come a time when she and your family will be asking about children. Don’t you want children?’

‘I don’t want to do anything but be with you.’

Alfred smiled, though it hardly reached his eyes, which were brimming with tears. His darling boy, who was so sad, was saying the most torturous things. Hope and wishing were far more painful thorns in one’s chest than meanness or loathing. Alfred loved him so much it hurt. But there was absolutely no backing out of this marriage anymore. He had to somehow keep his sanity knowing the man he loved would share a bed and a house and a name with another from this day forth.

The Sun was already on its way up the horizon. They really didn’t have much longer.

‘I… if you don’t mind it’s probably wiser if I don’t attend the ceremony. Say I got sick. I am here for you always, my love, but I’m not sure I will be able to watch this.’

‘Watch? I have to live it.’

‘I know, I’m sorry…’

‘Please Alfred! You promised you wouldn’t leave me alone! You promised. I won’t be able to get through today without you. In fact, I want you to stand right behind the bride’s side, by the stone column I face, so I could look at you while I say my vows.’
‘Edward…’

‘Please do this for me. This way, at least in our covert way, we would be blessed in the eyes of God. There is no hiding from Him. If you allow me to do this, I will gladly go to the church.’

Alfred considered this and observed Edward in the early morning light that now graced the room.

‘I will,’ he finally said.
Chapter Summary

It's Edwards wedding day

Chapter Notes

oh the dying whale noises I made as I wrote this......however here it is, its the day of reckoning and edward is getting married

Edwards wedding poem is by Elizabeth Barret browning :)

Afterwards Edward’s wedding day came back to him in flashes as if he’d watched someone else live though it and not himself.

He saw himself as he had been vomiting in his room an hour before the ceremony

He saw himself walking on legs that he felt would give way any moment towards the chapel to wait for Florence, his brother Charles’ hand on his shoulder mistaking the trembling he felt beneath his fingers for excitement and joy and not the fear and misery it really was

He heard the bells ringing to summon all to the wedding though to him it was the toiling of a funeral bell

He saw himself waiting in the chapel, feeling dizzy and wretched.

He saw himself turn and see Alfred, his dear beautiful face set like a mask.

He heard the doors open and the organist began to play as Florence paced slowly up the aisle on the arm of her father, every step breaking Edward’s heart into pieces

He saw himself turn and see her, the veil covering her face but through it he could see her face shining with happiness and love and he hated himself that he could not feel like that about her.

“if there be any man who knows of any lawful impediment why these two people may not be joined together in holy matrimony speak now and forever hold his peace”

‘now, screamed Edward internally, now is your chance Alfred! Speak up, tell them no, save me from this, please!’ But of course Alfred could say nothing, there was no lawful impediment as to why and Florence could not be married only an unlawful one. He didn’t love her, he loved Alfred.

He picked up the ring and slid it onto her finger and as he promised to worship her with his body, he couldn’t help it, he coughed and mumbled so the words came out indistinctly, he could not even think about that yet.

He watched almost dispassionately as she slid the ring onto his finger, the symbol of his bondage and...
her ownership of him

“I now pronounce you man and wife, you may kiss the bride”

Florence was openly weeping with happiness and he summoned up all his courage, this was not her fault he reminded himself sternly, she was not to blame and he steeled himself to drop a light kiss on her lips. As he did so the people in the chapel burst into applause and then he was taking her arm and walking down the aisle, past Alfred who stared rigidly straight ahead.

Watching Edward marry, Alfred wished he could die; death would be preferable to enduring this. Inside his coat pocket he had one of his spurs and every time he felt that the anguish of what he was witnessing was too much, he would tighten his hand around it, the spokes digging into his flesh and the pain momentarily distracting his mind. Perhaps he mused he might die; people did even young people like him, and if that happened at least the hurt would stop. If he died though he would leave Edward alone and the mere thought of leaving Edward to face the world without him made him straighten his spine. If Edward could bear this then so could he.

He steeled himself to greet Edward after the ceremony as a now married man

“Drummond”

“lord Alfred” they shook hands, Alfred marvelling that last night those hands had been caressing his body and now here they were shaking hands as politely as if they met occasionally for dinner, Alfred noted the ring on Drummond’s finger and he wanted to tear it off, throw it away, smash it, destroy it but he did not, instead he said

“Congratulations”

the words barely audible through clenched teeth and then he turned to Florence. There she stood in her white lace (since the queen had married in white, all the fashionable ladies wore white) looking delicate and pretty, her face aglow with happiness, his now triumphant, implacable enemy. He could barely bring himself to touch her

“Mrs. Drummond” he nodded politely at her

Florence laughed “how strange that sounds” she said “I declare Edward I shall be looking for your mother whenever anyone says it today”

Edward smiled at her and Alfred almost choked with jealousy

“Lord Alfred” it was Miss Coke behind him “you are holding up the line”

“My apologies” he said and he nodded at them again and passed on barely seeing the room as his eyes suddenly blurred with tears.

He took several depth breaths and blinked back the tears, aware of Miss Coke beside him

“It was a beautiful ceremony was it not” she said gently

“It was” said Alfred

There was silence and then she said quietly

“It is for the best you know”
“The best?” Alfred looked down at her frowning, what did she mean?

“That Mr Drummond marries, men should be married”

Alfred’s heart was thumping, did she know? But how could she?

“Perhaps” was all he could bring himself to say

“You do not agree?” she looked up at him and the light dawned, she was hoping to be next. This was a complication he did not need

“I believe that one should marry when one is in love” he said slowly

“And are you in love lord Alfred?” she asked hopefully

Poor Miss Coke he thought, her aunt had ill prepared her for the rigours of the real world, first prince Ernst and now sadly it seemed himself

“I have long been in love” he said

“Do I know the person concerned?” she asked

“You do” he replied gently “my heart has been theirs and only theirs for many years”

She frowned “but then, why do you not marry?”

Alas he said we cannot, they are already married to another which is why their identity must remain a secret

Oh she laid a hand on his arm oh Lord Alfred, how sad for you both

At last he no longer had to act “it breaks my heart that we cannot be together” and he let the tears brimming in his eyes spill onto his cheeks

“Oh but sir” she fished out her handkerchief “here, you must not cry at weddings”

He took it gratefully, one thing he would do he swore was find Miss Coke a husband who loved her.

Out of the corner of his eye Edward could see Alfred closeted with Miss Coke and he saw her give him a handkerchief and he wipe his eyes. His heart contracted with pain. He knew why those tears were there and he yearned to comfort him but with Florence clinging to his arm and surrounded by people he could not.

He felt numb inside, empty and cold. He was astonished that he was here functioning like a normal human being, walking, talking even unbelievably doing a passing semblance of laughing when all he wanted to do was drop to the ground and howl.

Now they were being called to take their seats at the wedding breakfast, the company passed into the great hall where tables had been set out and Edward was alone with Florence for the first time as her husband as they waited for the party to seat themselves

“Oh Edward” she said smiling “I believe I might burst with joy”

He wanted to cry with sadness for her, for him, for Alfred. If only she did not love him, if only she
saw this as a marriage of convenience but sadly she did not, she loved him. The worst thing of all was that he had thought he did love her too until he met Alfred and knew what real love was for the first time and by then it was too late.

“I am pleased you are so happy” he said “I hope that I will not be a disappointment to you”

“As if you could disappoint me Edward dearest” she said “we are going to have the happiest marriage in the world”

Just then the gong rang and the butler announced them “my lords ladies and gentleman, please be upstanding for the bride and groom Mr and Mrs Edward Drummond” and Edward led Florence into the room.

“Are you not hungry Edward” asked Florence as he pushed his food around the plate

“I am a little nervous about my speech” he said

She beamed at him, “you have done so many speeches my love, I know you will do well”

Edward nodded “I just want to do justice to the day” he said

Just then his father in law tapped his glass for silence and rose to do his speech. Edward barely heard it as he went over and over in his mind what he would say and then he heard the applause and realised it was his turn

He stood

“My lords’ ladies and gentlemen” he began “I find myself overwhelmed to be stood in front of you all knowing that the love of my life is with me today. Alas as you know I am a politician and thus my speeches can be on the dry and dusty and also lengthy side” he paused as people laughed” so today I intend to spare you that. Instead I wish to read you this as it says what is in my heart today

_How do I love thee? Let me count the ways._

_I love thee to the depth and breadth and height_  
_My soul can reach, when feeling out of sight_  
_For the ends of being and ideal grace._

_I love thee to the level of every day’s_  
_Most quiet need, by sun and candle-light._

_I love thee freely, as men strive for right;_  
_I love thee purely, as they turn from praise._

_I love thee with the passion put to use_  
_In my old griefs, and with my childhood’s faith._

_I love thee with a love I seemed to lose_
With my lost saints. I love thee with the breath,

Smiles, tears, of all my life; and, if God choose,

I shall but love thee better after death.

He had been looking down as he read concentrating on making sure his voice did not crack as he read but as he reached the last line he stood up and looked at Alfred who looked back at him, his blue eyes shining with tears and love until they glowed like sapphires and he repeated the last line again

“I love thee with the breath, smiles, tears of all my life and if god choose I shall but love the better after death”
Chapter Summary

Florence's mother explains to her about marital expectations & Edward and Alfred say goodbye as Edward sets off on his honeymoon

Chapter Notes

There is no end to the bizarre and strange things Victorian's believed about sex so forgive Edward taking advantage of that but what he says is no more odd than the belief that men only had limited amounts of semen hence masturbation would use it up and that having sex in any position other than the missionary would cause tumours to grow on the womb. There are documented cases of some couples believing that the belly button was for sex and where babies were born and going to the doctors in great distress about their inability to conceive.

also im sorry about all the sadness at the moment! i feel like Im channelling Jordan in the Build interview to Margret "all you ever seem i do is cry" but yes there's a lot of crying at the moment

I will give them happy times I promise

Caroline, Lady Lothian sat anxiously on a chair next to her daughter as the maid helped Florence change out of her wedding dress and into her travelling clothes. Her darling girl, how beautiful she was, how happy she looked! The Marchioness hoped fervently that Edward would be good to her daughter. She believed he would be though she was not sure if he actually loved her, but then love of course would be a bonus and in the great scheme of life, didn’t really matter. The important thing was that he was kind to her and gave her children - though to do that of course she would need to endure the shameful nightly past time women had to put up with. She remembered her own wedding night, her own mother was dead, partly the reason her father had married her off at the early age of 16 to a man 15 years older and there had been no one to tell her what to expect. She would never forget her horror at seeing her husband uncovered, his erect member pointed at her as she’d cried and hid her face. With hindsight she knew he’d been as gentle and considerate as he could be and of course he had his rights as a husband but her fear and loathing of that first time had never quite left her. Florence was their only child, a fact she knew disappointed her husband but she simply could not bear to do ‘the act’ as she called it very often and he in turn had lost interest in trying to lay with someone who seemed to be permanently fearful. She needed to explain to Florence what would be expected of her.

“Florence darling”

“Yes mama?”

“You know that Edward will have” she paused, “expectations of you tonight?”
“Expectations mama?” asked Florence

“Of the marital bed”

Florence took pity on her mother and took her hand “I know mama, he will want to lay next to me in the bed”

“Yes……” how to explain it to her? “he may want to take his clothes off”

Florence looked sideways at her mother “well yes mama I mean he won’t sleep with his clothes on, that would be too hot, he will wear a night shirt”

“He might…..and sometimes my dearest he may not wear one of those either”

Florence began to laugh “oh mama you are teasing me! Edward would never….in bed with me…without his clothes on, whatever next!”

Whatever next indeed thought Caroline

“He may want to do that, and then he may want to touch you…..”

“We will hold hands of course”

“I mean in other ways, other…..places”

“You may go Edith” Florence dismissed her maid, she needed to reassure her mama that she wasn’t a complete fool when it came to these matters and she didn’t want to do it front of the servants

“Mama, I understand what you are trying to tell me but you must not worry” she blushed “I know that he will need to touch me with his….with his…..” she faltered “here” and she put her hands over her navel “so that we can have babies”

‘Oh my darling girl why didn’t I explain to you before?’ thought Caroline helplessly, she had been a fool to listen to her husband saying it was better for her not to know! After all it had not been better for her

“That is not exactly how it works my dearest” she said and putting her arm around Florence’s shoulders she began to explain trying to be as reassuring as she could

“Mama!” Florence bolted away from the bed and stood there with her hands over her mouth

“Edward would not, father would have never, why are you saying these things?”

“It is true my darling” said her mother gently “Edward is a man and all men want to be with their wives in that way and although you may find it hard, it will give you children and as women that is our purpose in life, to be mothers”

Florence simply couldn’t take it in, imagining her gentle kind Edward pushing inside her body with with…..no she simply couldn’t. She would speak to him about it, she was sure he would reassure her.

Downstairs, his brother Charles was supervising the loading of luggage onto the carriage as Edward said goodbye to people, accepting their handshakes, back slaps and congratulations. Eventually he managed to make his way to Alfred who was standing with Miss Coke who was regarding him with sympathetic eyes.
“May I steal Lord Alfred momentarily Miss Coke?” he asked “I have a message I would like him to take to her majesty”

Miss Coke smiled and shook her head at him “work should not intrude on your wedding day Mr. Drummond”

“It is not a work message Miss Coke” he said “I wish to thank her majesty for her wedding gift. Lord Alfred?”

Drummond hurried Alfred off to a small side room, closed the door and seeing that it had no lock, wedged a chair against the handle, then he grabbed Alfred and kissed him desperately

“Oh god oh god oh god” he moaned “I couldn’t go without doing this”

Alfred was not in any way refusing, his eyes closed, returning Edward’s kiss with the same urgency it was being dispensed

“I only have a few moments before we leave” he gasped “Alfred how will I do this?”

“The way you have done everything else today” whispered Alfred “by knowing that my love is always with you. Edward that poem…I…..” he reached up and touched his face staring at him wordlessly

“I know my love I know…..”

They kissed one more time and then Edward heard cheers and clapping, Florence must have thrown her bouquet

“I must go” he said “Alfred…” he pulled away still holding his hand

Alfred smiled at him bravely “I love you too” he said “now go…..”

Edward gripped his hand hard, raised it to his lips and then was gone. Alfred collapsed into the chair and began to weep, soon this hellish day would be over and then the real nightmare would begin

Why Edward you are crying” said Florence as the carriage rattled away “what ails you?”

Edward wiped his cheeks with the back of his hand “it has been a most emotional day” he said his voice shaking

Florence pressed his hand “it has my dear but now we are together for the rest of our lives”

‘The rest of our lives’ thought Edward bleakly and he wanted to cry all over again

“Edward, now that we are alone, I wanted to ask you something”

“Yes?”

“I…about tonight…mama told me things and….I wanted to know if…..”

With a sense of dread, Edward felt he knew what was coming

“Edward mama said that you would need to push something inside me to make babies but that can’t be true can it?”
Edward stared at her; surely she couldn’t be that ignorant could she? But then yes, of course she could! It was generally believed women should be protected from such knowledge lest they fall into temptation before they were married. He was filled with a wild sense of relief, she didn’t really know and this was his chance! He took her hand

“It is true my dear but women’s bodies need time to adjust to the marital state. The wedding ceremony triggers a marriage humour to help women come to terms with their duties but it will be many months before your body has learned to do what it necessary”

She smiled with relief “we may just lie together in the bed then?”

“If that is your wish my dear though of course I would not wish to intrude on your privacy if you would prefer me not too…..” He said hopefully

“No Edward, I would like you next to me and I will trust to you as to when I will be ready to assume my wifely duties”

He smiled at her “I believe that will be best”

“I believe so too” Florence clasped his hands “oh Edward, I am so looking forward to seeing Italy! Tell me, shall we visit the villa d’este? I believe the scandalous Queen Caroline lived there for some time”

“We shall visit wherever you wish my dear” said Edward indulgently, now he could avoid the unpleasant marital duties for at least a few months, he was ready to grant her whatever she wanted

That night in his room, Alfred was 3/4 of the way through a bottle of brandy trying desperately not to think that right at that moment Edward would most likely be making love to Florence. He’d discarded his jacket, waistcoat and cravat but couldn’t find the strength to take of more and consequently was sprawled on his bed in his shirt, breeches and with his boots still on. He tried so hard, so hard, not to think of them together but he couldn’t help himself; would Edward kiss her like he kissed him? Would she respond as eagerly as he did? Would she too moan and clutch her fingers in his hair holding him in place as they kissed? would his hands caress her body as tenderly as they caressed his? and would she cry out his name in the dark as he did?

He told himself that Edward did not want this, that he would be doing it reluctantly, that he would not be enjoying it

‘ah but what if he is?’ said a voice in his head, ‘What if he discovers that after all he is like other men?’

Alfred got up and began to pace around the room, willing the voice in his head to shut up. Edward loved him, what about his speech? That proved it!

‘that was before though’ said his mind ‘before he slept with her, what if he prefers her too you now? What will you do then? Discarded, alone again, how will you manage?’

Alfred seized the bottle and tipped another shot into the glass before knocking it back. He caught sight of his reflection in the mirror and paused to stare at it, he saw a sad eyed young man, a good way to being very drunk, a man not like other men, doomed to always be different. He took another drink thoughtfully and then suddenly hurled the glass at the mirror so it shattered before bursting into sobs.
Going home

Chapter Summary

Alfred goes to spend some time with his parents and Florence is starting to wonder how long she has to wait to become properly Edward’s wife

Chapter Notes

firstly thank you for all the lovely comments and continuing to stick with my fic xxxx it means such a lot to me xx

secondly I promise that very soon I will inject some happiness

thirdly this chapter sees the introduction of Alfred's mother and father. Yoy need to read more about these guys and the whole family, seriously they were amazing!! Alfred's father the Marquess of Anglesey was second in command at waterloo; his leg was shot off where upon he said to Wellington "by god sir I have lost my leg!" to which Wellington replied "by god sir! so you have". He fell in love with alfreds mother while they were both married to other people, they both divorced their spouses and married each other - the scandal was huuuuuge! he was also Lord liuetenant of ireland and called for Catholic emancipation which if you know your irish history was probably the move most likely to get your fired (and it did) later he introduced state education into ireland for 400,000 children

Plas Neywdd is now owned by the national trust

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Alfred came back to his rooms after another wearying dinner with the Queen, Prince and the Court and slumped down heavily onto his bed. Tonight they had been discussing Italy and of course Miss Coke had to pipe up that she had received a letter from Florence on who was on honeymoon there with Edward. That had set off a conversation about what a lovely couple they were, the charm of Italy as a honeymoon destination and marriage in general. After dinner when the men had joined the ladies, Miss Coke thinking she was doing him a kindness by telling him about Edward as they were such dear friends, had read him Florence’s letter which bubbled over with happiness as she waxed lyrical about the villa they were staying in, the charm of the lakes and Edward’s wonderfulness as a husband

“He is truly the best of men Wilhelmina, so kind, so considerate, always thinking of my comfort and pleasure. I declare he is an angel on this earth”

It had taken every ounce of Alfred’s self control not to rip the offending letter from Miss Coke’s hands and throw it on the fire. Instead he had excused himself politely complaining of a headache and withdrawn to his room.

‘Edward and Florence, Mr. and Mrs. Drummond, they were forever linked together in the eyes of the
His eyes strayed to the brandy bottle but no! He’d drowned his sorrows too much as it was. He was sure the Duchess of Bucchleuch had smelt stale alcohol on him when she suggested that perhaps the maids weren’t laundering his clothes properly. He lay down on his side and as he did so, he caught sight of the painting of Plas Newydd his childhood home and estate of the Paget family. The house was in North Wales, set on the edge of the Menai straits looking up towards the mountains of Snowdonia. As a boy with his brothers and sisters they had roamed freely around the surrounding wild countryside. His parents despite the scandalous start to their marriage were enormously happy together and openly affectionate with each other. Alfred had grown up in a family where there was a great deal of love. All of a sudden he felt a yearning to be there, in the fresh mountain air or by the sea, galloping his horse for miles across open ground in a way you just couldn’t do in London. To be free from the endless wearying protocol that of course surrounded Her Majesty, to be free if only for a few weeks! He swung his legs off the bed and standing up, went to his writing desk and began to pen a note

“Dearest mama…..”

“Of course Lord Alfred if your family needs you, you must go” said the Queen kindly

“It is only for a few weeks” said Alfred “until mama is recovered”

The Queen nodded “give her our best wishes for recovery and commend us to you father”

“Of course ma’am” Alfred bowed

“And Lord Alfred? Return safely to us at court, we shall miss you”

Alfred smiled “I promise to ma’am”

**Italy**

Florence awoke, stretched and smiled as this time she had managed not to inadvertently knock Edward in the face. Learning to share a bed with another person had been strange. She was used to lying in the middle of the bed and now all of a sudden she had a side and it would seem the same side every time, how odd! She turned to look at Edward who was still sleeping. How handsome he was she thought, really she had seen no man to compare to him. She enjoyed the envious looks of the other ladies as they were out together. He was the most charming companion she could have, attentive, witty, and intelligent. They had been invited to dine at the Consulate and she had wanted to burst with pride listening to him argue most politely yet with absolute conviction with one of those tedious Liberals about the Corn Laws. She sighed wondering when her body would be ready to properly become his wife. She couldn’t deny that when he kissed her cheek and held her hand as she fell asleep that she felt the most peculiar sensations. Feeling very very daring she lifted the covers slightly so she could look at him in his night shirt, he had such broad shoulders, such a manly chest just like in her novels (the ones her friends hard shared secretly, their mamas would not have approved). She blushed and dropped the cover back; she was behaving in a most unseemly way! What would Edward think if he caught her peering at him like that? Getting up she pulled on her robe and went to the balcony looking out over the private garden they had by the lake. The day would be a hot one again and she could smell the mimosa by the window. She hugged herself; she was the luckiest, most fortunate woman on earth!
It was not the custom for grown up sons to embrace their mothers but the Paget’s were not like other families.

“How was your journey?”

“Long and tiring” said Alfred “but now that I am here I am already forgetting it”

His mother laughed “then come inside and see your father while I call for refreshments, you must be hungry after your travels”

Alfred nodded and put his arm through his hers “I am so pleased to be home mama” he said

“And we are pleased to have you home” she said noting how wan he looked and the darkness under his eyes “now you can have some rest from court duties. Mr Bumps will be delighted to see you! He has missed you”

Alfred smiled “and I him, it was so sad he had to retire to the country but court is no place for an old dog”

“Nonsense” said a voice “this old dog has never had a problem finding his place at court”

“Papa!” Alfred smiled at his father who was leaning on his stick regarding him with a twinkle in his eye “I thought you were waiting inside”

“I was but I find some people chatter on and on” he looked lovingly at his wife “and I was impatient to see you”

“Tush Henry” said his mother “we were but a few minutes! It is not our fault you have no patience”

“It was never one of my virtue Charlotte” he said as he took her other arm “now let us go inside”

They entered through the wide oak door and then there was the sound of barking and scampering paws

“Mr. Bumps!”

The old Dalmatian jumped up at Alfred who picked him up and cuddled him “how are you boy?” he crooned “did you miss me?”

Mr Bumps barked and licked his face

“Oh he did” said his mother “he did! now come and have some tea”

"He is not right Henry” said Charlotte as Alfred went upstairs to his room to rest after the journey "you can see it in his face, he seems…..diminished”
Her husband nodded slowly “I fear you are right, and he has given you no sign of what it is?”

Charlotte shook her head “no but I will find out, he will tell me, he always does”

Henry nodded “of that I have no doubt! Now as we have a few moments privacy…” he winked

“Henry!” Charlotte giggled and slapped the hand sliding along her arm away "you are quite impossible, the servants will see”

“Let them see”

“I think over the years they have seen quite enough!” she grinned at him impishly “but if you can wait till later…..”

Henry leaned back against the sofa “if I must though I’m an old man Charlotte, you need to take advantage when you can”

She leaned over and kissed him “you are never old to me” she said

This had been the best idea he’d had thought Alfred as he rode along the hills bounding the water. There was nothing to compare to galloping across the field at full speed, feeling the air rush past your face. No buildings, no people, no etiquette and remembering how to address a French Comte as opposed to a German Landgrave - and no reminders of Edward. He recalled how when Lord john Russell had come to call on the Queen as Prime Minister and the page had announced “the Prime Minister of Great Britain and Ireland and his private secretary” , a smile had blown across his face until he remembered. Edward was not the Prime Minister’s secretary, he wasn’t even in the country and he didn’t know when he would see him again. ‘No’ he thought ‘you have come here to forget about Edward for a while’ and he spurred his horse and rode even faster, trying to outrun his memories and his sadness.

“Alfred you look most dishevelled” laughed his mother when he returned “come and sit with me and tell me your news”

“Oh there is little to tell” said Alfred lightly

“Oh come Alfred” said his mother “you live at court, there is always news”

“Well we believe Her Majesty to be pregnant again” said Alfred

His mother snorted “that is hardly news Alfred! That is an everyday occurrence”

Alfred smiled “I believe Her Majesty wishes it were less of one”

“And a new government” said his mother “Her Majesty must be glad to be rid of peel” and just like that Alfred’s demeanour changed

“I need to change, I am not fit to be seen” he said his voice shaking slightly

“Alfred? What is the matter?”

“Nothing mama”
“That is clearly not true” said his mother “was there a difficulty with Sir Robert?”

“No there was no difficulty…mother please” he could hear his voice on the verge of breaking

His mother was tiny but she was forceful “Alfred Henry Paget you will tell me what is wrong this instant!”

“...” he made to stand up and walk away but she laid a hand on his arm

“Alfred” she turned to look at him and stroked his face “my boy, you think I do not know you are in pain about something? Tell me my dearest, what is it?”

And then she watched as his face caved in “oh mama” he said “mama...” and crumpled into sobs, his face pressed into the lap of her gown as he had when he was a little boy

“In love? Oh Charlotte how I hoped this would never happen” said Henry gruffly as he held her while she wiped her eyes

“He is so unhappy Henry…our darling boy is so desperately sad”

Alfred’s parents sat down holding hands on the sofa in their bedroom

“We always knew he was….different” said Charlotte sadly

Henry nodded “we did our best, removed opportunities or temptations when we saw them happening, arranged things so that if he couldn't change, he would at least be safe but….. “He shrugged “we couldn’t protect him forever…and you say this man is married?”

“Yes, most recently it would seem”

“And he shares Alfred’s feelings?”

“It would seem so”

“poor boys, poor poor boys” said Henry “I saw things you know in the army Charlotte, dying men calling for their closest comrade and not their wives, we punished it so harshly, far too harshly in my opinion but these things have been happening for many centuries”

Charlotte nodded “what are we to do Henry? I cannot bear to see him like this! He was always such a merry child and now.....”

“I believe there is nothing we can do, he must grieve and take his time, and it will work itself through in the end”

“You are right Henry and at least he is here with us, I shudder to think what would happen if someone in the Palace were to realise his….disposition”

“he is safe here my dear” said Henry gently kissing her

“He is” and they embraced

“Did he tell you the name of this man?” asked Henry almost idly as he held her

Charlotte shook her head against his shoulder “no, it is for the best I think”
Henry nodded “most likely” ‘but I will find out’ he swore to himself ‘I want to know who is inflicting this pain on my boy and I WILL discover it’

Chapter End Notes

next chapter i promise i will make them smile!
Welcome home

Chapter Summary

Edward is finally back from honeymoon & Alfred returns to London wondering when he will see Edward again

Chapter Notes

Wooop wooop no one cries in this chapter for what feels like the first time in age plus bonus lord alfred in his uniform because who doesn’t love that? (Including Edward)

Italy 4 weeks later

‘Only one more day to get through’ thought Edward with relief ‘just one more’

He was so bored he thought he might scream! He’d always needed time alone, quiet time to think, to process the day but he’d found that apparently marriage didn’t allow you that, leastways honeymoons certainly didn’t! Everytime he tried to have even 5 minutes to himself, Florence would be there talking, keeping up a never ending stream of chatter about the day, people they’d seen, what they would do tomorrow.
‘Leave me alone’ he wanted to shout ‘just give me some peace’ but he couldn’t, it wasn’t her fault. It was what she had been taught.

He also sensed a slight undercurrent to her chattering, a sense of anxiety & need for reassurance. Despite what he’d said to her about her body needing time to adjust to marriage (and yes he did feel hot with shame every time he thought of how he lied but not guilty enough that he regretted it) he’d caught her looking at him several times in a speculative way & although she thought he didn’t know, he was aware of her furtive looks at him under the covers. Florence was naive but she was not a fool! The time would come when she would wonder whether he was being honest about his reasons for waiting.

But above all else he missed Alfred more than he thought possible. His face, his lips, his scent, the feel of his skin beneath his fingers, his smile, his wit, his merry nature. Every time he embraced Florence (he could not avoid that entirely) he closed his eyes & wished it were Alfred

“Edward! Are you dozing at this hour?”

Florence swept into the room ready for the day

Edward roused himself “no my dear, just thinking”

“What about?” She oozed her head on one side & fluttered her eyelashes at him. He knew she wanted him to say ‘of you’ but he couldn’t, all he could think was how Alfred’s eyelashes, so dark when he was so fair, were so much more beautiful.
“Of our dinner engagement tonight with the ambassador”

“Oh” Florence smiled happily, she had secured them an invitation at the British embassy to her great delight. She was determined to be the sort of wife who would help Edward gain access to the right people “it will be such a grand occasion Edward”

“It will & you must be sure to wear your prettiest dress”

He smiled at her, he didn’t really care what she wore but he knew she was proud of her wardrobe

“Of course Edward! I want you to be proud of me” she came close to him & looked up with a look he already knew meant she wanted to be held. He drew her into his arms

“I am proud of you” he said, for what else could he say? and ‘just one more day’ echoed around his mind.

Plas newydd

“Must you return to London Alfred?” Asked his mother anxiously

“I’m afraid I must, the queen requests my presence & a request from her majesty is in actuality a command!”

He’d received a letter from Wilhelmina that morning. Slipped in between the lines telling him of the latest court doings was a reference to the fact that Florence & Edward would return home the day after tomorrow. He needed to get back to London with all speed.

The visit home had soothed him. Although he still burned with jealousy every single night at the thought of Edward with Florence, his body aching & hard for Edward as his fingers dug into the pillow with frustration, he was calmer than he had been, at least during the day. Not having to mask his sorrow helped enormously. His mother & father let him grieve and he was grateful for that. They had not asked too many questions although they had pressed him to tell them who the man concerned was but he refused. He was free to come & go as he pleased & he spent long periods out on his horse or walking by the sea throwing sticks for Mr Bumps. They had also of course tried to (as they saw it) reason with him

“He is married Alfred! Even if it were not illegal which it is, there is no hope you can be together and besides what of his poor wife?” said his mother

Alfred’s eyes were cold as he replied “the marriage was not his choice & I have no sympathy to spare for her”

“Alfred!” His mother was truly shocked “she has done you no harm”

“She has him mother, who I would kill to have! do not expect me to feel any pity for her”

His father had been blunter “he’ll never be yours my boy, don’t waste your life on what you cannot have”

Alfred had just smiled sadly at him “and what if you had thought that when you met mother & she was already married to someone else”

“That was different” said his father
“No papa, it wasn’t” said Alfred quietly & left the room

The last of his things were loaded up onto the carriage and he made ready to leave

“Alfred” his mother hugged him long & tightly “please consider what we said. Do not see this man anymore”

“I cannot promise that mother” he said “I would soon as not breathe again than never see him”

His father also embraced him “then please my son take all care & precautions. If you will not give him up then keep yourself safe”

“I will papa, I will not jeopardise the man I love”

His father sighed “I was thinking of you my boy, I just hope this man whoever he is, deserves your love for him”

Alfred smiled “oh he does papa he does”

London

As the carriage rattled down the street towards his new home, it was all Edward could do not to raise his arms in the air & shout hallelujah. Finally the honeymoon was over, he was back in London & life could return to normal

“I’m so excited to see the house” said Florence “I hope all the furniture has arrived safely, mother wrote to say it had but I won’t be happy till I see for myself”

“I’m sure all is well” said Edward distractedly, wondering how soon he could see Alfred

Florence rolled her eyes affectionately at him “you could sound a little more excited Edward”

“Sorry my dearest, I am just tired” said Edward ‘and I just want to see Alfred’ he thought

“Of course we’ll have a dinner party to celebrate” said Florence happily “invite all our friends” she giggled “perhaps there may even be a few more marriages yet”

“Mmmmm” said Edward non commitally

Florence gave up ‘men’ she thought as began to mentally plan her very first dinner party as a married woman

Buckingham place

“Lord Alfred you have returned to us at last” said the queen “we have missed you”

“And I you ma’am” he said

“And your mother is recovered?”

“Oh much better ma’am”

“I am delighted to hear it. Now we have a desire to go fir a drive, will you accompany us?”

“With pleasure ma’am” said Alfred with a smile
How typical thought Edward all the way back to England with nary a problem and they were stuck less than a mile from home.

He put his head out of the window.

“What is the delay?” He asked.

“It is the queen sir”

“The queen” Florence was beside him “oh Edward! I have never seen her majesty! Will she come this way do you think?”

“I do not know” replied Edward his heart pounding. If the queen was riding out then she would almost certainly be accompanied by Alfred & he wasn’t ready yet..he wasn’t..

“Make way make way” said an authoritative voice “clear the way for her majesty”

Edward closed his eyes “not here” he whispered.

“You there! Move that carriage!”

“Edward! Why that sounds just like lord Alfred” said Florence.

“I think not my dear” said Edward.

“Oh but it is!” Florence put her head out of the window & called.

“Lord Alfred”

Edward saw Alfred start & then expertly wheel his horse so he was facing them.

“Mrs Drummond” he swept off his helmet & nodded at her “I fear your carriage is blocking her majesty’s path”

He paused and then looked in the carriage.

“Drummond” he said quietly “you are returned from honeymoon”

Drummond nodded his heart beating so fast he thought it would burst from his chest. Alfred in his uniform had always been a sight that undone him & to see him here unexpectedly like this sent a bolt of lightening through him.

“I trust you enjoyed it” he said.

“It was sublime lord Alfred” said Florence ecstatically “you must come & dine with us so we can tell you all”

Drummond wanted to drop his head into hands & yell to the gods, invite Alfred round to tell him all about the honeymoon? what a truly horrific idea.

“I’m sure lord Alfred has many engagements at present” he said.

“Oh Edward” she touched his arm & Edward felt Alfred stiffen on his horse “I am sure he is not too busy for an old friend like you”

“I must ask you to move your carriage madam” said Alfred again, “her majesty must not be held up”
“Of course” said Edward

Alfred bowed “then I will not detain you and Drummond - welcome home” he said looking directly into Edwards eyes before turning his horse again to continue along the street

“Lord what a handsome man lord Alfred is Edward” said Florence “I declare had I met him first I may not have married you” and she laughed to show the joke and Edward smiled mechanically. He was too busy thinking of Alfred’s eyes as they had met his, soft & loving but with a slight hint fear in them too

Welcome home he said quietly to himself
Edward and Alfred finally meet again properly, Edward's career is looking up at last and he has something he wants to offer Alfred.

Another chapter without tears! in fact even some actual happiness - hurrah!

Historical notes - Lord Palmerston was one of the most important politicians of the 19th century and famously disliked by Victoria and Albert. He held every great office of State and was the brother in law of Lord Melbourne.

Edward lent his head back against the door and gasped as he clutched his fingers in Alfred’s hair. Below him he could feel Alfred’s mouth working against him, his hands gripping his hips as he licked and tasted. Edward was dizzy from the pleasure, panting as he felt himself building to a climax.... He woke with a start, momentarily disorientated to discover he was not actually with Alfred, he was in his own bed next to Florence and then he felt the liquid pooling on his stomach under his night shirt. ‘Not again’ he groaned to himself, if he didn’t see Alfred soon, he would definitely lose his mind!

After their surprise encounter in the street, Edward had hoped that he would be able to see Alfred very soon but nearly a week had passed and still he had not been able to arrange it. He hadn’t really factored in just how much difference not going to the Palace every day would make plus he no longer had access to an army of messenger boys he could dispatch quite legitimately to the palace with notes for Alfred. Instead he had single footmen he could use to send messages from home but who he certainly couldn’t entrust notes for Alfred too. Alfred’s job had not changed so he was still at the Palace dancing attendance on the Queen on an almost permanent basis. It was now nearly 5 weeks since they had seen each other.

At breakfast Edward was tired and grumpy, a fact that did not go unnoticed by Florence who asked him solicitously if he was well. He wanted to snap at her ‘I would be quite well if I could see Alfred’ but of course he could not. Instead he pleaded worry about his future which was true. Despite his father’s invitation and everyone else pressing him to go and work at the bank, he just could not so it. His marriage was killing his soul as it was, it could not die at work too.

“This may cheer you up my dear” said Florence handing over an official looking letter with the Houses of Parliament seal “perhaps some old political colleagues would like to see you”

Edward took the letter and went into his study. He did approve of having his own study where he could now at least get a few moments to himself. He took his letter opener and sliced open the envelope.
Dear Sir (ran the note) I have heard from my trusted friend Baron Holland who met you at the Consulate in Italy. He has written to me to tell you how deeply impressed he was by you and suggesting that now Sir Robert Peel is no longer Prime Minister that you may wish to turn your talents to the Foreign Office. I therefore ask you to lunch with me tomorrow at the House of Lords. Palmerston

Edward felt a burst of happiness run through him. This was the chance he had been waiting for! Working at the Foreign Office possibly even representing Her Majesty abroad would more than make up for no longer being at the right hand of the Prime Minister. Of course the Government was now Whig but he would live with that. Not all Whigs were bad he reminded himself with a smile thinking of Alfred.

“Edward dearest” Florence stood in the doorway “forgive me but I’m so curious as to what was in the note”

He smiled at her “I have been invited to lunch with Lord Palmerston tomorrow night at the house. He wishes to discuss my joining the Foreign Office”

“Oh Edward” Florence clasped her hands “I’m so pleased for you! I know how miserable the thought of working at the bank made you”

‘Did she?’ thought Edward in surprise ‘how did she know that?’

“It is a great chance” he said happily “a chance to do something that matters again”

“Edward” she came and took his hand “I am thrilled. Is the invitation for you alone or…?”

Edward knew she wanted to come to but even if she had been invited, he would have made excuses. He was already planning how he could see Alfred. By telling her it was dinner instead of lunch he could have a whole day free. He knew Florence had already arranged to visit some friends so he could go to the house, have lunch with Palmerston and then wonder freely around the chambers and libraries before god willing he would meet Alfred.

“I am sorry my dear” he said “it is a working dinner, perhaps next time”

Florence nodded, she understood that when men were working they did not want women fluttering around. Besides, she was already thinking of a much bigger prize, a dinner for the foreign secretary hosted at her own house.

Edward scribbled a hasty note to Alfred begging him to meet him at his old rooms’ tomorrow evening; (thank god he’d had the foresight to keep them on he thought) and asking him to leave his reply with the doorkeeper of the House of Lords. It was too dangerous to send notes directly to him at his home.

At the Palace, Alfred was engaged in an interminable round of cards with the Queen and her ladies. Sometimes he wondered if he really ought to try and do more with his life. The endless trivial round of gossiping, currying favour, of a thousand things being said but none of them being meant made him feel weary to his bones. While it was of course a great honour to be Her Majesty’s equerry, in practise it as largely ceremonial with clerks carrying out most of the actual accounting and payment work.

“Excuse me my lord” a page handed him a note
Alfred’s heart skipped a beat; he knew that handwriting so well. Excusing himself he opened it; it was from Edward imploring him to meet him tomorrow evening at his old rooms. Tomorrow night he knew there was yet another reception at the Palace; frankly there were receptions nearly every night. He would make his excuses to Her Majesty and meet Edward. He had waited for so long, so long, while he’d been away training himself not to think of him, not to imagine him with her. He needed to see him; he was dying a thousand deaths inside everyday with Edward’s absence.

Edward had not had such a pleasant day since he could remember. After what felt like decades he was free of Florence for a day. He’d never realised how much he valued his space and privacy until it was taken from him. He wandered the streets, the parks, just enjoying his own thoughts and the quietness of not having to make endless small talk. He was very excited to meet Palmerston but even more so to see what Alfred’s reply would be. Surely, surely he would come. He arrived at the Lords greeting the doorkeeper like an old friend

“Why Mr. Drummond sir! How lovely see you and congratulations on your nuptials. Now I have a note for you here before I forget”

He handed it over and Edward opened it trying not to let his hand shake, on it were 4 words “I will be there”. Edward took a deep breath ‘thank god’ he thought ‘thank god’

“Good news sir” asked the doorkeeper seeing Edwards face

“The best” smiled Edward “now I am meeting Lord Palmerston”

“Right you are sir, you know the Members dining room of course”

“Of course” said Edward and he strode off feeling as light as a feather

“My lord” Edward bowed his head and then held out his hand, Palmerston rose and shook it

“Sit sit” he said “I am delighted to make your acquaintance at last Mr. Drummond” he said “I have heard great things about you which when it comes from your political enemies is not to be sneezed at. Your enemies not mine” he added with a laugh

Edward returned the laugh “perhaps it is a clever plot sir, to have you take on a Tory to have someone to blame if your plans go awry”

Palmerston stared at him and then guffawed “well I heard you were an honest one, and not afraid to speak your mind. You will find I am the same, I believe we may do well together Mr. Drummond, Tory or Whig, we both want the best for this country”

“We do sir” said Edward as the soup arrived “indeed we do”

Back in his room, Edward was immensely cheered at how the lunch had gone. Although Pamerston's politics was not his, he had huge respect for the older man. He sensed he was a man who got things done and that he was also not inclined to let the monarch stand in his way, something Edward found refreshing; there had been many times he’d been frustrated by what he saw as the Queens emotional approach to politics and foreign relations. Now all he needed to do was wait for Alfred
Alfred had chafed with impatience all day long. Never had the meetings seemed so long, the gossip seemed so pointless, the meals so endless. Finally he secured his release at 6pm; rushing to his room, he threw on his coat, grabbed his hat and gloves and left almost running to Edward’s rooms.

Edward was too nervous to sit down; he paced round like a caged animal, looking at his pocket watch every 30 seconds, waiting, waiting, waiting for Alfred to arrive. Finally there was a knock on the door and Edward flung it open. Standing outside was Alfred

“Edward” he said and smiled and that was all it took for Edward to almost drag Alfred inside the door and crush mouth down on his feeling Alfred gasping softly as he slid his tongue in his mouth and then he was kissing him back hard. Edwards’s hands were in Alfred’s hair, his fingers combing through it and then tugging softly as his tongue continued to plunder his mouth. Soft little sighs of joy interspaced their kisses as they pressed together, their bodies each yearning for the other.

Eventually Edward pulled away from the kissing, his mouth red and swollen, and his whole being on fire

“Alfred” he murmured brokenly, feeling almost undone with happiness his hands reaching up to cup Alfred’s face “how I have missed you”

Alfred smiled at him “and I you” he said and then a look of sadness crossed his face “I was not sure if you would want me now that you are err, now that you are…” he couldn’t bring himself to say it “not want you?” Edward frowned at him “Alfred why would you think that?”

“Because you are…..”

“Married” Edward supplied softly

Alfred nodded “and now that you have….with her, I thought you may not want to with me…” He didn’t want to tell Edward how he had been nearly driven out of his mind with jealousy and frustration and had had to leave Court and go home to recover some balance to his mind

Edward looked at him as the light dawned, of course Alfred would think that he and Florence had…. “Alfred” he took his hands and looked into his eyes “I have not lain with Florence”

Alfred’s eyes widened “you have not? But Edward, why?”

Edward shook his head “I could not bring myself too” he said simply “I could not have you in my heart and lie with her, I just could not do it”

“Oh Edward” Alfred pulled him against him “Edward, Edward, I love you so much”

Edward buried his head against his shoulder “I love you too” he said his voice choked “Alfred” he pulled away and looked down at him “I want you to be the first person I lie with…..I cannot give that to her, it belongs to you”

Alfred looked at him “are you sure Edward?” he asked gently

Edward knew of course that he could not put off laying with Florence forever but if he must sleep with her then he would give himself to Alfred first. Only by doing that would he feel right. Only by doing that could he then bear to consummate his marriage.

He nodded “yes” he said “I have never been more sure of anything”
if that was what you wanted

Chapter Summary

They are finally able to be together but Edward struggles to cope with what it means

Chapter Notes

Ooooh this was a hard one to write! I struggled with how Edward, a fundamentally honest and decent man, would reconcile himself with being with Alfred and being married.

Huge thanks to animateglee on tumblr for all her input to this chapter and so many others x

When Alfred had taken his hands and gestured to the bed, Edward momentarily panicked; he wasn’t sure he meant right there and then, he wanted it to be perfect, a beautiful room, the most comfortable bed. Alfred seeing his hesitation had asked if he wanted to change his mind and Edward had falteringly tried to explain.

“Edward” said Alfred gently “do you not think that anywhere we are together is perfect because we ARE together?”

Edward looked at Alfred; he was right, this was what he wanted to be with Alfred finally and completely and it didn’t matter where they were, he nodded “yes”

“Then….” Alfred gestured to the bed again

They had both been nervous; of course they had, but Edward much more so than Alfred, so much so that he found his hands were shaking and his body didn’t seem to have any coordination.

“Edward” Alfred stilled him “perhaps if you permit me?”

And so he had, he had let Alfred softly kiss him and stroke him, his hands and mouth driving him to ever higher levels of arousal until Alfred had asked his voice rough edged with need if Edward was ready. Edward had nodded and then finally finally they were as one. Alfred had been so slow, so gentle but even so Edward was unprepared for how much pleasure he would feel. He wanted to move, he wanted to stay still, he wanted to clasp Alfred there forever. He had clutched at Alfred unable to believe that the noises he was making were falling from his own lips. Alfred was kissing him, biting tenderly at his bottom lip as Edward moved his hands from Alfred’s back and into his hair, holding him in place as he kissed him frantically. Alfred’s eyes were closed but as Edward groaned his name, he opened them and smiled down at him

“My love” he whispered “my only love”
Edward pulled him hard against him, needing to feel every inch of Alfred’s skin against his. He was aware of every nerve ending, the heat of Alfred’s body, the softness of his skin, his lips on his, their fingers interlaced and the pressure of Alfred’s hand as he squeezed them. Alfred was moving faster against him now, his breathing deeper and rougher and Edward whimpered as he began to feel his own body move in time with Alfred’s.

Alfred gripped him harder, his head thrown back, his breath coming in shorter and shorter gasps as he began to unravel and Edward wrapped his arms around him even tighter so he could find his own release. And then Alfred was crying out incoherently and falling forward to bury his face in Edward’s neck as Edward shuddered and whimpered out his bliss.

Edward had never heard such silence in a room; it was as if all noise from outside had been extinguished and only they two existed. Alfred was still on top of him, his skin damp from exertion and Edward stroked his back gently, his mind still spinning from what had just happened. He felt at peace as he never had before, as if the world could end now and he would accept it because he at last knew what it was to experience the pinnacle of happiness. All he wanted to do was close his eyes and sleep in Alfred’s arms, and then wake up there the next day and do that every night of his life until he grew old and then if God was merciful he would die in Alfred’s arms.

On top of him, Alfred stirred and gently rolled to the side and then snuggled himself into Edward’s embrace. Edward could feel his smile against his shoulder and he kissed the top of Alfred’s head and wrapped his arms around him. As he looked down at his hand around Alfred’s shoulder, the candle light reflected off the gold of his wedding ring. As he looked at it, it was as if an icicle had suddenly pierced his heart. What had he done? What was he doing lying here thinking of sleeping next to Alfred every day when he couldn’t even stay with him this night? It would not be long before he would have to get up and return home to carry on with his pretend life, to be Florence’s husband, the dutiful son, to resurrect his career. He could no more stay in this room with Alfred than he could stop time but how he would give anything anything to do it. Worse was the realisation that he was not the person he thought he was. Before he met Alfred, he had believed that honesty was non negotiable, that people should hear the truth no matter how much it hurt. Now of course he knew different. He was no longer an honest man and that thought devastated him as much as the knowledge that he could not be with Alfred as he wanted to be.

Alfred sensing the tension is his body asked “are you well Edward” softly kissing the tip of his nose

“I……” Edward didn’t know how to reply. Was he well? Yes he was and no he wasn’t. His love for Alfred flooded his heart and soul and yet a part of his mind said “you are a terrible person Edward Drummond, you have broken vows made in front of God, you are a liar and a cheat”

“Edward?” Alfred was looking at him with concern “what is the matter?”

“Alfred…” His voice cracked even though he didn’t want it to “do you think I will go to hell?”

Alfred reared back “hell?” he repeated “Edward my love! Why do you say that?”

Edward began to weep “I have broken my vows, I have lain with you, what we have done is a sin, surely I will not go to heaven?”

“Oh Edward” Alfred’s heart wrung with pity for him. How hard his beloved found life, everything so black and white, never seeing that the world was full of so many many shades of grey.
“Listen to me” he said rolling onto his back and pulling Edward into his arms “do you believe God is omnipotent? That he knows all”

Edward nodded tearfully

“And do you believe he created the world and everything in it?”

Edward nodded again

“And do you love me?”

“You know that I do” whispered Edward

“Then my love He created us and people like us. If we could marry each other we would but it is man’s law not God’s that prevents that. God sees into your heart, He knows you’re a good man, that what you do is because you love me. I don’t believe God would bar you from heaven for loving someone”

Edward looked at Alfred, his eyes blank with misery “but what if he did?” he whispered

Alfred wanted to weep, to howl that after having been through so much and to have finally had this moment of exquisite and complete happiness, it was still not enough, that Edward was still suffering. He could not allow that and so hardly believing what he was going to say, he said

“Edward listen to me if it is your wish that we never do this again, that we never even meet again if it makes you happy I will do it” he bit his lip “if you would rather now that we have….that you go to Fl….your wife and be with her and only with her then I will not stand in the way of that. Your happiness is all that matters to me and I would rather die than think of you in such pain”

It was not exactly true. If Edward said yes to his offer, if he got up, put on his clothes, kissed him one last time and then walked out of the door and out of his life, Alfred knew would crumble into a thousand pieces. It was all he could do not to fall to his knees and beg Edward not to say yes, never to say yes, not to ever leave him. But he did not, instead he closed his eyes and prayed.

There were a few moments pause which seemed to Alfred an eternity before Edward spoke

“Alfred” he said quietly “how have these weeks been for you?”

“These weeks?” Alfred looked at him

“While I have been away, how did you manage knowing that I was married and believing I had been with Florence?”

Alfred gave an ugly half strangled sob “I drank” he said “I raged, I broke things and when I could bear it no longer I returned to Plas Newydd”

“And yet you would live like that again for me?”

“If that was what you wanted then yes”

Edward lay there his eyes smarting with tears, by what miracle on earth had he come to have this man love him? He had to come to terms with his life and the choices he had made that had led them to this point. If he did not madness lay in wait not just for him and Alfred but yes for Florence too.
He had made his bed and now he must lie in it. He would do the best he could by both of them; by Alfred whom he loved more than life itself and by Florence who loved him and was innocent in all of this.

Somehow he would make it work.

End of part 1
Part 2 chapter 1 "know thine enemy"

Chapter Summary

Florence invites Alfred to a dinner party to celebrate hers and Edward's marriage

Chapter Notes

Part 2 begins and this part will see a lot more interaction between Alfred and Florence as well as changes in Edward's personal life and professional life

note - it is usual to refer to the houses of parliament as simply the House

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Edward you did not come to bed last night” said Florence “I wondered where you were”

“I am sorry my dear” said Edward “I did not arrive back from the House till very late and did not wish to disturb you”

She smiled at him “you are so considerate Edward but I would always prefer to be disturbed than wake without you there”

“I shall remember in the future” said Edward gently and he put his arms round her to avoid looking at her. He was so torn, last night he had been with Alfred again but he was finding that the lying he was doing was already incredibly painful for him. How was he going to do this for the rest of his life?

In all other respects his life was now much better. It was such a relief to work again, his day now had shape to it. He got up, generally breakfasted alone as Florence did not rise until later, went up to say goodbye to her, strolled to the House and then his day was full of meetings, reviewing documents and discussions with MPs. He would lunch at the House and dine there 3 or 4 days a week at least. The one dark spot was how difficult it remained to see Alfred. Although he now had a lot more time away from Florence, this did not mean more time for Alfred. Alfred’s job remained as time consuming as ever and unlike when he was Sir Robert’s private secretary and went to the Palace on almost a daily basis, Palmerston did not go there as much. The rumour was that the Queen did not like him; he must remember to ask Alfred about it thought Edward. That meant that anytime he got word from Alfred he was available he would drop everything to see him but that was not a state of affairs that could continue.

Florence half hoped as she pressed herself against Edward that he might sweep her into his arms and carry her upstairs as she had read happened to heroines in novels but alas he did not. She could not deny she was becoming somewhat bewildered at how long it seemed to be taking for her to be ready to be completely his wife. Perhaps she ought t consult her mama about it and how long she should expect to wait.
He was in all other expected the perfect husband. Kind, thoughtful, interested in her day, seeking her opinion on matters and indulgent, allowing her as much freedom as she wanted. When she had suggested they held a dinner party, he had smiled and said of course if that was what she wished. The only slight shadow had been their disagreement about who to invite. She had wanted to include Lord Alfred amongst their guests and he had not, but equally had not been able to come up with a good reason why, mumbling something about having spent many dinner parties together at court and he was probably bored of his company. Florence had laughed at him

“How ridiculous you are Edward! Of course he would not be bored of you and anyway, even if he were, I have hardly met him. I will seat him next to me so I have an opportunity to get to know him better”

Edward wondered whether he should continue to put up a fight. He felt in a desperately difficult position. The absolute last thing he wanted was to have Alfred in his house, having dinner with him, his wife and their other guests, he did not want to put Alfred though that or himself for that matter. But equally it was known what good friends they were. If he continued to argue, Florence might get suspicious and the merest idea that Florence might suspect there was anything beyond friendship between him and Alfred terrified him more than anything

He decided that the most politic thing to do was allow her to invite Alfred but to say that he would invite him personally

“Very well but do not worry about an invitation my dear I will invite him next time I see him”

Florence pouted “but I like inviting people properly Edward” she held up an invitation “look Mr and Mrs Edward Drummond request the pleasure of your company at a dinner to celebrate their marriage” she smiled happily “I am still so excited to be Mrs Drummond” she said

Edward almost snatched it out of her hand “I will take it personally my dear”

the last thing he wanted Alfred to receive was one of those invitation, he could only imagine how much it would hurt

Florence turned her attention back to the menus for the dinner; she was still going to send an invitation to Lord Alfred anyway, the opportunity to send something to the Palace where he may even open it in front of Her Majesty was too good to miss.

“I can only assume you have gone quite mad Edward” said Alfred the astonishment clear in his voice“a dinner invitation? What on earth are you thinking?”

Alfred had sent a message to the House asking if they could meet for lunch at his club. It did at least make matters more manageable knowing he could send messages to Edward at work and he could do the same, sending Parliamentary messenger boys to the Palace though of course not with too much frequency.

When Edward arrived, Alfred had taken out the invitation, laid it on the table in front of him and looked at Edward questioningly.

Edward seized it and crammed it into his pocket “I told her she was not to send one to you” he said angrily “I’m so very sorry Alfred”
“I can’t say it’s the welcome invitation I’ve received” said Alfred quietly. When the footman had handed the envelope to him and he had opened it, he had to summon all his self control to reply lightly.

“An invitation from the new Mrs Drummond”

when Harriet asked him who it was from. Miss Coke had then arrived with hers in her hand

“Lord Alfred! I have an invitation from Florence and…oh look you have one too”

Back at the lunch table, Alfred raised his eyebrows at Edward “so she disobeyed you?”

“Yes but I do not want to have the kind of marriage where I expect my wife to obey me like…like a servant!”

“Then you are very unusual Edward” said Alfred irritated that their conversation was being dominated by Florence “most men prefer their wives to do as they’re told”

“Perhaps I spent too much time with Her Majesty” said Edward “she did not do as the Prince asked”

“She is the Queen Edward” said Alfred impatiently “it is in no way comparable. The fact remains that your wife” he bit down on the word “has invited me to a dinner at your house, something for obvious reasons I do not wish to attend”

Edward sighed “I tried very hard to persuade her not to include you but I couldn’t find a single good reason why not, other than one that I obviously couldn’t say”

“Of course I will reply sending my regrets”

“Mmmmm….” Edward looked at him worriedly “Florence is very…tenacious, if you don’t come to this one, she will bombard you with invitations until you do. It may be easier just to accept; once you have attended one then she should leave you in peace

“Oh for goodness…” Alfred tried hard to swallow his anger at the ridiculous position he was being put in

“are you actually expecting me to go and have dinner at your house with you and your…with her and make polite conversation and not show how I feel?”

“I know it is difficult Alfred” pleaded Edward “but I do not believe she will accept no for an answer”

Alfred look away, a scowl marring his handsome face, he really did not want to have to do this but he also knew that sooner or later, he would have to spend more time with Florence than a simple greeting or asking after her health. He was Edwards’s best friend; it would look very odd if he refused to meet her or to spend time with her. It would certainly cause problems for Edward if it were obvious that Alfred disliked her and being (or at least trying to be) sensible, the reality was the only thing Florence had done to him was marry Edward, and she could not be blamed for that. She had not after all proposed; however, the fact remained she was Edward’s wife and had the right and privilege of being known as that to the world, the woman that Edward belonged to, the person the world believed he loved. He could not, would not forgive her that she had so much of Edward and he who loved him so deeply, had so little.

He sighed heavily “very well Edward I shall attend but I shall leave as soon as is polite”
“I understand” said Edward relieved, he wanted to squeeze Alfred’s hand in thanks but of course he couldn’t “thank you Alfred” he said and flashed him one of the special looks that only they two shared and Alfred looked back at him wanting to be angry with him but how could he be when Edward looked at him like that?

*the evening of the dinner*

Florence smiled at her reflection in the mirror; she knew she looked beautiful her dress of blue and gray suited her so well. Surely it could not be much longer before Edward made her truly his wife? She was so excited. Her first dinner party as a married woman. She was already determined that She would become one of the most brilliant hostesses in London to help further Edwards career. She took one last look as the maid fastened the diamond pendant around her neck, a most unexpected but beautiful present from Edward that morning, and went downstairs to be ready to greet her guests.

Downstairs, Edward was in a state of nervous tension. He had thought that his wedding day would be the hardest thing he had to get through but he as finding out that in comparison with living everyday as the husband of Florence whilst being in love with Alfred, his wedding day was a picnic. He had confidence in Alfred’s ability to hide his unhappiness at having to be here, after all hiding boredom, fatigue and annoyance was Alfred’s everyday job at court. No what he was worried about was how he would get through the evening.

Alfred looked in the mirror, the pale blues and greys he had chosen to wear he knew suited him perfectly. The temptation to turn up looking any old how like a sulky child had been strong but no! He was better than that beside he knew what his father would say “know thine enemy Alfred!” and Florence was his enemy as far as he was concerned. His biggest fear was that Edward would tire not so much of him but of the difficulties their relationship brought. Tonight he would deploy all the weapons in his arsenal to find out more about Florence her life with Edward and her plans. He took one last look in the mirror before he left, “know thine enemy” he whispered.

Chapter End Notes

next chapter the dinner party unfolds
a dinner party at the Drummond's

Chapter Summary

After being placed in the awkward position of having to go to a dinner party at Edward's and Florence's, Alfred decides to use it as an opportunity to find out more about Florence. He finds himself the centre of attention and speculation from Florence's female friends, something which does not please Edward at all.

Chapter Notes

sooooo yes! Alfred has to go to dinner with the love of his life and his wife because who wouldn't want to do that?

notes: the other people at the dinner are made up with the exception of John Spencer Stanhope who was the real husband of Wilhelmina Coke and William Peel (keep an eye out for him later!)

“Edward” Florence swept into the room “are you ready? The guests will be arriving soon”

Edward nodded trying to calm the beating of his heart, he couldn’t imagine how terrible the evening would be with Alfred and Florence in the same room. He had had a small glass of whiskey for Dutch courage and he hoped Florence wouldn’t smell it on his breath, but then he never really let her get that close that she would have thought.

“Well then?” Florence stood there waiting for him to offer her his arm and trying to quell her disappointment that he had not commented on her appearance or noticed she was wearing the new pendant he had brought her

Edward stared at her looking nonplussed and then it was as if his mind had slipped back into focus and he came over

“Shall we?” he said taking her arm “you look most charming tonight” he added and Florence smiled

“Thank you” she said relieved that her efforts had not been in vain.

At the bottom of the stairs, Florence turned to him “I will give the table one last check” she said and Edward smiled

“Of course my dear”

In the dining room, Florence cast a practised eye over the table. The tablecloth was of the snowiest white linen and the Crown Derby dinner service they had received as a wedding presents from Edwards mother and father was on the table. There were Crystal glasses to hold several wines and liquors and the finest silver cutlery. A centre piece of roses to match her wedding roses and place cards for all the guests completed the setting. Florence walked around the table, paused and then
swapped over two of the place cards, she knew Edward had been quite insistent that she sit next to John Spencer Stanhope but she wanted to know more of Lord Alfred, Edward’s best friend. Lord Alfred would sit on her right and John Spencer Stanhope would sit next to Wilhelmina Coke.

When she returned to the drawing room, Edward was standing staring into the fire, looking somewhat tense thought Florence,

“Are you well my dear?” she asked

He looked round at her “I know the effort you have put in to this dinner” he said quietly “I am nervous on your behalf that it all goes off as handsomely as you desire”

She smiled “you are sweet Edward” she replied “I have the greatest confidence that it will”

Just then the front door bell rang and they heard Greening the butler walk across the floor to open it; Edward took a deep breath and took up his position by the door ready to greet people as they arrived.

“You look pale Lord Alfred” said Miss Coke in the carriage as it rattled along to the Drummond residence “you are not sickening for something I hope”

“I am just over tired Miss Coke” he replied “Her Majesty has been somewhat demanding these last few days”

His mind was in turmoil, he still couldn’t quite believe he was doing this. Coming to dinner with Edward and his wife as if he wanted to spend any time with her at all! He had spent the last few days trying to push aside images of Edward with her, he said they had not lain together but he could not be sure of that could he? Edward had no reason to lie but still, even if they had not yet, they would and that was like a knife to his heart. Even worse than that though was the everyday intimacies she shared with him, that she could wake every day next to him, see him asleep, watch him in the evenings as read the paper by the fire or talked to her about his day. Sometimes his jealousy of her was so visceral, he physically ached from the need to rage and break things.

And now he was expected to smile politely at her, to smile as she gushed about being Edward’s wife whilst all the time he knew he would wanted to scream at her to cease speaking instantly and tell her that Edward didn’t love her, had never loved her. He noticed his breathing was speeding up and his fists were clenched. He had to calm himself; he had to remember what he planned. That tonight he would use all his charm to find out more about Florence, only by doing that could he stay one step ahead of her.

When they arrived, his legs felt like lead as he escorted Miss Coke up the stairs and rang the bell. The butler admitted then and paced in front of them towards the drawing room before announcing

“Lord Alfred Paget and the Hon. Miss Wilhelmina Coke”

“Lord Alfred” Florence came towards him smiling with her hands outstretched with Edward behind her, his eyes mutely telegraphing ‘I’m sorry’

“I am so delighted you could come. Edward feared you have had dinner with him so many times that you would not want to”

Alfred took her hand and bent over it, grazing it momentarily with his lips trying not to wince as he did so
“Mrs. Drummond” he said “How charming you look tonight, surely that gown must be from Paris? And what an exquisite pendant”

Florence bushed, Edward never really noticed what she wore; oh he said she looked nice but he wouldn’t be able to tell if a gown was from Paris or Pitlochry!

“It is from Paris” she said “and look! How we match” she indicated Alfred’s dark blue coat and silver waistcoat

“So we do” he smiled at her and then looked over at Edward “Drummond” he said holding out his hand “alas your plan to spare your wife the dullness of my company did not succeed” his eyes glittered as he looked at him

“Lord Alfred” Edward took his hand wondering how, if this was an indication of tonight would play out, he would make it through with his sanity intact

The fact that both Alfred and Florence were wearing the same colours was enough of itself to make his head spin

“I am sure you are delightful company lord Alfred” said Florence “in fact Wilhelmina has told me on many occasion how charming you are”

Alfred laughed lightly “as you know Miss Coke is the kindest of women which is why she does not mention how often she also has to listen to my amateurish efforts on the piano and the number of times I tread on her feet whilst dancing” he realised he was still holding Edward’s hand and dropped it abruptly

“How you are teasing me sir” laughed Florence

Behind them another group of people arrived

“Forgive me” said Florence “I must greet the newcomers, Edward would you introduce Lord Alfred and Miss Coke to our other guests?”

“With pleasure” said Edward “Miss Coke, after you” and he gestured with his hand and then looked at Alfred helplessly who gave him a half smile “just one night” he whispered

As well as Lord Alfred and Miss Coke, Florence had invited amongst others John Spencer Stanhope, Lady Gwendolyn Moncrieff, Lady Charlotte Howard, William Peel, and Lord and lady Duff Wilson. Ordinarily Edward would have enjoyed such a dinner, he had always been fond of dinners at the Palace, distinguished guests, erudite conversation, fun and laughter, however at those he had been with Alfred, the two of them sharing conspiratorial glances and smiles. Now all he could do was sit helplessly at the head of the table, Miss Coke to his left and Lady duff Wilson to his right while at the other end Alfred sat on the right of Florence next to Lady Gwendolyn. He was in full Palace mode as Edward had jokingly described it once and both Florence and Gwendolyn looked utterly entranced as he told them amusing tales of life at court interspaced with flattering their outfits and asking their opinions on the latest novels and ballets. Lady Charlotte was also leaning down towards him and Edward was sure she would have got up and changed places if etiquette allowed it. Edward wanted to storm to the other end of the table and demand they all stop looking at Alfred like that and simpering and batting their eyelashes but of course he could not.

And then Edward heard Lady Gwendolyn ask in bell like tones
“How is it you are not married lord Alfred?”

It seemed the entire table fell silent and all eyes turned towards Alfred thought Edward as he dug his fingers into his leg under the table to stop his face betraying any expression other than polite interest

“Ah” said Alfred “I have long been in love”

“Oh” Lady Gwendolyn fluttered her fan and looked puzzled “but then why not marry the lady?”

“Alas they are already married” sighed Alfred “and so I am doomed to remain alone”

Edward looked down with a sudden lump in his throat, Alfred was alone in a way he was not and his heart filled with sadness

“Oh but sir” exclaimed Florence “surely with so many beautiful charming ladies at court, there must be one who is her equal?”

Alfred looked at her directly “they have no equal” he said softly “they are incomparable”

Florence looked down at her plate; did Edward feel like that about her? That she was incomparable? Would he have remained alone if they had not been able to wed? Stop it Florence Drummond she told herself sternly, Edward is the best of husbands

She smiled at Alfred “then we shall have to do what we can to find her equal for you sir, shall we not Gwendolyn?” she added

“Most assuredly” said Gwendolyn, starting with herself she added mentally. It was simply not allowable that such a fine man as Lord Alfred should be alone

“Now I have made you sad” said Alfred “with my melancholy tales, come Mrs Drummond tell me of your plans now that you and Edward are settled” and he smiled at her as he took another sip of wine

It seemed like the dinner went on interminably but at last the ladies rose and left the table and the port was brought in.

As soon as they reached the drawing room, the women clustered around Miss Coke

“Now Wilhelmina” said Florence “I want you to tell us all about Lord Alfred!”

Miss Coke smiled at them “he is the most charming of men”

“That much is quite apparent” said Gwendolyn “but who is this mysterious woman he loves?”

“Could it be the Duchess of Sutherland?” asked Lady Charlotte “they have known each other many years I believe”

Wilhelmina shook her head “I do not believe so” she said “besides Harriet is now a widow so there would be nothing to prevent their marrying”

The ladies sat and fluttered their fans in silence for a few minutes and then Florence turned to them wide eyed

“Could it…could it be…her Majesty herself?” she asked “he is her dancing partner and close companion. Could it be he entertained hopes before the Prince Consort arrived”
“I do not think…” began Wilhelmina bit she was drowned out by Lady Gwendolyn and Lady Charlotte talking over her

“Oh but yes! It must be”

“How romantic, in love with the Queen”

“Poor Lord Alfred, no wonder he struggles to find someone to compare!”

Florence laughed “I cannot believe ladies that you would give up so easily! I am certain we can find Lord Alfred a wife” she said plans already forming in her head

In the dining room John Spencer Stanhope smiled at Edward

“How charming your wife is Drummond, what a lucky man you are”

Edward smiled at him through gritted teeth “she has many virtues” he said trying to ignore the smothered noise sounding suspiciously like a giggle coming from Alfred

“And you Lord Alfred” continued john “seemed most taken with her”

Alfred laughed “she is the wife of my best friend; I wish to know if she is good enough for him”

Lord Duff Wilson snorted “generally it is the other way around sir! Is he good enough for her??!”

Alfred said gently “Edward is the best of men, he deserves the best of wives” and Edward shot him one of those looks

“Here here sir!” Said John “Now I must ask you of Miss Coke, she seems delightful”

Alfred smiled “she is a pearl amongst women”

“But you are not” he paused “entertaining thoughts…?”

“oh no sir” said Alfred smillingly “but I can think of no one more sweet natured and loving than Miss Coke though her aunt is another matter” and he shook his head ruefully

“How are you finding working for Palmerston, Drummond?” asked William Peel. He was one of Sir Robert Peel’s sons and knew Drummond well. Edward grasped gratefully at the opportunity to change the conversation away from marriage to politics

“Foreign affairs are most interesting” he began

Eventually after they had finished their cigars, Edward rose

“We should join the ladies” he said even though he would rather stay here with Alfred near him and far away from Florence

“Indeed” John stood up “after you sir” and they progressed to the drawing room. As they walked Edward hung back next to Alfred

“Could you stop doing that please” he quietly

“Stop doing what Edward?” asked Alfred confused
Edward looked at him sideways "you know what! being charming like that to to to…." he couldn’t bring himself to say my wife “the ladies”

Alfred sighed “I am just playing the part required of me Edward, do you think I am enjoying it?”

“I…” began Edward but they reached the drawing room where Florence was waiting impatiently

“Edward” said Florence “I was on the verge of sending Greening to find you! We were just saying how much we wanted to dance”

“Dance?” said Edward

“But of course! We have the Queens favoured dancing partner here” she smiled at Alfred “of course we wish to take advantage of that and I’m sure Wilhelmina will play for us”

Wilhelmina nodded “if perhaps Mr Spencer Stanhope would turn the music for me” she asked shyly

“I would be delighted” he said with a bow

“Wonderful” Florence clapped her hands delightedly “a waltz to start I think and as hostess I claim the first dance with Lord Alfred”

Edward felt his stomach jump into his throat. Florence dance with Alfred? Oh no no no he thought

He stepped forward “surely the first dance is mine my dear, I claim marital privilege”

“Oh but you can dance with me anytime Edward” she said waving him away “lord Alfred is our guest”

Edward ground his teeth, why he wondered had he not after all availed himself of one of the milksops who would do as they were told. How ironic that it was the very honesty which made him think he could tolerate being married to her which was now causing him problems.

Edward looked at Alfred willing him to come up with an excuse but he did not

“Madam” he said offering Florence his arm “I would be honoured”

He led her to the middle of the room and waited for Wilhelmina to begin, when she did he bowed and Florence curtseyed and then he put his arm on her waist and began to move gracefully through the steps. No one could see how hard he bit the inside of his cheek as he touched her.

“You are an excellent dancer sir” said Florence

“You are most kind Mrs. Drummond” replied Alfred

“I fear Edward does not enjoy dancing as much as I” she said with a humorous moue “even though that was how we met”

“Drummond has never told me of how you met” said Alfred keeping up a relentless count of the time of the dance in his head to keep himself from pushing her away and running from the room, 1-2-3… and 1-2-3….

“it was at a ball” she said smiling “he was much talked of you know, the handsome Mr. Drummond but I confess when we danced that first time that although I thought him handsome, I also found him
“Dull?” Alfred blinked

“Yes he made little conversation and when he said he was in politics, well I must say I told him what I thought’

“And what was that?”

Florence raised her chin and laughed “that I found his wretched politics extremely dull just like him and do you know? that was what did the trick”

“Was it now?”

“Yes we danced again, and this time he made an effort to make conversation and before I knew it we were chattering like old friend. Of course” Florence grew serious “I adore him utterly, I didn’t think I could be so happy” and she looked at him with limpid eyes

Allred wondered almost looking in on himself from the outside, how many more times it was possible his heart would break over Edward. Just seeing the look on Florence’s face and knowing she had Edward forever made him want to cast himself from the window. Thankfully the music ended and he bowed

“Thank you for your company” he said

“Now it is my turn” said Gwendolyn impatiently, honestly how typical of Florence to monopolise Lord Alfred when she was already married “a polka Miss Coke? I believe something livelier is caused for”

Edward watched as Alfred danced with all the ladies including Miss Coke (lady Duff Wilson grudgingly taking her place on the piano for a quadrille). All of them, married or single, simpered and fluttered in a way that made Edward almost sick with jealousy. How dare they all look at him like that? Tap him with their fans and touch his arm and smile coquettishly up at him.’ Leave him alone’ he wanted to shout ‘he’s mine!’ But of course he could not. Eventually as Florence stepped forward to dance with him again, Edward could stand it no longer

“Lord Alfred I wonder if I may have a moment of your time in private please”

“Oh but Edward!” said Florence “do not break up the party! It is still early”

“I am not breaking up the party my dear” said Edward “I only need a few minutes of lord Alfred’s time as I have a message from Lord Palmerston for the Queen and I wished to discuss it first with Lord Alfred as he knows Her Majesty so well”

Florence pouted crossly

“It will not take long” said Edward mollifying her “we shall rejoin you very soon. Lord Alfred?” and he gestured to the door that led to his study on the other side of the drawing room

As soon as they were through the study and the door was shut, Edward fell on him kissing him wildly as Alfred struggled in his embrace
“Edward” he hissed trying to free his mouth “what do you think you are doing? Have you taken leave of your senses?”

“Almost definitely” replied Edward with a laugh verging on the hysterical “you drive all my sense from me Alfred”

“Edward you need to control yourself” said Alfred as he felt Edwards hands fumble under his shirt and began to stroke across his chest “please! For the love of god stop it!”

Edward mouthed feverishly at his neck “I can’t” he said

“You must” said Alfred urgently “Edward if you do not stop this minute I will not be able to prevent myself from tearing your clothes from you”

“And that is meant to stop me?” Edward began to pull at Alfred’s cravat, he didn’t care, he was going to have him right there, the world and everyone in it could go hang and….

There was a knock at the door and they both jumped

“Excuse me sir. Mrs Drummond wondered when you would be rejoining your guests”

Edward cursed under his breath “am I to get no peace??!”

“Tell Mrs. Drummond I am discussing important business with Lord Alfred and we will rejoin the party when it is concluded and not before” he said peremptorily

“Very good sir”

“Edward, I fear that will not be received well” said Alfred refastening his clothing

Edward slumped back against his desk with his face in his hands “why must this happen to us Alfred?” he asked “why can we not be together”

Alfred came and leant next to him and put his arm around his shoulders

“Edward” he said “can I ask you something?”

“Anything”

Alfred rested his head against his "why her?” he whispered

Immediately, Drummond tensed, feeling even more uncomfortable than he had been watching his wife dancing with Alfred.

"Edward I need to know, you're not in the witness box, it's only me.” Alfred tried to make light of it but he suddenly found he really did want to know

"I never loved her," started Edward defensively

"I know you didn't,' Alfred replied " but I was just wondering... she said something rather curious while we were dancing."
"What did she say?" bristled Edward

"She told me how you met."

Edward's eyelids fell as he tried not to be taken back to the memory of that evening and prayed to God that he would never again be as uncomfortable as he was right now, listening to Alfred talk about this.

"She told she told you she wasn't interested in politics,' said Alfred shaking his head almost comically "and what I don't understand is how on earth did it come about that you of all people should have proposed to her, who is so openly and honestly disinterested in your life's work."

Edward still seemed to want to wish the moment away rather than answer “it will not help to know” he said finally

"Humour me Edward, you never know, it may help" said Alfred quietly pretending to fix Drummond's necktie just to have an excuse to also run his fingers along his cheek to let him know it was alright and that he wasn't being accusatory even if it all hurt so very very much still.

"I wish..." Edward muttered almost inaudibly still not answering the question. "I wish I had met you earlier."

Alfred's eyes were brimming with tears but a smile broke on his face regardless:

"I don't," he said, surprising Drummond.

"Why not? Things would be so different if--"

"I know. But if I had met you earlier, everything since then would have been different too. Which means that all my present memories of you would never have happened. And I wouldn't want to give up any of them for anything since they have been my happiest."

At that Edward put his arm around him and held him fiercely

“Nevertheless Edward, I want to know why her? I assumed you shared at least common interests. It does make me wonder whether I know you at all” said Alfred voicing his real fear.

What if he actually did know Edward? How much time had they spent together? Very little, snatched hours if they were lucky but mostly their time was counted in minutes. He was seized with a cold fear, what if after all he really didn’t know Edward at all

It was at that that Drummond stopped cowering away from the subject, straightened up and looked Alfred straight in the eye:

"Alfred, Florence doesn't know the first thing about me."

"You must have had a reason Edward, I mean you don't have to tell me...I don't want to twist your arm..."

"I found her honesty refreshing." Said Edward in a rush realising as he said it, how feeble it sounded

"Refreshing?" Alfred said, mocking the wholly unromantic word. In fact, he found he really had to laugh. At first it was just a soft giggle, which he credited to the champagne. But he really had a moment of oddness here: it was all so ridiculous, the whole situation, and he had gone through all the depths of misery, so the only thing he could do now was to laugh.
At first, Edward was eyed him warily, confused as the turn of events, but then he felt compelled to join in.

And so, with a dozen dinner guests in the drawing room just a door away, they kept laughing and shushing each other, giggling like naughty school boys

Eventually Edward wiped the tears of laughter from his eyes and stood up

“We have to go back in” he said

“I know” said Alfred, he paused “I have some time in two evenings hence” he looked at Edward “if you are without a prior engagement”

Edward looked at him “I believe my diary is free” he said “Alfred” he hesitated “you will not leave me will you?”

Alfred sighed “do you think I would put myself through an evening like this if I planned to do that?” he laughed softly “surely this evening must tell you how much I love you?”

They embraced one last time and then left the room side by side to rejoin the other guests.
Tangled web

Chapter Summary

Florence is concerned about why she and Edward have still not consummated their marriage and is considering seeing a doctor, meanwhile Alfred’s father comes to London with an offer for Alfred and Edward has to face up to reality

Chapter Notes

notes - morning dress is the equivalent of a dressing gown that women wore before they got formally dressed for the day and Alfred's dad really did fight a duel when he divorced his wife to marry Alfred's mother (its not quite as dramatic as it sounds, they fought with pistols and neither party was injured)

"My Lord, I hereby request you to name a time and place where I may meet you, to obtain satisfaction for the injury done myself and my whole family by your conduct to my sister. I have to add that the time must be as early as possible, and the place not in the immediate neighbourhood of London, as it is by concealment alone that I am able to evade the Police."

Arthur is Arthur Wellesly aka the Duke of Wellington - he and Henry Paget were close friends

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Florence was pensive for several days after the dinner party, she wasn’t sure her relationship with Edward was progressing exactly as it should. She was becoming increasingly worried about their marriage not being consummated. She wasn’t a fool, she listened to things her married friends said and she wasn’t at all sure it should be taking this long. Nevertheless she did not want to tackle Edward head on; she did not want to appear wanton or unwomanly. Perhaps she should visit Scotland and talk to her mama; she would discuss it with Edward over breakfast.

“Florence” Edward stood up as she entered the room in her morning dress “I did not expect you to join me so early”

She smiled “I miss you dearest; I’m still not used to you going to the House everyday  and besides I wanted to ask you something”

“Oh?” Edward was in a good humour, he was seeing Alfred that night “have you overspent your allowance?”

Florence gritted her teeth, sometimes Edward made her feel like a child!

“No” she said crisply “I wish to visit mama”

“Your mother?” said Edward puzzled “is she ill?”
“No, I just wish to seek her advice that’s all”

“Advice?” asked Edward “can I not be of help”

Florence blushed “I do not know Edward” she hesitated and carried on “I am…alarmed that we have still not….,” and she went redder “and I thought perhaps there may be something wrong with me so I was going to consult mama as to whether I should see a doctor”

A doctor?? Oh no no thought Edward; he could not allow that, if Florence spoke to a doctor she’d know he’d been lying. It seemed as if his time had run out and he could not avoid doing what he knew he had to any longer

“Perhaps my dear before you do that we could” he fumbled with what to say “see for ourselves?”

“Oh” Florence blushed again “Edward” she found her heart was thumping very fast “I would like that”

He smiled at her though inside his heart was crumbling, how was he going to do this? “If I may suggest…..tomorrow night to give yourself time to prepare”

She nodded suddenly feeling extremely shy

“And now my dear, I must go, I have a long day at the House” he came over and kissed the top of my head “and do not forget I will not be home for dinner”

“I hadn’t Edward” she smiled “I am going to dinner at Gwendolyn’s” to plan she thought mischievously

“Enjoy your day my dear” he said “goodbye” and he was gone

Florence sat back in her chair; she had much to think about before tomorrow night including how she could arrange for Lord Alfred to escort Gwendolyn to the opera next week.

Edward did not have an early meeting to go to; he just needed to get out of the house and away from Florence to enable him to think. He should have known that the lie he had told Florence would come back to haunt him. Now he was in the position of having to consummate his marriage with Florence the following night or face her going to the doctors and discovering that what he told her was a falsehood. He really had no choice, tomorrow night he would have to lay with her. He was seized with an urge to talk to Alfred, to seek comfort from him but he knew that he could not, must not, inflict that on him. He understood that even though Alfred knew he had to lay with Florence properly at some point, he would still be devastated when it happened. No it would be unbearably cruel of him to seek solace from Alfred over this, he had to carry this alone.

“How is that new secretary of yours working out Palmerston?” Henry Paget leant back in his chair

“Drummond? He’s a splendid fellow! Intelligent, efficient, pleasure to be around even though he is a Tory”

They both laughed “well one can’t have everything” said Henry

“He married Lothian’s daughter recently” said Palmerston “knows your son too I believe”
Henry picked up his ears “a good marriage for an ambitious man” he remarked

“Yes” nodded Palmerston “in fact it was indirectly her doing that I took him on. She secured an invitation to dinner with Henry Holland on their honeymoon and he was so impressed with him, he wrote immediately to say I’d be a fool not to snap him up”

“An impressive young man” said Henry almost casually but his eyes were narrow “and when was this honeymoon?

“Only 7 weeks ago, he’s not long been back in London”

“Ah” Henry nodded and changed the subject but inside his heart was racing; Edward Drummond was a name he had heard Alfred mention in his letters. He had assumed that this Drummond was no more than a friend but perhaps not, the coincidence of a young man that Alfred knew marrying recently was just too strong. He would go to the Palace and call on Alfred

“Lord Anglesey” intoned the butler gravely

Alfred sprang up “Papa!”

Henry smiled at the company assembled around the Queen

“Your Majesty” he bowed stiffly but still elegantly leaning on his cane

“Lord Anglesey” aid Victoria smiling holding out her hand so he could kiss it “it has been far too long since we have seen you”

She’ always had a fondness for the old marquis despite his scandalous past, she found the fact that he fought a duel over his love for Charlotte Cadogan (as she had then been) deeply romantic. He was also exceptionally charming, a trait inherited by his children.

His eye alighted on the Duchess of Buccleuch “Charlotte” he said kissing her hand “why had I known you were here I would have come much sooner and brought Arthur with me to relive old times”

“Henry” said the Duchess, trying to sound stern but failing “I see you have not changed one bit, still charming the birds from the trees”

He shrugged and grinned “alas you know me too well my dear duchess”

“I did not know you were in town papa” said Alfred “why did you not let me know?”

“Oh everything happened so fast dear boy. I had an urgent message from Lord Russell, it seems pickings are so slim in Parliament these days he wants me to be Master General of the Ordnance.

“Well congratulations sir” said Alfred delighted “will you and mama now spend more time in London?”

“I believe we shall” he said “Your Majesty, may I trespass on your good graces and ask Alfred to accompany me back to my carriage. I need to return to the House, alas so many papers already and I have a family matter I wish to discuss with him”

“But of course” said Victoria smiling “and Lord Anglesey, I hope we shall see more of you now”
He bowed “I hope so to ma’am. Alfred? Walk with me”

They both backed slowly out of the room before turning to each other

“So my boy” said Henry as they walked slowly down the corridor “how are you?”

“I am well father” said Alfred and indeed he did look better, much better in fact

“I take it then your liaison continues?” said Henry quietly

“It does papa” Alfred flushed but looked defiant “I cannot give him up”

“Mmmmm” said his father “and you still refuse to tell me his name?”

“I do father” said Alfred “it is dangerous for him and for me, the fewer people who know the better, even you” he added

His father sighed; it seemed obvious to him that this Edward Drummond may indeed be the man Alfred was in a relationship with. It could be no coincidence that he was back in town after being married at the exact same time that Alfred had returned to London and that Alfred seemed a thousand times better

His father stopped and looked around the Palace “it cannot be easy to meet living here” he said “not when he is married”

“No but we manage” said Alfred

“Perhaps you should consider having your own residence Alfred? It is all very well to live here but a man needs his own space” he looked at Alfred “his own privacy”

Alfred looked away, his heart beginning to race, his own residence where he could see Edward as much as he wanted or at least as much as Edward would be available anyway. No more sneaking upstairs to that dingy room near Parliament

“I would enjoy my own privacy” he said “and… it could be done?” Alfred knew it was not as simple as just occupying one of the properties they owned. He would need servants and servants were notorious gossips. He could not afford to have himself and Edward exposed or to become objects of blackmail

“I am sure the Queen would understand, you cannot live in the Palace forever and as for the rest, I am sure arrangements could be made” said Henry already thinking of people he trusted, former soldiers in his regiment who would safeguard Alfred’s secret.

“Papa” Alfred smiled at him gratefully “really you are far too kind to me”

“You are my son Alfred” he said “what else would I be?” he did not add how many sleepless nights he and Charlotte had had over him, the nightmares of Alfred being caught, dreams of fighting his way to the scaffold to save his boy, he and Charlotte would go to the ends of the earth to protect him and if that had to include the man he loved too, then that was how it must be.

Henry made one last effort “given the situation Alfred, could not tell me who he is?”

“No papa” said Alfred sadly hating to disappoint him Henry nodded, he would have to do it the hard way then, so be it. They reached the carriage and shook hands

“Goodbye papa” said Alfred “and thank you”
“Goodbye my boy” said his father “and we will discuss arrangements shortly”

“Ohgodohgod…oh Edward...Oh…” Edward clamped his hand over Alfred’s mouth to muffle the noises he was making. He didn’t think there was anyone in the room next door but you never knew. Beneath him, Alfred writhed and squirmed as his orgasm over took him and Edward closed his eyes and gave himself up to his own pleasure, biting gently on Alfred’s shoulder to stop himself shouting aloud.

They lay there panting, Edward half over Alfred’s back, his arm around his waist; Alfred lay with his head turned to the left, his hand on top of Edward’s on his waist

“Edward” said Alfred “that was most…..” he trailed off not sure what to say, he’d never known Edward so desperate, admittedly it was a short time they had been able to be together like this, but still, Edward had gripped him so tight, he could still see the imprint of his fingers.

Edward kissed the back of Alfred’s neck gently; he had been overtaken with an almost primeval need to ensure Alfred was his before he had to lay with Florence the following night. He needed the reassurance in his own mind that what they had was pure and true and could not be damaged or undone whatever happened in his marital bed. The urge to tell Alfred this and what he had to do tomorrow night was almost overwhelming but he pushed it down firmly. He could not do that to Alfred, the burden was his alone to carry.

“Edward”

Alfred wriggled his way out from under him and turned over and Edward was seized again at how beautiful he was and how unbelievable it was that in this world that frowned on people like them, they had found each other

“My father is in town, he has suggested to me that it is time I moved out of the Palace and had a home of my own”

A wild fear leapt into Edward’s throat; surely Alfred’s family did not mean they wanted him to marry?

Seeing the look on Edwards face, Alfred immediately understood

“No my love” he said “not in that way, no papa believes I should have my own home away from court and I agree with him. It would make it much easier for us too”

Edward looked around the little room, he had wondered how long he would be able to keep the fact that he had it secret from Florence, Alfred having his own house would remove that need, one less secret to manage would make his life easier

He smiled at Alfred “I think some privacy for you and for us would be most welcome”

Alfred smiled back happily “yes, oh and I forgot to say, though you probably know already, papa has been given a job in government, I expect you shall meet him at the House”

Edward pulled him into his arms “I expect I shall” he said, he looked over at the clock and sighed inwardly, they had not much longer and this was the last time he would see Alfred before he had to consummate his marriage

“Alfred” he stroked his face “I love you” he felt tears prickle his eyelids; he had to be as he saw it
unfaithful to Alfred and the thought of it killed him.

“I love you too Edward” said Alfred burrowing into his embrace “I didn’t know it was possible to love this much”

“Neither did I” said Edward in a choked voice

“Edward! You are crying” Alfred felt a tear splash onto his cheek

Edward scrubbed at his eyes with his hand “sometime how I feel overwhelms me” he said thickly

Alfred smiled at him “yes, me too” he said softly

The clock struck 10pm and Edward sighed

“I must go my love” he said

“I know Edward” said Alfred “when might I see you again?” he hated that he never knew when he would see him again but that was how their life was and he had to get used to it

Edward was already struggling into his clothes “I will send word” he said “Alfred…..”

Alfred looked at him questioningly

“I would die for you you know” his emotions threatening to spill over again

Alfred looked at him oddly “I hope that will not be required” he said gently “Edward are you quite well?”

Edward took a deep breath and pulled himself together, he could not let Alfred suspect anything

“I am sorry” he said “I just miss you so”

Alfred nodded “and I you, and now you must go” he added

Edward pulled on his coat, kissed Alfred fiercely, clung to him and then abruptly pulled away

“Goodbye my love” he said

“Farewell Edward” said Alfred “I love you”

On the threshold of the door Edward turned “and I love you too” he said and then he was gone

Chapter End Notes

next chapter I'm afraid Edward really does have to do what he has to do.....
Consummation

Chapter Summary

Edward finally consummates his marriage and meets Alfred's father

Chapter Notes

I wanted to call this chapter dying whale noises because
aaaaarrghhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh Poor Edward, poor Florence, poor all of us!

I promise that there is some good in this chapter for Edward and after this, I will give them a bit of happiness - I know? who would have thought it

Now it came, the moment he had been dreading all day. Florence’s maid had helped her undress and unpinned her hair which flowed out across the pillow as she laid waiting for him. He could see the fear in her eyes, he knew that she would have been told very little about what would happen other than that it was something she must endure rather than enjoy. He wanted more than anything not to make her any more afraid then she already was and to ensure she at least didn’t find the experience repugnant but how? How was he to do this when he was even more reluctant than she?

Edward sat on the side of the bed next to her and took her hand

“We do not have to try….” He paused delicately “if you do not wish to tonight”

She smiled at him “Edward you are my husband, you have the right to to to” she faltered not knowing how to phrase it

“I would rather we…because you wanted to than because I have the right to it” he said gently

“oh I want to Edward” she said “I want us to be properly man and wife and have children, this is the real beginning of our life together that I have waited for, for so long”

He nodded wanting to say he felt the same, that this was what he wanted too but he just couldn’t so instead he kissed her.

At once she put her arms around him

“Oh Edward” she sighed “make me properly your wife”

Afterwards, he waited until Florence had stopped crying and fallen asleep before he slipped out of bed. He had steeled himself for the fact she would cry but not that she would sob how much she loved him and how happy she was. He had held her and soothed her, willing her to stop saying such things. It only made everything even worse than it already was.
Their coupling had been nothing like the ones he had with Alfred. Florence had lain there biting her lip and trying not to flinch as he groped about under her nightdress not wanting to lift it up. Eventually he realised he was going to have to, as he really did not know what he was doing and he was worried that too much longer and he simply lose the ability to consummate it all. Unlike Alfred who gave himself completely to what they were doing, Florence as one would expect, waited for him to take the lead. When finally he had thrust inside her she had cried out and he had stopped immediately asking if she was hurt.

“No Edward, it is to be expected I think”

And he’d nodded and carried on as gently as possible. She didn’t moan or sigh as Alfred did, or run her hands over his back or mischievously bite his ear or do any of the things that made lying with Alfred such a delight, and he was grateful that she did not, but the contrast made his heart ache. Instead she lay there as still as possible, just making little gasps every time he moved. The only way to climax, the only way, was to think of Alfred as he had been the day before, his eyes drunk with desire as had pushed Edward against the wall and dropped to his knees to pleasure him. Thinking of the feel of Alfred’s lips wrapped around him, his tongue licking and his little moans of excitement had made Edward suddenly speed up and then he was thrusting once, twice more and then finally it was over.

In his dressing room, he ran the tap into the wash basin and took a sponge and began to vigorously wash himself. The water was freezing but that didn’t matter, all that mattered was that he wash himself clean of what had just happened. He felt hollow and empty, his sorrow too deep for tears. How he wished that Florence did not care for him, that she saw him as a vehicle to keep her in the manner to which she was accustomed and to provide her with children. Sadly, she did not, she loved him or at least she thought she did for how could she really love him? She did not know him at all. As for Alfred, he could hardly bear to think of him now. The only reason he had managed to stay vigorous long enough to actually have sex with Florence had been to think of Alfred and he didn’t even know how he would face him next time he saw him.

He washed himself once last time and then looked in the mirror. The moonlight lit up the shadows and angles of his face. How, he wondered, had things come to this? He thought back to the choices he had made, the times he could have turned aside from the path he led. He knew to the outside world it was simple; Florence was his wife, together they would have children (he could at least give her that) and it would be she who accompanied him in public to dinners and balls, she who would host the parties and soirees with useful contacts that would further his career. But his heart belonged to Alfred, Alfred who he could never be seen in public with, at least not in that way, Alfred who understood him, it was Alfred who his soul sang for, Alfred who simply loved him in the full knowledge that they could never truly be together but went on loving him nonetheless.

Florence woke the next morning to find Edward already gone and a flower on her bedside table. She smiled and stretched; at last she was finally properly Edward’s wife. The experience itself had been, well not the most enjoyable time she’d ever had but then as she understood it; it wasn’t really meant to be. Poor Edward had clearly been afraid of hurting her and she had been worried that he would, though he had not when it came to it. It had felt pleasant to have him as close to her as that and if that was what they had to go through to have children, then so be it. Nevertheless she couldn’t help wondering what all the fuss was about if well that was it.
At the House, Edward buried himself in his work. He simply could not allow himself to think of the night before or the fact that he would have to do it again and again until she was pregnant. No, the only way to get through the day was to focus on his job and not think about Florence or even Alfred, just work.

He spent several hours drafting amendments to various Bills until Palmerston arrived

“Drummond” he said “I need you to take these dispatches over to Lord Anglesey” he looked concerned “more trouble in the East” he said “I would not be surprised if there is not a war over this in the end.

Edward nodded “the Eastern Question has vexed us for decades sir” he said “the Ottoman Empire continues to crumble slowly and the Russians look to take full advantage, if that happens……” he left it unsaid but they both knew in that scenario, war would come

Palmerston nodded “exactly so and I want Anglesey to do a full review of the condition of the army. If we have to fight a war in Europe, could we do it?”

“I will take them at once” he said

As he walked along the corridor, the wondered if he would see Alfred’s father, he’d heard much about him, Alfred clearly adored, and was in awe of him in equal measure and who did not know of his early life? a famous beau, second in command at waterloo, close friend of wellington and of course his divorce to marry Alfred’s mother

He arrived at the Master of Ordnance office and knocked, expecting it to be opened by the depts. equivalent of him and was surprised to hear a voice a commanding voice say “come in”

Edward opened the door; the ante chamber was empty but in the office through the door could be seen some highly polished boots resting under the desk and as Edward turned the corner, a Field Marshalls uniform glittered; Alfred’s father, the marquis of Anglesey. He turned to look at him and oh, Edward could see the resemblance to Alfred at once though the Marquis had brown eyes not blue

He bowed “Edward Drummond sir, I have papers for you from Lord Palmerston”

Edward Drummond, well well thought Henry looking at the young man in front of him, so this is who my son is in love with. His first thought was how handsome he was, he could see why even just for his looks, Alfred was smitten. His second was how sad he seemed, there were dark shadows under his eyes, and his face was pinched and drawn. Clearly as his Alfred suffered, so this youth suffered too. He sighed, when would the law ever learn not to interfere in people’s hearts? he thought

“Drummond” he said “sit for a moment please”

Edward looked at him puzzled, all he needed to do was drop off some papers but he was trained to obey his elders and betters and so he sat

“What is in the papers?” asked the marquis

“Lord Palmerston wishes you to carry out a review of the army, in particular its ability to fight a war in Europe if it should become necessary”
“Europe? Or the east of Europe?” asked Lord Anglesey

“The east sir” said Edward

“Very well” he held out his hand and Edward slid the papers over the desk and made to rise

“I haven’t given you permission to leave yet sir” said the marquis quietly and his tone made Edwards heart start to beat faster

The marquis fixed him with gimlet look “you are acquainted with my son I believe”

“I am” said Edward, if he kept his words to a minimum perhaps he could leave quicker

“Well acquainted I understand” and the look he gave Edward made terror rise in his throat; he gazed at the Marquis piteously begging him not to ask more

The marquis stood up “do not misunderstand me sir” he said quietly “I mean you no harm”

Oh, Edward gaped at him as he continued

“I am a military man; I have no time for dancing round the subject so I will be direct. I know Alfred loves you, do you return his love?”

“I…”Edward looked away feeling tears threatening and then he felt a gentle hand on his shoulder

“You have my word I mean you no harm sir, do you love him?”

Edward nodded and then the anxiety of the last few days overwhelmed him and he burst into tears.

‘Poor boy, poor poor boy’ thought the marquis, his hand on Edwards shoulder occasionally patting it as he cried and cried. It was obvious he loved Alfred and was in deep misery because of it. Eventually he coughed, pulled out his handkerchief and handed it to Edward

“I believe that has been building for some time” he said kindly, pouring a whiskey and handing it to Edward as Edward wiped his eyes, blew his nose and generally tried to compose himself

He sat down behind his desk again and shook his head

“As a member of Her Majesty’s Government I must tell you officially I cannot condone what is between you and my son, however as a father and a man, I believe the state has no right or need to interfere in the hearts of its citizens. Therefore not only is your secret safe with me but I will do what I can to protect you both”

Edward stared at him, hardly able to believe what he was hearing

“I will purchase a house for Alfred which I will staff with servants whose loyalty I can trust. At least there you can meet in private away from prying eyes. In return you will swear to me that you will do all you can to spare him the inevitable heartbreak waiting for him” he sighed “you do know I hope that heartbreak will be impossible to avoid? That you will always be torn in two by your marriage and by your love for Alfred? That your love for each other can never be acknowledged?”

Edward nodded “I do sir” he paused “I do not know what to say”

“There is no need to say anything. Just promise me that should there come a time when you no
longer love Alfred or that your circumstances become such that it is imposable for you to continue your liaison that you tell him. Do not let him cling to false hope and waste his life”

Edward smiled a melancholy smile at him “the world would have to cease spinning before I stopped loving him” he said

The marquis nodded “then can I suggest you wash your face, step outside for some air and leave the arrangements to me. I will speak to Alfred and let him know what has passed between us’’

Edward understood he was being dismissed and he stood up

“Thank you sir” he said “you have given me back my hope”
Lord Alfred’s house

Chapter Summary

Alfred has a new house, Edward and Florence quarrel and Edward and Alfred make use of Alfred’s lovely big bath ;)

Chapter Notes

so we’re now 6 months into the future as I have to move us through time otherwise how else will I fit in revolutions on the continent, romantic beach scenes and handsome russians eh?

thanks to animateglee on tumblr for her house research to help picture Lord Alfred’s house in my mind :)

Six months of marriage, Edward could hardly believe it was true. He had found things had become easier, or maybe he was just more used to them, either way he didn’t feel that he lived on the edge of precipice any longer. His twice weekly couplings with Florence continued with somewhat grim regularity; neither of them particularly enjoying it but Florence wanted to have children and so it was a necessity. At least when she was pregnant they could stop he thought, which would be a huge relief he suspected to them both

Alfred having his own house had changed things enormously for the better, and what a house it was! When he had first visited, he had laughed incredulously

“All this?” he said “just for you?”

Alfred shook his head “for us” he said with a smile

Edward had stared around taking in the carpets, paintings, silk damask curtains, mirrors and mahogany furniture. It was not that he had not seen such luxury before; of course he had, many times but to think this was for Alfred and he made him feel dizzy.

“Allfred” he said his voice thick with emotion “your parents, what they have done, I can never thank them enough”

Alfred smiled “I am the most fortunate of sons” he said “perhaps” he added shyly “you would like to see the bedroom?” and after that the tour of the house had ground to a halt.

Alfred’s mother had decorated and furnished the house herself, waving aside Alfred’s tentative suggestions about what he would like with

“Don’t be silly Alfred; you can’t possibly know what will work”
And as a result the house was furnished boldly in emeralds and cobalt’s and crimsons. Windows ran floor to ceiling in the receptions rooms and also in Alfred’s bedroom. This mother had furnished it in duck egg blue with silver trim. The house had the latest in indoor plumbing which meant the bedroom had a large bathroom leading off it tiled in the Moorish style with a large claw foot bath. There was no need for servants to be carrying water up and down stairs, you simply turned the taps and hot water gushed out. It was quite the talking feature of the house.

His parents had been very careful about the selection of servants; they knew that this was the element that posed most danger to Alfred. Servants gossiped or worse they could blackmail. It was imperative the household was overseen but people they could trust. To this end, Alfred's parents had hired Dafydyd and Phyllis Jones to run the house. Daffyd had been Alfred’s father’s batman in the regiment and had served with him for 10 years before retiring with a leg injury which meant he could no longer fight whereupon Henry had offered him a job. Phyllis had been a house maid at Plas Newydd which was where she had met Daffyd. When Alfred’s mother heard of their plans to marry, she suggested to them that they come to London and take up position at Grosvenor place. She and Henry had talked seriously to them before they came down of the need to safe guard Alfred’s privacy.

Phyllis had nodded and smiled

“Don’t worry ma’am” she said “my youngest brother was like that god rest his soul. The secret will be safe with us”

And charlotte smiled at her gratefully

As well as a butler and housekeeper, Alfred had a cook, housemaid, footman and scullery maid but only Mr. and Mrs. Jones lived in. the others arrived early in the morning and left at 8pm unless they were required to serve dinner or for a party.

Of course Edward could not avoid bringing Florence to see the house, it was the talk of society (Edward had quickly learned that society meant seeing the same people repetitively at dinners, balls and soirees and any new thing, even a new hat could be the subject of conversation for days!) but he made sure they were at least with a group of other people including lady Gwendolyn who despite Alfred being at his most repressive towards her had not given up hopes and continued to pursue him with dogged determination.

“What a wonderful house this is Lord Alfred” she said gazing at him over the top of her fan “all it needs is the right chatelaine”

“My mother will of course preside when she is in town” said Alfred deliberately misunderstanding her

Gwendolyn laughed and moved nearer to him; Alfred backed away slightly

“And when she is not in town, should you ever need help…..”

Alfred cast his eyes around pleading mutely for someone to come and save him from this damn woman! Why last week at the opera she might as well have sat on his lap for how close she had been getting,

“Madam” he had whispered as she edged closer “I insist you remove yourself to a more respectable distance not to encourage gossip

Fortunately Wilhelmina who had arrived with john Stanhope, really they were getting on so well,
saw him and came to his rescue

“Lord Alfred, what an incredible house, please do explain to me the different between the Chinese porcelain eras” and he’d gratefully taken her arm knowing that Gwendolyn would not follow.

Once he was safe he smiled thankfully at Wilhelmina

“Thank you. Honestly I dont know what I have to do to get her to leave me alone”

Wilhelmina dropped his arm and laughed

“I fear she will not stop until you marry and even then I think she would still make advances to you”

Edward came over with Florence clinging to his arm. After 6 months, Alfred still felt his heart droop at the sight of them together especially as Florence was always hanging onto Edwards arm as if he were a possession of some kind to be shown off. They had agreed that it would be too suspicious if as Edwards best friend, he never saw him and Florence together but it still hurt, he wondered if it always would. Edward as was usual when the 3 of them met looked melancholy, knowing that Alfred would be sad.

“I saw Gwendolyn talking with you Lord Alfred” said Florence pertly “did you enjoy the opera with her last week?”

Alfred counted to ten to stop himself being discourteous

“Donizetti is not my favourite composer” he said

“Such a pity, she said she had a wonderful time”

“I am sure she will find someone who enjoys Donizetti to accompany her next time” he said with a bow “now please excuse me”

Edward watched him go feeling profoundly annoyed with Florence and, it had to be said, her somewhat silly friend.

“Lord Alfred’s house is quite remarkable don’t you think Edward?” said Florence when they arrived home

Edward didn’t reply, the more he thought of how Florence was encouraging Gwendolyn’s pursuit of Alfred, the angrier he felt. It was not that he was jealous, well not that jealous, but it was causing Alfred discomfort and causing gossip

“Edward? Did you not hear me?” said Florence

“I wish you to discourage Gwendolyn form her pursuit of Lord Alfred” said Edward “it is making her a laughing stock and causing him embarrassment”

Don’t be silly Edward” laughed Florence “why on earth should she not try to catch him? He’s one of the most eligible bachelors in London”

“Lord Alfred is not a trophy to be hunted Florence” said Edward sharply

“I disagree Edward, Gwendolyn needs a husband and he would make a fine one”
Edward stood up and looked at her coldly “it is not a request my dear” he said “Lord Alfred has expressed his profound unhappiness to me at her advances and I said I would speak with you”

Florence stared at him, tears springing to her eyes; she had never seen Edward like this.

“Edward” she said with a sob in her voice “do not be so harsh with me”

“Then please do as I ask” he said and left the room. Outside he paced around angrily, he’d never spoken to Florence like that and he knew deep down that if it had been about anyone other than Alfred, he wouldn’t have spoken to her like that at all but damn it, that Gwendolyn woman needed to be told and Florence needed to stop encouraging her!

Left alone Florence wept into the sofa cushions, Edward had never spoken to her like that before.

After 15 minutes he returned and knelt by the sofa

“Florence” he said gently, she lifted her tear stained face to his “I am sorry you are so upset”

“Edward” she collapsed crying into his arms while he patted her back wondering how much longer she was going to go on “I am sorry to have made you angry. Gwendolyn doesn’t mean any harm you know”

“I am sure she doesn’t my dear but she is your friend and really you should tell her, she is making a fool of herself”

Flounce sniffed and nodded “I will tell her to stop”

“Good” said Edward “now wash your face, shall we dine out tonight?”

“Oh” she said “I would like that Edward, perhaps Ciros?”

Edward shook his head “to many politicians my dear, I suggest the café royal?”

Florence’s’ face lit up “that would be wonderful, I shall change” and she sprang up and headed to the stairs calling for her maid

Left on his own Edward slumped back on the sofa, tomorrow night he would see Alfred and everything would be good with the world.

Edward leaned back in the bath, his head resting on Alfred’s chest his hair wet and sleeked back. It had been a long and trying day. The bath in Alfred’s house was enormous with easily room to accommodate them both.

“Difficult day?” asked Alfred sympathetically as his hands began to work soap into Edwards’s hair

Edward nodded “there are unsettling developments in France, people begin to openly toast the republic and Louis Philippe, well he seems not to understand the seriousness of the situation”

“I cannot say that is a surprise Edward” said Alfred his fingers working deftly “too focused on pleasure to be a true statesman, still” he laughed “I enjoyed our trip there, you were very eager to go for a swim as I recall”
Edward grinned at the memories “I think it is truer to say I was very eager to see you without your shirt on” he said “although that pond was freezing! This is much more civilised”

Alfred leaned over to retrieve the pitcher from the stand at the side of the bath and began to rinse Edwards’s hair

“How long can you stay?” he asked trying to sound nonchalant as he always did

“A few hours yet” replied Edward “Florence is at Gwendolyn’s

He heard Alfred groan at the name and he turned over in the water to face him

“She won’t be troubling you anymore” he said “she has found a new target”, Edward didn’t want to tell Alfred he had asked Florence to tell Gwendolyn to stop. He knew he would hate to feel he owed Florence anything!

“I’m relieved to hear it! Said Alfred “and if you can stay I have something new I would like o try with you”

“Really?” said Edward raising his eyebrows “does it involve binding me to anything like the last time?” Alfred had stripped him naked, tied his wrists to the bedstead and proceeded to torment him with kisses and licks and little bites until Edward thought he would go mad with the need to climax

Alfred smirked at him “as I recall Edward you seemed to find it most pleasing at the time…and anyway no, it does not require you to be tied to anything”

“I am intrigued!” said Edward climbing out of the bath and walking over to where the towels were draped over a clothes horse in front of the fire. Alfred watched him, Edward was truly amazing to look at wet, naked, and his body looking like it had been sculpted by the gods. He sighed and stood up, if only he and Edward could live together, do this every day but it was not possible, would never be possible. Edward turned with the towel around his waist, his hair now drier but messy and threw a towel to Alfred. Alfred grabbed it, and rubbed his own hair before tying it around his waist.

He took Edward’s hand, and led him over to the bed

“Lay down” he said “on your front”

Edward obeyed

“We had a demonstration today of massage techniques from Turkey which are meant to relieve the anxieties of the day and I thought that they may be of benefit to you”

Alfred climbed astride Edwards’s waist and began to gently press his knuckles into his right shoulder and move his hand into circles; Edward groaned softly it felt strangely invigorating and soothing at the same time. Alfred was working his way across Edwards’s shoulder blades to his left shoulder to knead that

“How does that feel Edward?” asked Alfred his hands pushing and squeezing

“It feels….mmmmmm” said Edward as Alfred began to gently kiss the back of his neck as his hands worked their way down. He felt Alfred’s eyelashes tickle against his skin as his began to mouth kisses down Edwards’s spine following his hands. Beneath him Edward wriggled and his breath hitched as Alfred’s hands reached the towel

He felt Alfred move and then his teeth nip gently at his ear “this I think needs to go” he murmured
and he pulled the towel away
Chapter Summary

The Queen is not happy with Lord Palmerston leaving Alfred with an idea that will enable him to see more of Edward, and Alfred and Edward go for a ride together and somehow don't make it back to work on time....

Chapter Notes

Victoria and Albert famously disliked Lord Palmerston so Alfred's suggestion would have helped.

and yes there is entirely gratuitous Lord Alfred in his uniform because who doesn't love that? (especially Edward)

“That man is most vexatious” the Queen stormed past Alfred and out the door of her study
“Aberdeen was a man you could talk to but Palmerston! He is impossible”

Alfred followed Her majesty down the corridor as she continued to rage

“He doesn’t listen, he patronises us, and he doesn’t understand our need to preserve our Cobourg ties”

“Perhaps ma’am I could offer a suggestion that would improve things?” said Alfred smoothly

“If you could lord Alfred that would be most welcome!” said the queen her eyes continuing to flash angrily

“You remember ma’am Mr Drummond who was Sir Robert peel’s private secretary?”

“But of course lord Alfred, a very agreeable young man if somewhat unnecessarily direct on occasions”

“Mmm” said Alfred, the queen still hadn’t forgotten the churching conversation then “he is now Lord Palmerston's secretary and I wondered whether perhaps your majesty would feel happier discussing matters with him? Or at least having him present at future meetings?”

The queen paused and then nodded “that is a splendid idea lord Alfred, anything that dilutes that man’s presence would be most welcome”

Alfred inclined his head “with your permission man, I will talk to Mr Drummond and Lord Palmerston”

“It is gladly given” said the queen with feeling “gladly”

Alfred returned to his own apartments and penned 2 notes; the first was to his father asking if they
Edward asking when he could see him as he had news from her majesty

“Alfred” his father stood up and embraced him drawing a few glances from the other men in the House of Lords dining room but they both paid them no mind. They had always embraced on meeting and they always would

“Papa”

They both sat down as waiters fussed about them, Alfred waited until they had left and then said

“Papa I need your advice”

“Oh” said his father raising his eyebrows “not trouble with your…..” He stopped aware they were in public “friend I hope”

“Oh no papa” Alfred smiled “no that is all very well indeed but it is to do with him and Lord Palmerston”

“Ah” his father laid down his spoon “and what is the difficulty there?”

“The queen finds her conversations with Lord Palmerston very” Alfred paused “trying, and I suggested that as she always found Ed…Mr Drummond’s advice most helpful when he was Sir Roberts’s private secretary, that she might find his involvement in her meetings with Palmerston useful”

“And what did her majesty say?”

“She agreed papa only I am not sure how Lord Palmerston will react to such a suggestion and I thought as you know him, you might have some advice as to how to broach the subject”

“Well” Henry sat back and looked around before lowering his voice “I believe the frustration is mutual and I think Palmerston may well welcome a third party in those meetings. I suggest you write to him formally in your position as her majesty’s equerry suggesting the involvement of Drummond ostensibly to record the notes of the meeting and I think Palmerston will jump at the chance”

Alfred smiled “I will do so papa and thank you”

“Have you mentioned it to Drummond yet?”

“no I have not spoken with him about it but I know he will be delighted, he always enjoyed those meetings when he worked with sir Robert” Alfred smiled fondly thinking of the many times he and Edward had glanced yearningly at each other across the room both wondering if anything more would ever happen, and now look where they were

“Write to Palmerston and talk to Drummond. And now my boy, I need to talk to you of your brother George, he is in trouble with his regiment again!”

After dinner, Alfred and his father left the dining room together and strolled down the corridors towards his father’s office talking animatedly. As they turned the corner still talking, Alfred cannoned straight into a tall dark figure carrying papers which flew everywhere

“Edward” the name came out before Alfred could stop himself
“ah um lord Alfred” Drummond bent down to gather his papers breathing hard, thoroughly taken by surprise “I did not know you were at the House” he straightened up and looked at Alfred who looked back at him

Watching them Henry felt a stab of pain, he’d never seen them together but now he had, it hurt to see them; as they looked at each other, so he and Charlotte had looked at each other all those years ago. He knew he was entirely superfluous to them at that moment, that when they looked at each other like that, no one and nothing else mattered for them but the other. The world could collapse, the building fall down around them and they would still only have eyes for each other

He cleared his throat “oh papa, I am sorry” said Alfred conscious that now other people were coming “you know Drummond of course”

“I hope you are well sir” said Edward politely

“Most well” replied Henry “Alfred I will leave you to discuss your plan with Mr Drummond but write to Palmerston with all speed”

He embraced Alfred again “good bye Alfred, Drummond” he said and was gone

“What plan?” asked Edward curiously

Alfred took out his pocket watch “I have to return to the palace, Edward; perhaps you could come riding with me tomorrow?”

Edward nodded even though he did not enjoy being on horseback anywhere near as much as Alfred did but he knew Alfred loved it and not only that, he looked rather splendid on his horse and so Edward was prepared to overcome his dislike.

The next day found Edward waiting on his horse somewhat impatiently in St James’ park; Alfred should have been here by now

At last he heard the sound of galloping hooves and turned his head to see Alfred riding up clad unexpectedly but to Edward’s great delight in his cavalry uniform

“My apologies Edward” he said breathlessly “her majesty was seized with a need to go out in the carriage, I have only just returned”

“It is of no matter” said Edward happily, if Alfred was going to arrive looking like that, the queen could go out as many times as she liked!

Alfred, there was no other word for it, smirked at him and leant in to whisper

“I am sure you are only saying that because I’m wearing my uniform” and then laughed as Edward blushed

“I’ve said before it is most becoming on you” he muttered

“And you look most personable too Edward” Alfred said with a grin “now come, I have news for you and we cannot talk here” and he wheeled his horse and galloped off shouting “come on Drummond” over his shoulder

Edward raised his eyes to heaven smiling fondly as Alfred headed off and then dug his heels into his
horse’s flanks and sped after him.

There was no better feeling than this as far as Alfred was concerned as his horse flew over the ground and he manoeuvred it to duck under branches or jump over fallen trees; well perhaps there was one and he grinned warmth spreading throughout his body.

Behind him Edward was riding fast too but he had no intention of trying to keep up with Alfred, he valued his life and limbs too much for that. Instead he just admired the view of Alfred ahead of him. Eventually Alfred slowed and turned his horse into a small clump of trees where he dismounted waiting for Edward. Edward arrived, dismounted and peered around looking for Alfred, he must be in the summer house he thought; he went through the door and found himself immediately dragged into Alfred’s arms and kissed thoroughly.

For all that they could now spend many hours in bed; kissing Alfred was something that could never fail to lift his heart thought Edward as their lips crushed together. He always tasted of love and joy and home, if he could, he would just live off Alfred’s kisses for the rest of his life.

Finally they drew apart breathing heavily.

“Perhaps we should have arranged to meet at home” said Alfred trying to control the want in his voice.

Edward smiled, he adored that he and Alfred called Alfred’s house ‘home’; to him it was his home far more than the house he shared with Florence.

“Alas we had not the time” said Edward “and besides then I would have missed out on you wearing this” he said looking Alfred up and down wantonly.

Alfred stared at him suddenly feeling boneless.

“Come here” Edward whispered and he reached out and tugged him forward.

This time there was no mistaking the need as they pressed their bodies together gasping. Edwards’s hands were fumbling with the buttons on Alfred’s tunic while Alfred’s hand was at Edward’s waist untucking his shirt so he could feel the soft warm skin that lay beneath it.

“I need you Edward” said Alfred in between feverish kisses “I need you” his hand moving downwards.

“We cannot” groaned Edward into his mouth “not out here”.

“God” Alfred had his head thrown back as Edward licked at his neck “I shall go mad if I do not have you Edward” he said.

“Then we must go home” said Edward, his hands searching and stroking.

Alfred nodded impatiently “yes, we will go home, quickly Edward hurry”.

It felt like the most illicit thing, to be in Alfred’s bed on a sunny afternoon with the windows open and the birds singing outside when by rights they should both be in other places but their desire for each other had been too great. He would worry about it later thought Edward as he idly trailed his hand down Alfred’s chest and followed the trail of hair across his stomach and then downwards.
Next to him Alfred laughed and raised his head

“Edward Drummond I fear you are becoming insatiable” he said

Edward laughed, “If I am it is your fault” he said

“My fault” said Alfred in mock outrage “I’m appalled sir at such a slur”

Edward rolled on top of him “do you deny that you encouraged me with wanton looks and entreaties to” he paused as if pretending to remember something “oh yes ‘take me now Edward please I cannot wait’?”

“I may have done that” said Alfred with a grin “but I do not recall any protests from you” and he kissed him, gently at first and then with deeper passion

Edward responded but then something nagged at the corner of his brain, surely there had actually been a reason he and Alfred were meant to meet?

“Allfred” he said

“Mmmm?” Alfred was still busy chasing his mouth for a kiss

“Were we not meant to discuss something today?”

“Mmmmmmmm?” said Alfred “Edward kiss me”

“No stop” Edward sat up “you said you wanted to tell me something”

“Oh...oh! Yes!” said Alfred now finally distracted away from kissing Edward “yes I did!”

“Well what is it?” asked Edward

“The Queen does not enjoy her conversations with Palmerston, bluntly Edward she dislikes him and finds him a fool, she wishes you to participate in those meetings as you did when you were sir Roberts secretary “

Oh, a smile spread across Edwards face

“To go to the Palace again as before?”

“Yes” smiled Alfred

Edward laughed joyously

“I would be delighted to offer such a service to Her Majesty” he said with a bow

“I knew that you would Edward” said Alfred pulling him down “and now I feel there are things we need to finish here……”
Invitation to a ball

Chapter Summary

Alfred and Edward spend a whole night together and Edward and Florence are invited to a ball

Chapter Notes

Thank you everyone for all the lovely comments :) I can't tell you how much I love you all for reading my story. I said jokingly before Christmas it was going to be like War & Peace but I never thought it would get this long! and still sooooo much more to go to including balls, Russians, Welsh beaches and the Crimean War

The shadows from the sun lengthened and fell across the room and still Alfred and Edward could not bestir themselves to move. They were both relaxed and at peace, curled around each other, with Alfred idly winding strands of Drummond’s hair around his fingers

Alfred looked at the clock, it was getting on for 7pm, and he knew they should both be elsewhere but he couldn’t bring himself to rise.

“Edward” he said hating that he had to say this “it is nearly 7pm, will Florence not be wondering where you are?”

Edward sighed and snuggled into him a bit more

“I don’t want to go” he said “I want to stay here”

“I want you to stay too” he said “but I don’t want you to be in trouble”

Edward rolled over and rested his chin on Alfred’s chest looking up at him

“I could say I’m not coming home” he said carefully

“What? But Edward! Leave Florence?? You can’t”

Edward smiled sadly “I meant just for tonight my love”

Oh, of course that was what he meant though Alfred cross with himself that he’d even allowed himself 1 seconds hope

“But could you Edward?” asked Alfred hardly daring to hope “could you?”

“It is not unknown for the House to sit all night” replied Edward “there were many times when I worked for Sir Robert that I slept on those damned uncomfortable benches. I could send a message to Florence saying that I expected the house to sit all night and stay here”
A smile crept across Alfred’s face “you could stay here all night?”
Edward nodded, starting to grin himself “all night”

Dearest Florence

The debate on the Factories Act continues later than anticipated, the prime minister requires that all ministers attend and so I must stay with Lord Palmerston. I shall sleep at the House and see you tomorrow

With fond regards
Edward

Florence tossed the note aside crossly, honestly Edward she thought, if he had thought to tell her earlier she could have made other arrangements, as it was she was now at home with nothing to divert her. If only she could become pregnant she thought, her nights would never be empty again, or her days for that matter. She was enduring Edwards’s twice weekly attentions, on a Wednesday and a Saturday night, regular as clockwork but she couldn’t say she enjoyed them. As a matter of fact, Edward didn’t seem to enjoy the experience either. He did not make any attempt to caress other than to prepare her for penetration nor did he tell her he loved her or do any of those other things that she had heard whispers about but didn’t know whether to believe. It was all rather mechanical; much like a machine; in fact if only someone would invent a machine to deliver the necessary semen into her body, they could go forgo the whole thing! Shaking her head and thinking that if women did inventing, some much more useful things would be invented!, she rang the bell and asked the maid to go into Edward’s study and get her the copies of the Illustrated London News, she might as well start planning her summer wardrobe.

“Alfred, Alfred” Edward pulled Alfred hard against him, writhing and bearing down so that he had every bit of Alfred inside him. On top of him Alfred was alternately kissing him frantically and panting with ragged breath as he continued to thrust. Their bodies were glistening with sweat, Edwards hair was a mess against the pillow and Alfred’s was sticking up where Edward had run his hands through it earlier as Alfred had licked and sucked him. Alfred’s movements became faster and more jagged, his body begging to tremble and then he was crying out his release. Edward seized Alfred’s hand and closed it round his own so they were both stroking his cock together and then he too climaxed biting, groaning into Alfred’s shoulder.

Alfred lay for a few minutes with his face buried in the curve of Edwards neck until his breathing slowed and then he carefully rolled off him to collapse in a somewhat undignified heap next to him.

“Are you fatigued my love?” asked Edward his voice soft with love and drowsiness
Alfred tried and failed to stifle a yawn “I fear your demands have worn me out Edward”
Edward laughed “my demands?”
Alfred flapped his hand at him grinning “let us not split hairs Edward, mine, yours, all I know is
there were demands”

Edward smiled and lay back contentedly against the pillow, he could feel his eyes closing, he didn’t want to sleep, sleeping with Alfred seemed such a waste of the time they had together but he couldn’t keep his eyes open any longer

“Alfred” he said, but Alfred had already fallen asleep, his eye lashes fluttering against his cheek. Edward smiled and putting his arms around him fell asleep himself.

Alas sleeping wasn’t as easy as they thought it would be. Sharing a bed with another person for the first time was strange thought Alfred as he fought to retrieve the quilt from where Edward was hugging it under his chin. He was used to having an entire large four poster to himself where he could happily sprawl across the middle and have all the covers for himself.

Edward slept curled up on his side pulling all the blankets over him whereas Alfred liked to sleep on his back. He found himself edging closer to Edward no bad thing of course, in an attempt to snatch a few inches of covering. Then Edward snuffled loudly and rolled onto his back, half squashing Alfred in the process

“Edward” Alfred pushed at him “you are flattening me”, nothing! Alfred was already discovering that Edward slept quite heavily

“Edward” he hissed more loudly and tweaked his nose “allow me some room”

Edward muttered something unintelligible and shifted onto his side wrapping his arms around Alfred

This might be better thought Alfred he turned onto his side so that Drummond was spooned up behind him. At last he could sleep properly.

“I hope you are not to fatigued Edward” said Florence when he returned home the next day, she came close to him “you do look tired, you should rest, sit down and let me call for some tea”

Edward felt guilt flush his body, he was tired but that was because he’d spent half the night making love with Alfred and the other half fighting with him for the quilt. In spite of himself he grinned, Alfred’s outraged sleepy complaints as Edward had wrestled a few more inches of material off him had been completely adorable

“Why are you smiling Edward?”Asked Florence “did the debate go well? Debate? For a moment Edward was nonplussed and then he remembered

“very well” he said “this act will stop some of the most barbarous cruelties in factories to women and children, the evidence I have seen about what goes on there” he shook his head “it is not right a civilised country should treat people in such a way”

“No indeed” agreed Florence, she smiled at him again and touched his cheek “it is good work you do Edward” she said “and now I must go out, I have a luncheon at Lady Howard’s. I will see you for dinner later my dear”
Edward nodded and kissed her gently once on the lips “goodbye my dear” he said, shame touching him again, it wasn’t fair on any of them that they had to live like this.

3 days later

“It is good to see you again Mr. Drummond” said the Queen pointedly ignoring Lord Palmerston

Edward bowed “I am delighted to be able to serve Your Majesty again” he said

“And your wife?” asked Victoria “how is she?”

“She is very well Your Majesty” replied Edward somewhat stiffly; every mention of Florence in front of Alfred made him profoundly uncomfortable

Victoria smiled “marriage is a most joyful state Mr Drummond, and I am sure that soon we will be hearing some further happy news”

Edward winced internally and glanced at Alfred who seemed to have found something terribly interesting to look at outside the window

He bowed again “perhaps” he said politely

“If Your Majesty is ready” said Lord Palmerston sounding irritable “we could discuss the situation in France”

Victoria frowned, oh this tiresome man! “We are great friends with Louis Philippe” she said tersely

“Indeed ma’am but he does not seem to understand the situation he is in, his subjects...”

“His subjects would do well to remember that they ARE his subjects” said Victoria testily

“But he promised them a more liberal constitution and...”

“Really Lord Palmerston, I do not think” began the Queen

“Perhaps if I may intervene” said Edward horrified at how the meeting was going. It was indeed clear that the two disliked each other enormously “as you recall ma’am when we visited France, the King was keen to emulate the British way and encourage his population to be more industrious, if he could see that this would improve prosperity...”

As Edward talked, Alfred’s heart swelled with pride, Edward was so knowledgeable, so calm in such situations, he could see the Queen softening as Edward made exactly the same points as Palmerston but in a way the Queen could not disagree with.

When the meeting finished, the Queen was smiling and Palmerston seemed happy

As they bowed their way out of the room, the Queen beckoned Drummond over

“Mr. Drummond” she said “we are having a ball at Windsor in 2 weeks time to celebrate May day, I would be pleased if you and Mrs. Drummond would attend”

“We would be delighted ma’am” said Edward his heart sinking at the thought of Florence and Alfred
encountering each other again and at a court ball no less. A more formal public occasion he could not imagine. He sighed, would their lives never get easier?
The Russian ambassador

Chapter Summary

The new Russian ambassador arrives at court, Florence gets the invitation to the ball and Edward feels jealous

Chapter Notes

and the promised Russians appear at last - and so handsome (as we know!)

historical notes Count Fillip Brunnov was in fact ambassador to Victoria’s court much earlier than 1847 (from 1840) and remained there until 1854. Prince Alexi Aleonov is fictional than though name itself is not (I am a space nerd!)

Edward did not tell Florence about the ball invitation, partly because he was not sure if the Queen was serious & he knew how disappointed she would be and partly because she seemed to be out of sorts. As he had approached her for their regular Wednesday night coupling she had pleaded tiredness

“Perhaps tomorrow night Edward, I find myself unaccountably fatigued this evening”

And he had said

“But of course my dear, perhaps my attentions are too much for you. You should rest”

And she had nodded gratefully leaving Edward to happily recall the joy he had felt waking up next to Alfred

He’d woken spooned up behind him, Alfred still asleep, his breathing soft & rhythmical. Edward had leant up on his elbow & watched him sleep, his eyelashes fluttering as he dreamed, his nose twitching adorably as he snuffled & then groaned softly at whatever was happening in his dream. He glanced over at the clock, nearly 6am; soon he would have to go. Lying down again, he began to nuzzle into Alfred’s neck, kissing and licking the soft skin. In his arms Alfred sighed & stirred and Edward gently turned him so they were facing each other & then Edward rubbed his nose against Alfred’s

“Good morning” he said

Alfred half opened his eyes “morning” he said groggily and then he closed them again, his face still flushed with sleep.

Edward had kissed him gently revelling in how warm and soft Alfred felt in his arms.

“Edward” Alfred had softly said his name & he’d kissed him again & again, and then as Alfred lay
there, pliable & beautiful, Edward had kissed him, caressed him, stroked him & climaxed inside him while Alfred had gently moaned & sighed out his name

The memory of it made Edward want to hug himself well amongst other things anyway! If only he could wake up next to Alfred everyday

Alfred was day dreaming about Edward as he stood behind the queen who was receiving the Russian ambassador. He was just remembering exactly how much Edward writhed when he flicked his tongue in a particular way when the butler intoned

His Excellency Count Fillip Brunnov, Ambassador from the court of his Imperial Majesty Tsar Nicholas 1 to her Royal Majesty Queen Victoria

Count Brunnov bowed low to Queen Victoria formally handed her his credentials.

“Your majesty” he said “I bring warm greetings from his imperial majesty Nicholas & his people to your majesty and the subjects of the United Kingdom

Victoria inclined her head “we are grateful for his majesty’s felicitations, and I welcome you to our court”

“Your majesty may be I present my attaché his Highness prince Alexi Leonov”

A very tall well built young man with a merry face, clear grey eyes, high cheekbones & a firm mouth that looked like it was turned up from laughing at life came forward and bowed gracefully

"Your majesty" he said

"You are most welcome your Highness” said Victoria

He bowed & took 3 paces backwards and then he & count Brunnov bowed again and backed away, the audience was over

"What did you think Alexi?” asked count Brunnov as they made their way back to the embassy

"His imperial Highness Grand Duke Alexander described her well” said Alexi "she is indeed tiny but every inch a queen"

Brunnov nodded “you must get to know her courtiers, that is often the way to find out what her majesty will really be thinking”

Alexi nodded, he had noticed that the queens ladies had stood to the right of her throne but behind her and to the left had been a young fair haired man with delicate features and beautiful blue eyes. He was someone he would very much like to get to know better.

“Edward Edward” Florence could barely contain herself as Edward walked through the door “look! An invitation from her majesty herself to a ball at Windsor castle”

Edward smiled at her “her majesty mentioned it to me when I was at the palace recently, I did not tell
you as I wanted it to be a surprise”

She beamed at him & flung her arms around him “you are the best of husbands” she said

He returned her embrace feeling as always that low stab of guilt about the lie he was forced to practise

Florence clung on fir a few more seconds and that returned to pursuing the invitation. This was just what she needed! She had been feeling in low spirits tired and with headaches & bilious attacks ever since she & Edward had quarrelled over Gwendolyn. She would order a new gown she decided, nothing she had would do. She knew Edward would not mind, he never even noticed what she spent.

Looking at her obvious delight, Edward was happy for her but groaned internally at the thought that they & Alfred would have to meet in public again forcing them to act out their deceptions publicly. He had seen Alfred’s face when the queen had issued the invitation and the momentary irritation that had flashed across before he, ever the perfect courtier had smoothed his face back into its usual polite mask.

“I have to go to the Palace tonight my dear” he said “a reception for the Russian ambassador. Lord Palmerston was meant to attend but he is unwell and asked if I could do instead. I hope you do not mind” he looked at her anxiously praying she would say she did not. A hitherto unexpected opportunity to see Alfred was something he could not miss.

“Oh of course not my dear” she replied “I am delighted to see that Lord Palmerston trusts you so and of course it will give you the opportunity to see Lord Alfred”

She said it casually but Edward’s heart jumped into his mouth before he realised that of course she did not know how often in reality he saw Alfred

“It will” he said pretending to study the invitation in his hand and hoping she did not see how pale his face had become

At the palace, Alfred was readying himself fir the reception for the new Russian ambassador. He had only managed a few snatched moments with Edward since he had been at the palace & invited to the Windsor ball. How wonderful another opportunity to see Edward act the perfect husband with that wife of his’ he thought angrily. At least though this time it would be at a place where he was completely at home & she was not. He took one final look in the mirror & sighing left his room. How much more fun these occasion had been when Edward had been there and they could laugh over a particularly ridiculous situation or just feel better knowing the other was in the room. Instead Edward would be at home with his wife, Alfred clenched his teeth at the word, and he was here enduring another tedious round of empty headed gossip.

He entered the corridor that led towards salon where the reception was to be held, feeling deeply sorry for himself. So sorry that he did not look where he was going and slammed straight into a very tall figure coming the other way, rebounding and falling flat on the floor

“Ah pardon” exclaimed the man “please let me help you up sir”

He extended his hand and pulled Alfred to his feet who found himself looking into the slate grey eyes of Prince Alexi Leonov

“are you hurt sir ?” asked Alexi anxiously
“No” smiled Alfred “just a bump nothing more”

“I am relieved to hear it” said Alexi smiling in return, “i fear i am lost, I am looking for the salon for this evenings reception”

“then please let me escort you there” said Alfred with a bow

Alexi nodded “thank you sir”

They began to pace down the corridor “I saw you behind Her Majesty’s throne this morning did i not ?” he asked

“indeed you did sir, i should have introduced myself, I am lord Alfred paget Her majestys’ equerry”

“prince Alexi leonov at your service’ and he bowed with his hand on his heart and then grinned at Alfred, Alfred was unable to resist smiling back, he had such a handsome open good natured face

“Lord Alfred ?” Alfred jumped and his heart soared, Edward!

“Mr Drummond” said Alfred “may in introduce his Highness Prince Alexi leonov”

Drummond glowered at him, he had not mistaken that look he had given Alfred

“your servant sir” he said briefly “lord Alfred if i may have a word on the Queens business ?”

“ah please, do not let me disturb you gentlemen, i can see where i should be now” he added as several other guests arrived

“goodbye Mr Drummond, lord Alfred i hope i shall have the pleasure of seeing you again” and he bowed and left

As soon as he had gone, Alfred turned to Edward beaming “what are you doing here ?”

“Lord Palmerston is indisposed and asked me to attend instead to get the measure of the Russians, we fear trouble in the east is brewing” he added gloomily

“you mean i have to share you with the Russians tonight” said Alfred his eyes twinkling mischiefly “how very disappointing”

“i believe prince Alexi would rather talk to you than me” said Edward trying to say it lightly and failing

Alfred laughed “why Edward are you jealous because i exchange a few words with a Russian prince ?”

Edward came close to him “i am jealous of every single person who is with you when i am not” he said his eyes raking down over his body

“Edward” breathed Alfred, his body flooded with want from the look Edward gave him “do not forget where we are”

“I do not forget” saidd Edward stepping back “and perhaps you have some time later?

Alfred nodded “i do”

“then let us go in” and they entered the room together, side by side.
A ball at windsor

Chapter Summary

Edward and Florence go to the ball and receive some news and Alfred has a shock

Chapter Notes

Brace yourself because because the next several chapters are all about the draaaaama

“Edward how do I look?” Florence twirled around in front of him and then dropped a graceful curtsey

“You see I have been practising! I wouldn’t want to topple over in front of Her Majesty now would I?”

she mimicked falling over and then giggled and Edward couldn’t help but smile. If only he thought as he always did at such times, she didn’t love him and that instead they could be friends. That he could confide in her about how he really was and she would understand, instead of the endless nagging guilt he felt that she loved him while he was in love with someone else

“You look very beautiful” he said kissing her hand “really most charming”

She blushed and looked down, forgoing her usual blues and greys and lilacs, she was wearing a vivid scarlet dress that she knew would make her stand out. She had never worn anything of this colour before but her dressmaker had assured her that it was a la mode in Paris.

“Do you have a wrap my dear?” he asked “it is a long carriage ride to Windsor”

“I do” said Florence “Edith is bringing it down now” and a few moments later, Edith entered carrying a hooded white cloak trimmed with scarlet ribbons and feathers. It was not the most practical garment she’d ever owned thought Florence, but then she was going to a ball at Windsor Castle so practically could go hang!

In the carriage Florence held Edward’s hand and chattered nervously

“I hope I do not make a fool of myself”

“Of course you will not” said Edward “there is nothing to be alarmed about”

“It is different for you Edward” said Florence “you have met Her Majesty many many times, I have not; I don’t want her to think me lacking in grace or wit”

“she will not” said Edward “really Florence, Her Majesty is, well she is the Queen of course but she is also a human being, believe me, you have nothing to concern you”

When they arrived at Windsor castle, Florence stared wide eyed at the huge edifice.
“it is enormous Edward, quite twice the size of the Abbey” referring to the ancestral home of the Lothian family which was itself in no way small “don’t let me get lost Edward” she added as the carriage drew to a halt

“Of course not my dear” said Edward helping her down from the carriage “I shall be with you all night”

As they entered the ball room, Florence’s eyes grew even rounder; the room was huge dominated at one end by a vast window hung with red silk curtains. On the ceiling hung enormous chandeliers and the room itself was panelled in white and gold with scarlet hangings. Paintings and tapestries hung on the wall and in the centre of the room set on a dais were 2 thrones, one slightly higher than the other for the Queen and Prince Albert

Footmen weaved through the crowd with trays of champagne and Edward took 2 glasses and handed one to Florence

“Your first Windsor ball” he said and raised his glass to her

“Yes” she said laughing “oh goodness Edward, really I had no idea! It is like something from a medieval painting”

“It is” agreed Edward smiling

Suddenly there was blast of trumpets and the company hastily lined up on either side of the room

“Her Majesty Queen Victoria, His Royal Highness Prince Albert, Her Royal Highness the duchess of Kent, His Serene Highness the Duke of Cobourg, Her Grace the Duchess of Sutherland and Lord Alfred Paget”

The doors open and the Queen entered on the arm of the Prince with her mother following escorted by Prince Ernst and then Harriet Sutherland on the arm of Lord Alfred

As the Queen passed everyone bowed and curtseyed and the Queen paused occasionally as she came down the line to say a few words to her guests.

“Mr. Drummond” she stopped in front of Edward and Florence “and this must be your wife, I am delighted to meet you” she said as Florence looking nearly overcome swept a deep and perfect curtsey “please enjoy yourself”

“Thank you Your Majesty” said Edward

“Mr. Drummond” the Prince Consort smiled at him, they had always got on very well “I am so pleased you are back working in Government again”

“As am I Sir” said Edward, the Prince nodded and the royal couple passed on followed by their entourage

“Goodness Edward” said Florence fluttering her fan and laughing “I have met Her Majesty and she is so……small” and she giggled and then quickly muffled it as the people either side of her frowned

“Shhhh” said Edward smiling “one does not say that”

He looked sideways at Florence who smiled back and did not see how Edwards gaze lingered on the retreating figure of Alfred behind the Queen.
Once the Queen had greeted everyone, the company was free to mingle as they choose. Feeling it would be better to be in control of when he met Edward and Florence Alfred took a deep breath and sought them out

“Drummond” he said “Mrs. Drummond” he bowed

“Why Lord Alfred” said Florence smiling “how splendid you look! Is that a military uniform? I see that his royal highness and Prince Ernest wear it also”

“It is the Windsor uniform madam” said Alfred indicating the dark blue and gold uniform that he wore “worn by members of the royal family and courtiers when at Windsor. It was introduced by George III, one of the good things he did before you know” and he winked

“Lord Alfred!” Florence tapped him playfully with her fan “I am sure you should not say that!”

“Alas I am incorrigible, or so my mother told me as a child” and he smiled mischievously

“Well it is most becoming on you don’t you agree Edward?”

“I do” said Edward desperate to limit his words as Alfred in this particular uniform rather reduced him to gibbering fool. The cut of the uniform was very fitted and Edwards’s hands itched with the desire to just start unfastening the many buttons…..

“I hope that we may dance later lord Alfred” said Florence “I declare I have not danced with anyone as graceful as you”

Alfred bowed “it would be an honour and if I may ask a favour in return, could I steal Edward away for a few minutes? The Prince wishes to speak with him”

“Of course lord Alfred” said Florence “I spy Wilhelmina over there, I will go and speak with her. Edward I shall see you presently” and she disappeared into the crowd

“What does the Prince wish to speak to me about?” asked Edward

“Absolutely nothing” said Alfred with a grin “I just wanted to speak to you alone for a few moments” he smiled at him and Edward’s heart turned over with love once again, would he ever tire of that smile he wondered, those eyes? That face?

“The company seems very merry tonight” said Edward searching for something to say. It seemed so artificial that he was here next to Alfred but could not speak with him informally, not even call him Alfred when only the day before yesterday he’d been writhing naked beneath him and calling his name

“Very merry” but his eyes conveyed that he understood exactly how Edward felt and wished they could be alone together

“When can I see you?” asked Edward

“I have some time on Friday” said Alfred quietly

“Friday then” said Edward and they shared a look
Alexi scanned the room, he had to admit though not quite on the scale of the Winter Palace where balls were regularly attended by upwards of 2000 people, it was a very elegant and charming ball room and the guests an interesting and varied mix. He put this down to the influence of the Prince consort who he knew was keen to encourage science and business and cared less for people’s birth and more about what they achieved.

Alexi had danced with a number of very beautiful women some of whom had made it very clear that they would happily take a walk with him into the orangery to admire the flowers. However he had graciously declined all such offers pleading a love back in Russia. The women had looked at him sympathetically and sighed and he had smiled regretfully. They need not know that his love in Russia had been a man…or that he was dead.

His thought back to his encounter with Lord Alfred Paget two weeks earlier. He reminded him of Grigory with his mass of gold hair though Grigory’s eyes had been brown rather than blue. His eyes sought him out and yes there he was talking with that Mr Drummond again, looking rather divine in the Windsor uniform. Many of the men wore it but none with quite the élan of Lord Alfred. Alexi took a sip of champagne thoughtfully; it had been quite clear when Mr Drummond had arrived when he was talking to Alfred, that he was not at all happy that he was doing so. Alexi had no real doubts that Lord Alfred was like himself but Mr. Drummond he understood was married, had in fact come to the ball with his wife (a pretty thing wearing an amazing scarlet dress) but then of course that was no indication. Such activities were illegal here as they were in Russia and many men did marry to provide themselves with an alibi to their sexuality. He suspected that possibly Mr Drummond and Lord Alfred might be more than friends.

Florence was feeling giddy with champagne and laughter. She had received many compliments on her dress and even more requests to dance. She still however had not managed to dance with Lord Alfred. She manoeuvred her way through the crowd; really it was so hot she thought where she found him talking with Edward and Harriet

“Lord Alfred” she said somewhat breathlessly “we are still to have our dance”

Alfred groaned internally, he had hoped she had forgotten but no such luck. The orchestra struck up a polka

“Do you polka Mrs. Drummond?” he asked

“I do” she said “Edward you do not mind if I dance with Lord Alfred before you I hope”

“Of course not” said Edward trying hard to ignore Florence taking Alfred’s hand “just do not let him tire you out”

“I shall make sure I return her to you safely Drummond” said Alfred smoothly as he led her to the centre of the room

The good thing about a Polka was that it was danced at such speed that conversation was virtually impossible. That meant Alfred did not have to attempt to make small talk with Florence, only to smile at her which he did mechanically while his brain was fully occupied with Edward. When the dance drew to a halt he led her back to Edward

“You polka most gracefully Mrs. Drummond” he said

“Thank you Sir” she said “as do you, Edward will you waltz with me?”
“Are you sure you do not need to rest?” asked Edward

“No no” she waved her hand “I want to dance”

“Of course I shall then my dear” and he led her away

Alfred watched them go feeling hollow inside as he always did when he saw them together.

“They make a charming couple” said a voice next to him; he turned to see Prince Alexi standing there

“Indeed” said Alfred politely his face inscrutable

“Have you known Mr. Drummond long?” asked Alexi

“4 years” replied Alfred

“Ah and how long has he been married?”

“6 months” replied Alfred wishing Alexi would go away

“You are not married lord Alfred?” asked Alexi

“No” said Alfred shortly

Alexi nodded “we are not all of the marrying kind are we?” and he took a sip of champagne

Alfred looked at him “we are not” he said carefully

Alexi nodded; time to change the subject, at least for now

“Your uniform lord Alfred, I have not seen anything like it before, is it of a particular regiment?”

Alfred smiled and began to explain when suddenly there was a commotion on the dance floor; quickly the whisper reached them “Mrs. Drummond has fainted”

Florence was enjoying dancing with Edward. He rarely danced, it was far from his favourite past time but when he did, he was certainly more than passable and she enjoyed the feeling of being in his arms.

She was having such a wonderful time even though the room felt very hot, after this dance she would get some air, she was definitely feeling somewhat warm and rather dizzy and her corset must be too tight as she was starting to feel breathless. She felt herself stagger slightly

She heard Edward say “Florence?”

She tried to reply but the room was swimming in front of her eyes, she looked up at Edward and then the room spun and went dark as she collapsed

“Florence!” Edward supported her as her body folded against him, he looked around helplessly

“Mr Drummond” it was the Prince Consort of all people “quickly get your wife to a couch” Edward swung Florence up in his arms just as he saw Alfred followed by Alexi heading towards them with
speed. He turned and followed the Prince with Alfred and Alexi hot on his heels

“Please make way” he heard the Prince say “give her some air, Lord Alfred, find Her Majesty’s physician”

Alfred nodded and disappeared returning a few minutes later with Sir Henry Thompson

“You” he addressed them all “stand back, let me examine her”

Edward retreated back with Alfred, the Prince and Alexi all in tow

Edward found he was shaking slightly and Alfred silently handed him a glass of champagne which he gulped gratefully

“I am sure she is well Sir” said the Prince with a smile “in fact I would bet a few guineas on that”

“Mr. Drummond” Sir Henry returned

“How is my wife?” asked Edward

“Oh she is very well Sir, very well indeed” he smiled “she is with child, congratulations!”

Edward’s face sagged with shock “with child?”

“Indeed, I suspect only 2 months but yes, you are to be a father Sir” and he pumped Edward’s hand enthusiastically

Alexi watched Alfred as Sir Henry conveyed the news, he reeled backwards and his face crumpled. He put his hand on Alfred’s shoulder

“Keep your bearing Sir” he said so quietly no one else could hear “do not let your guard down”

He saw Alfred nod almost imperceptibly and then visibly straighten his spine

“Congratulations Drummond” he forced the words out just as he had with he’d congratulated Drummond on his engagement on the steps to his club

Edward looked at him helplessly mutely conveying his pain and regret that Alfred had had to hear the news this way.

“Edward” Florence spoke feebly from the couch

“My dear” Edward went to her side and knelt down, she smiled at him “Sir Henry told you? Edward we are to be parents”

“We are” try as he might Edward could not help a wide grin splitting his face; he was going to be a father

“I’m so happy Edward” she said “so so happy”

“As am I” he said, no more need for those twice weekly sessions, finally they had born fruit!

He looked at her again, hardly comprehending that inside her she carried their baby, their child. He shook his head in wonder
“Edward I am fatigued, can you take me home?”

“Of course my dear” he said, “put your arms around my neck” and he lifted her as if she weighed no more than a feather

Alfred watched them leave wondering if his legs would hold him up; he thought he might be sick there and then

“Lord Alfred, I hear there are rare Gobelin tapestries in the throne room, perhaps you would care to show them to me?”

Alexi’s voice was low but penetrating

“I have a great desire to see them” said Alexi more loudly

Alfred nodded, unable to speak and they left the ballroom walking silently until they reached the throne room. When they entered the room Alfred began to woodenly describe the tapestries but Alexi cut him off

“I do not care for the tapestries Sir; I believe though that you needed to leave and quickly, am I right?”

Alfred closed his eyes and whispered “yes”

Alexi nodded “I could see that was a great shock to you and not only a shock but I think an upset to”

“I do not wish to speak of it” said Alfred his mind a morass of pain, he had seen how Edward had looked at Florence at the news he was to become a father. However much he loved Alfred and Alfred knew he did, Florence was giving something he never could and it cut through him as if he’d been whipped by glass

“Very well” said Alexi gently “is there anything I can do that might help?”

Alfred shook his head and then paused “could you have a message sent to my father” he said “tell him that I will return home tonight after all”

Alexi nodded “I will Sir”

“Thank you” said Alfred hardly able to speak for the lump in his throat as the enormity of what was happening swept over him

Alexi turned to leave and then turned back and put his hand on Alfred’s shoulder again “this pain will pass, trust me I do know of what I speak”

Alfred stared at him and then Alexi squeezed his shoulder one more time leaving Alfred alone in the throne room
late night conversations

Chapter Summary

Alfred’s parents try and comfort him before Edward arrive to talk to him

Chapter Notes

firstly thank you so much for all the amazing comments!!!! Im so sorry im not being able to reply to them quickly. Im having to adult as well nrrghhhhhhh

call aboard the angst train is all I can say

“My Lord” the Butler handed Henry a note

“Henry what is it? Charlotte saw a worried frown cross his face

He handed her the note “Papa, there has been an unexpected development at the ball, I shall return to the house tonight, Alfred”

“That does not sound good Henry” she said looking anxious “I hope it is nothing too serious”

On his way home Alfred stared unseeing out of the window trying to process the impact of what Florence being pregnant would mean to himself and Edward. He had seen the look on Edward’s face, shock certainly but also joy. But worse than that was the knowledge that (and here he felt he was being really very stupid) Edward was indeed sleeping with Florence, had been sleeping with her all along whilst also sleeping with him. Of course he knew that Edward would be having sex with her but it didn’t stop the huge painful ache in his chest when he allowed the thought to even peek at the edges of his mind.

He scarcely saw the scenery as it changed from fields to houses, from tracks to cobbled streets until at length they were arriving at his house. He exited the carriage and went through the front door barely registering that it was open even before he arrived at it. In the doorway stood his parents

“Alfred” his mother put out a hand alarmed at the set whiteness of his face “what has happened?”

“Do not ask me” he brushed past them and fled upstairs

Henry and Charlotte looked at each other “give him some time my dear” said Henry “then we will speak with him”

Florence lay back in the carriage whilst Edward anxiously held her hand
“How do you feel my dear?” he asked

“I am just fatigued Edward” she smiled “but very well apart from that, more than well, oh Edward at last our hopes have come true. We are to have a baby!”

“We are” said Edward scarcely able to believe it himself; he looked down at Florence and wonderingly placed his hand on her stomach. Below inside her their child was already growing

“you must take care” he said

“Really Edward women have been becoming pregnant for centuries” she laughed but then seeing his worried face “but I promise to take care”

“You must” he said no harm could befall this baby

“I think I will rest Edward if you do not mind” she said her eyelid drooping

“Of course my dear” he said stroking her hair “rest”

She nodded and then settled herself falling asleep very quickly. Once she was asleep Edward let his head fall back and closed his eyes visualising Alfred’s shocked and pain wracked face at the ball. ‘I’m sorry Alfred, I’m sorry’ he thought helplessly knowing what an appalling way it had been for him to find out. Such news should have been broken to him gently by Edward in a place of privacy not trumpeted by the court physician in front of witnesses. He had also noted that Prince Alexi had made a great show of wanting to see some tapestries in order to get Alfred away so he had clearly seen how badly Alfred was hurt even if no one else had. He’d also seen him guiding Alfred to a carriage some minutes later. The thought bothered him enormously; he did not trust his motivations towards Alfred one bit! He needed to talk to Alfred as soon as possible

“Alfred” his mother knocked on the door; there was only silence from within “Alfred?” She knocked more loudly and when there was no answer a second time, went in followed by Henry

Alfred was lying on the bed staring at the ceiling, his body tense and rigid, his face a mask

“Alfred” his mother sat next to him “Alfred what has happened?”

Alfred shook his head

“Come now my boy” said his father “you cannot come home like this and not tell us what has upset you this much”

Alfred closed his eyes “Edward’s wife is pregnant”

“Oh Alfred” his mother took his hand, it was freezing cold “Henry” she gestured “ring for some brandy”

When the brandy came his mother urged him to sit up “here drink this” she said “tell us what happened”

And so Alfred told them how Florence had fainted at the ball and been examined by the doctor who immediately diagnosed she was pregnant

“I was fortunate Alexi was there”
“Alexi? Who is Alexi?” asked his father

“He is from the Russian embassy, we encountered each other a few weeks ago, and he saw how upset I was and took me away”

“How lucky he was there indeed” said his father filing away the information for another time

“I came home, I could not stay there, not with everyone discussing it” he turned on his side

“Alfred” his mother stroked his hair “you knew this would happen one day”

Alfred said nothing, how could he tell them that he had half hoped Edward was not sleeping with her or that by some miracle she would not be able to bear children

“It does not mean he doesn’t love you” said his father

Alfred still said nothing, he could think of nothing to say, his grief was too complicated and overwhelming. Florence and Edward would share something he and Edward never could; he would always be an outsider now even with Edward.

His mother sighed “Alfred you know that this pain will pass, it will pass”

He turned back to look at her, his eyes bright with unshed tears “but how do I bear it till then mama?” he whispered “it hurts so much” and he retched with the sudden feeling of despair and grief

“Oh my boy” she gathered him into her arms and rocked him as she had done when he was a child. Henry joined them on the bed putting his arms around them both and the three of them stayed there locked together in a sad tableau.

Eventually Henry and Charlotte went downstairs leaving Alfred alone, there was nothing they could do or say that would help matters

“Let him grieve Charlotte” said Henry

“That Edward!” Charlotte began to pace furiously “I could…kill him!” and she clenched her small fists murderously

“It is hardly his fault my love” said Henry “what would you have him do? He is married; Alfred has always known that, indeed was the one to tell him he had to go through with the wedding”

“Nevertheless! He could leave Alfred alone but he does not!”

“He loves him Charlotte” said Henry with a poignant smile “would you have preferred that I left you alone with Wellesley?”

“No…no…but Henry we knew we could in the end be happy, could be together, where is that happiness for our son? Alfred can have no happy ending”

Just then there was a clang as the bell rang

“Who on earth can it be at this hour?” frowned Henry

They did not have long to wait
“Mr Edward Drummond”

Once they were home safely and Florence was in bed sleeping, Edward was consumed with the need to see Alfred. He had to speak to him, he must have returned to their house he thought, it was the only explanation. He hurried impatiently through the streets and rang the ball expecting to see Jones or Alfred himself open the door, instead he found himself led into the drawing room to see the wrathful faces of Alfred’s mother and father.

He had barely began to greet them when Alfred’s father cut him off.

“What did I say to you Drummond when I arranged for all this?” he gestured to the house “spare Alfred pain! Well sir you have made a bad job of that!”

“I know sir” this was not what he had wanted at all, instead of Alfred whom he could comfort, he was faced with Alfred’s rightfully angry parents.

“You did not know she was with child?”

“I did not sir I swear”

Henry came close to him “you do know this changes everything do you not? Being a father changes a man”

Charlotte came to stand beside her husband, she looked at Edward searchingly, and she had not seen him before only a likeness. How handsome he was, how young he seemed.

“Sir” she said “you are to be a father, I ask you as a mother, leave my son be now, let him go and go back to your wife”

Edward shook his head “I cannot” he said “not without seeing Alfred”

“You cannot see him” said Charlotte firmly “he has been hurt enough tonight”

“Mama” they all turned Alfred was standing in the doorway, in just his shirt and breeches “I wish to speak to Edward”

“No Alfred” pleaded his mother “not tonight”

Alfred looked at her sadly and she looked at him and then Edward.

“Very well” she said “but you sir” she addressed Edward “you…I…” she stumbled over her words and then swept out followed by Henry.

“Well Edward” said Alfred coming into the room “what do you wish to say to me?”

Edward yearned to go over and take him in his arms but something about Alfred’s posture held him back, he was not yet at a place where he could do that.

“I didn’t know Alfred” he said “I did not know Florence was pregnant and I am sorrier that I can ever say that you found out in that way”

Alfred nodded “I believe you” he said.
Edward looked at him “but?” he said a feeling of dread growing in his stomach

Alfred looked away “I don’t know how to bear the pain any more Edward. I fell in love with you and you did not tell me you were engaged but I forgave you, when we returned from France you pushed me away even after what happened there, I stood there and watched you marry Florence even though it nearly killed me, I have sat through your dinner parties, made conversation with her, I have even danced with her never once betraying how I felt and all of this I have done for love of you but this” he shook his head “this pain is different. For the first time Florence can give you something I am unable to and my heart is breaking Edward. I do not know if I can carry on with this”

“You’re…you’re… leaving me?” Edward felt dizzy, he staggered and reached out to touch the wall for support

Alfred said nothing

Edward rushed over to him and gripped him by the elbows “you CAN’T” he almost shouted “you promised me……you said…you wouldn’t leave me alone… Alfred you promised” his breath was coming in sobs “you can’t leave me alone Alfred you can’t”

Alfred touched his face “but you’re not going to be alone Edward are you?” he whispered “you’re going to have a child, children”

“Listen to me” Edward was frantic with fear “that is the life we agreed I would have” he took Alfred’s face in his hands “it was what we AGREED, I would do this if you would stay with me always”

“Nevertheless perhaps it is better that I go” Alfred turned but Edward yanked him back, locking his face in his hands and staring at him

“Tell me you don’t love me Alfred and I will go”

“I….”

“TELL ME YOU DON’T!!!”

“I CAN’T!” Alfred pushed him away “I can’t Edward and I hate you for it” he began to weep “I hate you”

Edward folded him into his arms and held him tightly as he cried “I love you Alfred” he said over and over again “I love you, don’t leave me, please please don’t leave me”

“I love you too Edward” Alfred’s voice was muffled with his face buried in Edwards shoulder but then he looked up at him “I wish I could hate you sometimes but I cannot, you are the other half of my soul, my life”

Edward looked down into his face searchingly and then bent down and kissed him, at once Alfred kissed him back desperately.

“Alfred” Edward was moaning his name against his lips as he tried to take his coat off without having to stop kissing Alfred. Alfred was pulling frantically at Edwards’s cravat and his waistcoat while Edward his jacket now fully off already had his hands under Alfred’s shirt where they stroked and caressed

Edward pushed Alfred back up against the wall while he tore his own shirt off and then pulled him
down onto the rug. He slid on top of him and resumed kissing him wildly

“You can’t leave” he said desperately in between kisses “Alfred you can’t”
Edward stared out of the mullioned glass of his office window at the courtyard beyond. He should have been working on a briefing for Lord Palmerston about the situation in France but his mind was as usual occupied by Alfred.

The last week had been difficult to say the least. He couldn’t forget the well of despair that had opened up in front of him when Alfred had said he didn’t know if he could go on. Instantly Drummond had seen the colour of his life thrown into grey relief, repetitive days of making polite dull conversation with polite dull people, twice weekly soulless coupling with Florence and no Alfred to bring any joy to it. They had made frantic desperate love in Alfred’s house but afterwards as they lay there panting Edward knew it didn’t actually change anything. He was still married, Florence was still pregnant and Alfred was still in pain

“Drummond” it was Lord Palmerston “are you day dreaming? Is the French situation that tedious?”

“Ah apologies my lord” said Drummond scrabbling to regain his equilibrium “I was just considering the potential outcomes if Louis Philippe doesn’t take action”

Palmerston dropped into his chair “I fear the outcome is obvious is it not? Revolution! Again”

Drummond nodded “I fear so sir, a destabilised France is not good news for Europe”

“Indeed not and our friends in turkey also continue to destabilise Eastern Europe. The Russian position is key. There is a dinner tonight at the embassy. I wish you to accompany me”

Drummond nodded “of course sir, I will send a note to Florence telling her not to expect me home”

At the embassy Alexi was also deep in thought remembering what had happened to Grigory. Lord Alfred brought back the memories of him so clearly. How fine Grigory had looked when Alexi had first seen him in his uniform of the Leib Guard the Imperial Russian Guard, the blue tunic and white buckskin breeches suiting him perfectly. How he had wanted him but he knew it was forbidden, nevertheless his feelings had been so strong and when he realised Grigory looked back at him with
the same yearning they had been unable to resist. He swallowed and shook his head ‘no’ he told himself ‘do not remember more, do not think of what came next’

He wondered how Lord Alfred was; the man had clearly been distraught at the ball confirming Alexi’s feelings that he and Mr. Drummond were more than friends. On impulse he reached over and hastily scribbled a note

Sir

I hope that you have recovered from your sudden illness at the ball. I wondered if you have no prior engagement whether you would consider accompanying me on a ride in St James Park this coming Wednesday afternoon”

Prince Alexi

He summoned a messenger,

“Take this to Buckingham Palace and wait for an answer”

He knew how lonely a position it could be when your taste lay in a different direction to others. Perhaps Lord Alfred would welcome someone to confide in and he, well he yearned to talk to someone about Grigory. The worst thing for him when Grigory had been killed had been he had no one with whom he could share his grief, in fact had been actively told he must not grieve. He had had to mourn alone as best he could and with every passing day that he could not talk about Grigory it felt as if he were dying twice over. Lord Alfred might help Grigory live on for him even if only in his head.

At the palace, Alfred was attempting to look interested as the Queen and the Prince discussed the pans for Prince Bettie’s household and education to start the following year. From the sound of it, the poor little Prince was going to barely have a minute to himself and Alfred couldn’t help but think this might backfire. However be that as it may, he was not the boy’s father; in fact he thought sadly he was never going to be anyone’s father.

The footman entered “a note for Lord Alfred ma’am”

Victoria gestured and the footman crossed the room to give the note to Alfred, who read it and nodded

“Tell the Prince I would be delighted to accompany him” he said

Edward stepped through the door of the Russian embassy and looked around. The walls were decorated in an ornate style with gold’s and peacock blue, the doorways and windows rounded and on the walls were icons and portraits of the Tsar and Tsarina.

“Why it is Mr. Drummond!”

Drummond turned to see Prince Alexi standing there smiling

“Prince Alexi” Edward bowed stiffly

“I did not have a chance to congratulate you at the ball sir; I hope your wife is feeling better”
“She is” there was a silence before Alexi said quietly

“How have I done something to offend you sir?”

Edward looked at him sharply “why do you ask?”

Alexi shrugged “you seem displeased to see me”

Edward did not know what to say, he could hardly say ‘I believe you are more interested than I would like in the man I love’ because he did not know (though he suspected) that Alexi was like he and Alfred and being fair to him, Alexi had seen Alfred’s hurt at once and taken him away at the ball when he, Edward could do nothing to comfort him. He should be grateful to him……and yet he could not be. He could however try and be civil to him

He smiled “my apologies sir, the pressures of work are causing me to forget my manners”

Alexi smiled back “I understand you have a very busy job and with a baby on the way too life cannot be easy”

“No” said Edward in a heartfelt voice “it is not”

Alexi nodded “I hope you get some time away from your cares sir, now please excuse me, I must greet Lady Palmerston. Perhaps we shall talk more later”

“Perhaps” said Edward resolved to try and overcome his qualms about him

Wednesday

The sound of thundering hooves filled the air as Alfred and Alexi galloped across the park. Alfred was laughing as he overtook Alexi; no one was going to beat him on horseback. This was definitely what he needed! Of course a London park could never equal the mountains of Snowdonia or the shoreline by the Menai straits but it would do.

Behind him Alexi was doing his best to catch up, he rode well but he was out of practice. Eventually Alfred stopped and waited for him

“You ride well sir” said Alexi breathlessly “I am unable to keep up”

Alfred smiled “it is my favourite past time, alas I do not have the space here that I do at my fathers estate”

And where is that?” asked Alexi

“Plas Newydd, it is in Wales between the mountains and the sea”

“What? How did you come to be at her Majesty’s court?”

“I joined my father’s regiment and then when Her Majesty came of age to have her own household I was appointed her equerry; when she ascended to the throne I stayed with her”

“And you enjoy it?” asked Alexi as they began to trot side by side

Alfred nodded “I do, every day is different and one meets so many interesting people” and he smiled at Alexi “and you? How did you come to be here?”
“I am here in disgrace” said Alexi solemnly

“Disgrace?” Alfred looked startled “what did you do?”

“I fell in love with someone promised to someone else”

“And…there was no hope you could marry?”

Alexi shook his head slowly and took a very deep breath “none, marriages between two people of the same sex are not permitted are they Lord Alfred?” and he looked Alfred straight in the eye

“Ahhhhhhhhh” said Alfred softly

“My parents found out and I was sent here away from temptation”

Alfred looked down “I am sorry” he said quietly “that must have been very difficult for you to bear”

Alexi nodded “very difficult but I think perhaps you know something of that too, your friend Mr. Drummond” he hesitated and then plunged on, “is it possible you are more than friends?”

Alfred looked away momentarily ‘could he trust him?’ and then he nodded “we are” he said “more than friends”

“And yet he is married and soon to be a father” said Alexi gently

“It was necessary” whispered Alfred a lump forming in his throat “for him to be safe, no one must know”

“They shall not know it from me sir” Alexi put his hand on Alfred’s arm “I give my word and if you need that you need to talk of it, I am here”

Alfred looked at him gratefully “thank you sir” he said “and perhaps one day you will tell me of the man you left behind”

Alexi smiled “one day” he said “but not now, it is getting late and we should return, 5 guineas says I can outtrace you this time” and he dug his heels into his horse and set off, Alfred in close pursuit

“Why that looks like Lord Alfred!” said Florence sitting up in the carriage, she liked to drive out once a day in the open carriage to take the air

“Lord Alfred” said Gwendolyn eagerly twirling her parasol

“Now Gwendolyn” Florence shook her head at her “you know what I said”

“I know I know, it is just, he’s so handsome Florence! what a waste that he should be so devoted to the Queen he will consider no other woman”

“Her Majesty inspires much love in her subjects” said Florence “I wonder who that is with him though” she waved and Gwendolyn shouted “Lord Alfred” in a manner most unbecoming to a young lady

Hearing her Alfred groaned

“what is wrong?” asked Alexi looking and then he said “is that not Mrs Drummond?”
“It is” said Alfred gloomily “and her friend Gwendolyn”

Alexi looked at him sideways and grinned “I sense you do not wish to speak with the ladies”

“no” said Alfred “but having seen them we cannot ignore them”

“Indeed not!” said Alexi “that would be most ungallant” and he turned his horse “come the sooner we acknowledge them the sooner we leave”

They trotted over and bowing, took off their hats

“Mrs. Drummond, Lady Gwendolyn” said Lord Alfred “I hope you are both well”

“Very well Lord Alfred” said Florence “you are in good health I hope?”

“Never better Mrs. Drummond”

“Lord Alfred” broke in Gwendolyn “will you not introduce us to your friend?”

“of course; Mrs Drummond, Lady Gwendolyn, may I introduce His Highness Prince Alexi Leonov”

Alexi bowed “ladies”

“what a pleasure to make your acquaintance” said Florence

“and yours madam, alas I must take Lord Alfred from you as we need to return to my embassy but I hope we shall meet again” and saluting them again he turned his horse away followed by Alfred

“Edward” said Florence over dinner that night “Gwendolyn and I encountered Lord Alfred out riding today”

Edward’s heart beat faster as it always did at any mention of Alfred’s name “you did?”

“yes he was with a young Russian, Prince Alexi” and she picked up her glass not seeing the look of rage that crossed Edward’s face.

Chapter End Notes

Fans of jealous Edward can look forward to the next chapter!
Chapter Summary

Edward struggles with his feelings of jealousy and confronts both Alexi and Alfred

Chapter Notes

I decided to delete the chapter I posted on Sunday and rewrite it to explain why Edward is feeling the way he is. I forget sometimes that although they live in my head and I know why they're doing stuff, I need to explain on paper why they're doing it too.

Edward is now much less shouty and arm grabby too

hope you like :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Usually knowing that he was accompanying Lord Palmerston to the Palace for his weekly meeting with the Queen would have filled Edward with joy; being with Alfred even if it was with other people present always made his heart sing. This time however it did not because what he wanted, needed, was to speak to Alfred alone and find out exactly what he had been doing going out riding with Alexi which he could not do in a room with the Queen, the Prince and Lord Palmerston. He was finding his feelings very difficult to explain even to himself. Alfred’s reaction to Florence’s pregnancy had shaken him deeply. It had not crossed his mind that Alfred would question the future of their relationship because of it. Yes of course he knew it would be hard but Edward’s thought on that had lain mostly in the realm of the practical; how with a new baby would he have as much time for Alfred especially if his career continued to flourish? It had not occurred to him that Alfred would find the tangible proof that he and Florence had sex so painful. He had assumed that Alfred knew that they slept together, after all they were married and it was necessary for them to do so, but that it was only done out of duty and that the usual result of men and women coupling was a baby. He’d been shocked to the core that Alfred had considered finishing their relationship, unable to cope with the pain any longer.

If that wasn’t difficult enough, this Prince Alexi had appeared on the scene. Tall and good looking, Edward had seen that straight away, he seemed to have made a beeline for Alfred and well, Edward smiled ruefully to himself that was completely understandable! However, even if he hadn’t been, well maybe someone like he and Alfred, it would be irritating enough but Edward was convinced that he was just like he and Alfred. The situation had triggered the most unpleasant feelings in him, feelings he’d never had to deal with before. Jealousy was not something he had ever felt, primarily he supposed because he’d never cared enough about anyone to feel it. If Florence was to announce to him tomorrow that she had fallen in love with someone else and was leaving him, he’d be mildly annoyed at all the bother that would cause but happy for her that she had found someone to love. Whereas if Alfred was to do the same, Edward felt dizzy at the mere thought! Even the contemplation for a few seconds of Alfred in the arms of someone else, of someone else touching him or kissing him made him feel viscerally ill. The idea then that this Alexi might turn Alfred’s head...
just at a time when Alfred seemed to be questioning how he could manage their relationship was too much to be borne.

He was distracted all morning, tormented by thoughts of Alfred with Alexi; had he touched him? Had he tried to touch him? Made suggestions? He knew he should stop but he could not. On and on the pictures in his mind went, Alfred out riding with Alexi, Alfred smiling up at Alexi, Alfred doing that soft little sigh he did as Alexi kissed him...no no NO! At one point he had to get out and pace around the room to prevent himself from going over the Palace that instant to demand Alfred never saw Alexi again. Whatever happened he did not trust Alexi and he was going to put a stop to his designs on Alfred; Alfred was his and his alone

Edward marched purposefully in to the Queen’s study behind Lord Palmerston to find the Queen, the Prince and Lord Alfred already there, the Queen and Prince seated and Alfred standing behind them. The mid morning sun was casting rays of sunlight through the window turning Alfred’s hair golden and making his skin glow. Edward ached with the need to touch him, to kiss him, to push him down on the desk and possess him

“Mr Drummond! how is your wife?” asked the Prince

Instantly a cloud drifted across Alfred’s face

“She is much better your Royal Highness thank you” replied Edward

“I am relieved to hear it” said the Prince smiling “pregnancy is a happy state for a woman”

“How would you know that Albert?” said the Queen tartly “as you are not forced to endure it” and Edward watched Alfred’s mouth twitch as he hid a smile

“Now Lord Palmerston what is the latest situation in France?”

As the Queen, Prince and Lord Palmerston discussed the French situation, Edward struggled to stop his gaze from permanently resting on Alfred. Whenever he looked at him, Alfred sensed it and would look back and smile and Edward had to clasp his hands behind his back not to just go over there and seize him in his arms. He was so lacking in concentration on the actual meeting that when the Queen addressed him directly asking for his opinion, he was nonplussed, he wasn’t even sure what they were discussing

Seeing his confusion, Alfred spoke up

“Perhaps ma’am if I may? Your previous visit to France although it did not yield all that was hoped for, was still a success. Perhaps another visit to Louis Philippe to impress upon him in person the danger in which he finds himself?”

Before Lord Palmerston could open his mouth to disagree as Edward knew he would, he knew Palmerston believed diplomacy was best left to diplomats and not monarchs; he leapt in in support of Alfred

“Indeed Lord Alfred, perhaps if Your Majesty was to be accompanied by Lord Palmerston I am sure between you, you could open the King’s eyes to the situation”

“I think that is a splendid notion Mr Drummond, Lord Alfred” said the Queen “although I’m sure that Lord Palmerston has much to occupy himself here, and as you have met His Majesty before Mr Drummond I suggest you accompany us”
“With pleasure ma’am” said Drummond gravely his eyes sparkling as he looked at Alfred who grinned a most uncourtierly grin back at him

The meeting broke up soon afterwards and Edward addressed the Queen

“I wonder ma’am if I may speak with Lord Alfred to discuss the arrangements for France” said Edward “if you do not mind my Lord” he added to Lord Palmerston

“Not at all Drummond” said Lord Palmerston “it is well to be as organised as possible for these diplomatic trips” and bowing he left

As soon as the room was empty, Drummond crossed the room to Alfred

“Edward” Alfred smiled up at him “I trust you are well?”

“I hear that you encountered Florence in the park” said Edward hoping to sound as if it were a casual enquiry

“I did, with her friend Gwendolyn” shuddered Alfred “shouting at us across the park; really she has the most appalling manners at times”

“Florence told me that you were with Prince Alexi” said Edward trying not to sound accusatorial

“I was yes” said Alfred “he enquired about my health after the” he hesitated “upset at the ball and invited me to go riding with him”

“How kind of him” Edward said sarcastically “to take such an interest in you” stop it Edward he thought but he could not

Alfred raised his eyebrows at him “he was very kind to me Edward” he said quietly “he understands how it is to be…..different….as we are different’

Edward stared at him processing this information, so he had been right! Alexi was like them

Alfred continued “and therefore knows the difficulties we face. He only wants to help us”

Edward snorted “help you perhaps” thinking that there was nothing Alexi would like more than to help Alfred away from him

“Help both of us” said Alfred firmly thinking of Alexi’s love back in Russia

“I do not want you to go riding with him Alfred” said Edward abruptly “I do not trust him, he could be using you to find out information about Her Majesty”

Alfred began to laugh “you think Alexi is a spy Edward? Oh come now, you are being quite ridiculous”

“You do not know the situation in eastern Europe” said Edward “the Russians are working against us in Turkey” why wouldn’t Alfred just do as he asked?

“Edward, it was a ride in the park, I am allowed to go riding if I choose too”

“Not with him” snapped Edward
“I shall ride with whom I choose Edward” said Alfred now thoroughly annoyed by Edwards’s behaviour

“Alfred” began Edward and then stopped immediately as the Prince consort walked into the room

“Lord Alfred, Her Majesty is requesting your presence to discuss the French trip”

“Of course sir”

Alfred bowed and with a puzzled frown at Edward, he left with the Prince

Edward stayed in the room, breathing hard, how Alfred could not see that Alexi was not being kind to be kind, he was using it as a ploy to bed him and that would happen over Edwards’s dead body!

Edward spent the rest of the day in an anxiety of frustration over the mornings meeting and Alfred’s response to his request not to go riding with Alexi. Why couldn’t Alfred see? Alexi wasn’t interested in being friends! He would try to take Alfred from him and even though he knew he told himself sternly that Alfred wasn’t a possession to be given or taken, nevertheless, Alfred was feeling uncertain with the news of the pregnancy. For the first time in their relationship, Edward truly feared that he might lose him and that he simply could not endure. To live everyday without Alfred? How would he even breathe? In fact why would he even bother to breathe? No, Alfred must see Alexi’s offers of friendship and help were not made innocently but with ulterior motives, Edward would stake his career on it!

Eventually he could bear it no longer and sent a note to Alfred

“I have important papers, is 7pm acceptable?”

Important papers was their code for wanting to meet

He didn’t have to wait long for the reply

“Acceptable”

Edward watched the clock creep round to 6pm and then could wait no longer. If he were early to Alfred’s he would wait and a walk would get rid of some of the restless energy from his body, consumed as he was both with the need to impress on Alfred that he should not trust Alexi and with the need to make love to him to reassure himself that Alfred’s affections were not being transferred elsewhere

Walking past the black polished railings on Grosvenor Place, he was nearing Alfred’s house when he heard a door open and voices spilled into the street

“Thank you Alexi” that was Alfred’s voice

“You are most welcome” said a Russian accented voice “I hope it proves useful”

And then Alexi came into the street followed by Alfred who shook his hand warmly holding it for longer than Edward deemed was acceptable and then Alexi turned in Edward’s direction to walk down the empty street.

Edward stepped in front of him

“Prince Alexi” he said “you are a distance from the embassy”
“Mr. Drummond” Alexi smiled at him “I had something for Lord Alfred and I like to walk”

“I will not beat about the bush sir” said Edward “I wish you to cease your attentions to Lord Alfred”

“Attentions?”

“Yes sir, attentions” snapped Edward “do not think I do not know what your plans are”

“Oh you do do you sir” said Alexi looking amused “pray tell me, what are my plans?”

“You want too….you wish too….Edward stopped he could hardly say it on the street “you know exactly what I mean sir”

Alexi sighed “Mr. Drummond you are if you will pardon me making yourself rather foolish, I have no plans for Lord Alfred other than to be his friend”

“His friend” sneered Edward thoroughly angry that this Russian had the audacity to deny it to his face

“yes friend “Alexi drew himself up to his full height, some 2” taller than Edward and looked at him “I believe he needs one at the moment and you sir would do well to pay more thought to what you have before you have it no longer, good evening”

And he swept around Edward and set off purposefully down the street.

Edward hurried to the house, entering the door at speed and calling for Alfred who appeared from the study door

“Edward you are early” said Alfred smiling

Edward came over to him and taking his arm propelled him back into the study and shut the door

“Edward what on earth is the matter?” asked Alfred

“He was here wasn’t he? Alexi “Edward spat his name

“Yes he was Edward and I’ll thank you not to use that tone of voice with me please”

“What was he doing here?”

“Bringing something he thought we would find useful”

“Ha” Edward made a choked noise “you expect me to believe that?”

“Edward are you about to be ridiculous again?” asked Alfred crossly

“Ridic…” he seized Alfred’s hand and held it tightly against his chest staring at him intently “has he made advances to you?” he said quietly trying to be calm

“Let go of my hand Edward” said Alfred trying to tug it away, really Edward was being thoroughly vexatious this evening.

“Has he?” Edward could feel the warmth of Alfred’s hand against his heart through his shirt

“Edward I have had enough of this behaviour!” said Alfred exasperatedly “I do not know what has
“Has he??! Alfred I demand to know!!!” said Edward angrily why wouldn’t Alfred just *tell* him?

“Let go of my hand at once Edward! How dare you behave like this?” Alfred’s blood was now thoroughly up and his blue eyes flashed fire at him; Edward dropped his hand shamefacedly

“He has not made advances to me Edward but even if he had, that would be my business to deal with not yours”

“It is not my business if someone makes advances to my…to my…?” he faltered

“Yes Edward to your what? What am I? Your friend? Your lover? Your…your…I don’t know how you would describe me to someone if you ever could but you cannot can you? No one must know about us”

“Then what was he doing here?”

“Bringing this” Alfred picked up a packet of papers and threw them at Edward “it is a copy of the Russians intelligence on the French situation. He thought we might find it useful”

Edward picked up the papers and leafed through them, it was likely they would indeed be useful. He looked uncomfortably at Alfred

Alfred sighed and leant against the desk “Edward I am very rapidly tiring of your foolish suspicions about Alexi. He is a friend to me nothing more, indeed he has his own love back in Russia, I am allowed friends Edward, and I am allowed some kind of life when I cannot be with you, as I would be all the time if it were allowed”

Edward subsided into a chair and put his hands over his face “I am sorry Alfred” he said “I have behaved unforgivably! I just cannot bear the thought of anyone touching you as I touch you”

Alfred smiled sadly at him “it is hard to bear is it not?”

“No one touches” he began and then the light dawned “Florence” he said quietly

“Indeed Edward ‘Florence’ she touches you does she not? Lays with you? Kisses you? And I have to bear that, I now have to bear the evidence of that”

“She does not t...” began Edward but Alfred put up his hand

“Please Edward for the love of god spare me any information about what goes on in your bedchamber”

Edward looked down “my apologies I only meant to reassure you”

Alfred came over to him “what would reassure me Edward is firstly that you cease in your hatred of Alexi and secondly that you make love to me” he took both his hands in his “I miss you Edward, I miss you! All the time, every day, and to waste what little time we have in quarrelling distresses me greatly”

Edward stood “I miss you too” he whispered “I only want to be with you, to feel your hands in mine like this, to watch your face as you wake in the morning, to hold you, to kiss you”

“Then make love to me Edward while we still have the time”
next time a trip to France because they deserve a bit of a holiday :)}
A French birthday

Chapter Summary

The royal party go to france and alfred and edward relive old memories and create new ones

Chapter Notes

ahhhhhhh its so good to be writing again after a fortnight of being ridiculously busy at work!

as promised, some happy times for our boys :)

thanks to @luckymoony for the french translation and @twocandles for planting the silk idea ;)

"Perhaps we should invite Mrs Drummond to accompany us to France? I'm sure Mr Drummond will miss her while we are away, especially at such a time" mused Victoria, "what do you think Lord Alfred?"

Alfred nearly choked on his tea, 'take Florence to France?' Definitely not! He and Edward had already been planning the trip to France as if it were a long awaited holiday, the last thing they needed was Florence there too

"Mrs Drummond is suffering sadly from morning sickness ma'am" said Alfred smoothly "I doubt a sea trip would be good for her"

This was true, Florence was terribly sick in the morning. Edward hadn't said anything but Alfred concerned by his increasingly tired expression had asked and Edward had told him as briefly as possible that Florence wasn't finding pregnancy easy and was very sick in the morning which was disturbing him. Alfred asked why he didn't sleep in his own dressing room but it seemed that pregnancy was also making Florence more emotional than usual and she didn't want him to be sleeping separately. She was unhappy about his going to France but understood an invitation from the Queen could not be ignored and had invited her mother to stay with her for the two weeks Edward would be in France.

"Poor woman" said Victoria feelingly "it is probably better she stays here, I am sure that you will make sure Mr Drummond doesn't miss her too much Lord Alfred, I know what good friends you are"

At the Queen’s words Alfred had looked up sharply but relaxed, no she didn't suspect anything but there was always that moment of panic just in case.....
The June sun was hot as the carriages rattled down the dusty road through fields of lavender and sunflowers. Whenever they stopped to give the horses a drink, they could hear the sounds of bees buzzing lazily and crickets in the grass. Edward cursed the clothes they had to wear, he was feeling extremely warm, partly because he had 4 layers of clothing on and partly because he was in a confined carriage with Alfred along with Miss Coke and Harriet Sutherland. How he wished they could travel alone together but of course they were expected to escort the ladies. At least he supposed the Duchess of Buccleuch wasn't there; a change of Government inevitably meant a Whig Mistress of the Robes and the Duchess had remained at court but no longer in her original position and Harriet had stepped back into the role she had played when Victoria first became Queen.

Alfred was sat opposite him next to Miss Coke listening while she regaled him with tales about John Stanhope; it seemed highly likely an engagement would be on the cards thought Edward. Alfred looked cool and fresh, and when he turned his gaze on Edward he looked at his flushed face sympathetically

"It is indeed warm today Drummond"

"It is" said Edward "though you seem not to be feeling the heat quite as much"

"Ah I have a secret which I will tell you though not in front of the ladies" and he smiled

"Well now Lord Alfred I am intrigued" laughed Harriet” what can this secret be that is not fit for ladies ears?"

"I cannot madam" said Alfred solemnly "the Duchess made me promise that Miss Coke would not be corrupted in how did she put it? ’ that Godless licentious country’ and I must keep my word"

"But she would never know" said Miss Coke eagerly "come! Tell us your secret"

But Alfred merely grinned and shook his head

"Well then Mr. Drummond, you must be sure to tell us" said Harriet "once this huge secret has been disclosed"

Edward laughed “I could not break Lord Alfred's confidence"

"You are both intolerably dull" said Harriet with a wink to Miss Coke "but Miss Coke and I shall not be defeated!"

Looking out of the window Edward could see the countryside had changed to more manicured hedges and lawns, they were arriving at the Chateau. Outside the door the French court was lined up in order of precedence to greet the Royal party with Louis Phillips at the head

"Mon Cher cousin" said Louis embracing Victoria and then Albert "how delightful to see you again"

"We are delighted to be here Louis Philippe" said Victoria "we have such fond memories of our last visit"

"As do I" said Louis "you must be tired after your journey, come in and refresh yourselves"

As the Royal party exited carriages to make their way inside, Alfred tugged gently at Edward sleeve

"Silk" he whispered to Edward

Edward looked at him puzzled
"Silk undergarments Edward, I expect you're wearing flannel"

Edwards’s mouth dropped open but recognisable sounds didn't come out

"I thought so" said Alfred "much too hot Edward! You should try silk, much better against the skin too. Come we need to join the others" and he indicated how everyone was returning into the chateau

Edward blinked, his mind filled with images of burying beneath Alfred’s clothing, the soft silk beneath his fingers slipping and sliding against Alfred’s skin as they kissed

"Come Edward" Alfred was heading to the chateau and Edward shook his head and followed him

There was a ball to celebrate their arrival; the room was hot and both Alfred (who at least enjoyed dancing) and Edward (who did not) found themselves much in demand. Eventually they seized their opportunity and slipped outside to have a few moments of fresh air. As they stood there, hidden from the inside by the jade brocade curtains draped at either corner of the large open window, they heard female voices speaking in French.

"Que pensez-vous de nos visiteurs Anglais?" (what do you think of the English visitors?)

"Sa Majesté la reine Victoria est beaucoup trop petite pour être considérée comme élégante, mais ses vêtements sont tout à fait somptueux. Le prince quant à lui est assez beau...Enfin, il pourrait l'être davantage s'il souriait plus souvent!" (Her Majesty Victoria is too short for elegance though her clothes are very fine but the Prince is handsome enough or at least he would be if he would smile now and then!)

"La duchesse de Sutherland est ravissante et tellement à la mode; mais que dire de Miss Coke..." (the Duchess of Sutherland is beautiful and extremely fashionable but Miss Coke” there was a pause “she is pretty but if only she had some idea of colours that suited then men would notice her, as it is she is like a little mouse)

"Et ces messieurs? Lord Alfred et Mr Drummond?" (and what about the men? Lord Alfred and Mr Drummond)

"Ah, ce sont deux superbes gentlemen” (ah now they are both fine looking gentlemen”

"Lord Alfred a le doux visage d'un ange, mais vous savez mes chères, je pense qu'il n'est pas aussi angélique qu'il en a l'air..." (Lord Alfred has the face of an angel but you know my dears I think he may not be quite such an angel as he looks) and they giggled

"Mr. Drummond est si beau; quel dommage qu'il soit marié." (Mr Drummond is so handsome how typical that he is married)

"Il est peut-être marié, ma chère, mais cela ne nous empêche pas de nous rincer l'oeil! As-tu vu son postérieur?" (he may be married my dear but that doesn’t stop us looking! And have you seen his arse?)

Alfred was unable to suppress a rather unaristocratic snort and Edward looked at him puzzled

“I take it you did not understand the ladies conversation Edward?” he asked with a grin
“You know I do not speak more than a smattering of French Alfred”

“Ah, well then allow me to enlighten you and he whispered in his ear “they were saying that you are very handsome and admiring your” and his hands brushed swiftly almost imperceptibly across Edwards backside. Edward went red and looked at Alfred horrified

“They could not be making such indelicate comments Alfred! Not ladies, ladies do not think of such things”

At this Alfred laughed “oh Edward, how is it that you are married but understand women so little?”

Edward frowned “that is not true” he said

Alfred raised his eyebrows at him “I believe that it is! Edward trust me when I tell you, ladies may not say many of things we say but that does not mean they do not think them or say them to each other when men are not around, believe me I know. When you spend as much time as I do with the Queen and her ladies, even they on occasionally will, shall we say express certain views about men”

Edward frowned; did Florence think these sorts of things? he wondered, surely she could not, at least he hoped not, at least otherwise there was a whole secret world of thought that Florence had which he would never know and for some reason he found that idea faintly disturbing as they returned to the ballroom.

It was easy to see thought Drummond as he looked around why Louis Philippe’s government was in so much difficulty. Although he didn’t spend like his predecessors, the court was still extravagant while the country itself had recently been plunged into economic depression. In addition Louis governed like an autocrat and was refusing to extend the suffrage, an issue that was also raising its head in the United Kingdom. Victoria and Albert suggested the he involve the Parlement more but Louis brushed aside their concerns insisting that he was popular with his people who felt he understood them because he too had had to earn his own living. Edward was not so sure; a country that had so recently had a revolution could easily have another. However he reasoned, if Louis was determined to not to worry, he did not see why he should; it was not as if France was his country after all. He resolved therefore to just enjoy his time with Alfred.

A succession of dances, garden parties and dinners had been arranged for the royal party and Alfred and Edward threw themselves into them and being together as much as possible. For some reason in France, normal rules did not seem to apply. Even the Prince, less appalled now he had experienced the French court before and because Victoria this time did not follow French customs and wear cosmetics, was more relaxed. Edward and Alfred had plenty of time to be alone; Victoria and Albert had become increasingly frustrated by Louis Philippe’s refusal to listen to them and in the end had decided to cease trying to persuade him.

“We can do no more Victoria” said the Prince “he does not wish to see what is in front of his face, all we can do is prepare our response when the worst happens”

And with that the Queen and Prince embarked on what seemed to be a second honeymoon, walking, riding and often not leaving their room till late morning and retiring early.

As a result the court was also free to do what it wanted. On one particularly hot evening, Alfred and Edward sought out the pool where they had swum the year before. The shadows lay long across the ground and the sky was a dazzling blue as they walked there. The pool was as beautiful as they remembered surrounded by trees and with the sunlight dancing on the water
“Do you remember last time Alfred? Said Edward “it seems impossible it was less than 2 years ago”

Alfred laughed “I do! I could not quite believe how eager you were to join the Prince” he took off his jacket and began to unbutton his waistcoat

“I was not, I was just eager to see you disrobed”

“Well that is of course understandable” Alfred smirked at him “you are only human Edward” and he took off the waistcoat as well

Edward laughed “have you ever considered Alfred that you may not be as handsome as you think you are?”

“I must confess it has not” and grinning he pulled off his shirt “come Edward, what are you waiting for?” and he tugged down his breeches, threw them aside and jumped in

Edward shook his head smiling, really Alfred was incorrigible!

Edward removed the last of his clothes and leapt in after him, surfacing and pushing his hair back. This time unlike last time there was no need for pretend horseplay to conceal their need to touch and stroke each other. This time they were completely alone and the silence of the forest meant that they would hear anyone coming long before they saw them. This time they embraced each other kissing softly at first and then harder and more desperate, devouring each others mouths. Their hands touched and stroked driving each other onward until at last they climaxed clutching at each other and moaning

Edward pulled himself up on a rock in the sun and lay back

“I wish we could stay here forever” he said “and never go back to England”

Alfred came and lay next to him

“I wish we could too my love” he said “but we cannot”

“No…” Edward sighed

Watching him Alfred stroked Edwards’s damp hair back from his forehead

“Do not dwell on things that cannot be Edward” he said “let us enjoy the time we have now”

Edward turned to him screwing up his eyes against the sun

“You are right” he said taking Alfred’s hand and kissing it “let us take what we can while we can”

“Mr Drummond” said Miss Coke eagerly “Harriet and I wanted to discuss something with you about Lord Alfred”

“Oh?” Edward tried not to be immediately worried

“Yes” said Harriet “it is his birthday the day before we depart and we thought we might arrange a small celebration”

“That is an excellent idea” smiled Edward, he knew how much Alfred loved surprises “perhaps you could discuss with Her Majesty, Your Grace?”
“I shall” beamed Harriet “it would be the perfect way to round off our sojourn here”

The Queen was in complete agreement and mentioned it to Louis Philippe who said that he would instruct his chefs to serve a banquet in celebration. Alfred was delighted on the morning of his birthday to receive birthday cards painted by Harriet, a set of exquisitely embroidered handkerchiefs from Miss Coke and a box of cigars from the Queen and Prince.

“And tonight there will be a banquet” said Miss Coke delightedly “to celebrate your birthday”

Alfred smiled at her, although he could not be with his Edward as he would like to be, he was in many ways he reflected a very lucky young man “I am indeed fortunate to have such wonderful friends” he said

“you will receive your present from me after the dinner” whispered Edward to him as the party made their way to the garden where breakfast was laid out and Alfred shivered, Edward clearly had plans

The banquet was a splendid affair with 10 courses and champagne running like a river. The centrepiece of the party was a Gateau St Honore, sumptuous with whipped cream & caramel covered choux pastry which was brought in with great fanfare

Edward was sat opposite Alfred and smiled at him; his eyes alight as he remembered the Croquembouche from their previous trip

“Look at that” he said and laughed as Alfred looked at him his eyes sparkling with happiness

“Miss Coke” Edward whispered to her as the gateaux were served “would you mind asking the servants to take the remainder to Lord Alfred’s room, you know how much he loves cake and it would be such a shame not to finish the whole thing”

“of course Mr. Drummond” Miss Coke smiled at him and signalling one of the servants she asked them in quiet precise French to take the rest of the cake to Lord Alfred’s room

Edward lay in bed waiting for everyone to go to their chambers, Alfred’s room was close to his but he didn’t wish to be caught creeping around corridors. Eventually the chateau was silent and he cautiously opened his door, Alfred was expecting him and had left his door ajar

“Edward” Alfred held out his arms as Edward padded quietly in

“Alfred” Edward kissed him long and lovingly “happy birthday”

“That is the 5th time you have wished me happy birthday today” laughed Alfred

“The day you were brought into the world is the most precious day of all to me Alfred” said Edward nuzzling his nose “and I wish to celebrate it”

“But we’ve already celebrated…”

“No just us too” and he grinned

“Oh” Alfred kissed him “a special celebration”

“Exactly! Now you have to be quiet” whispered Edward “we cannot disturb people”
Alfred grinned at him between kisses “are you saying I am noisy Edward?”

Edward pushed him down onto the feather soft bed “sometimes I fear the whole street might hear you”

“An exaggeration surely? Though perhaps the neighbours”

“Alfred?”

“Mmmmm?”

Edward smiled against his mouth “I thought we might enjoy more cake”

“More cake? But Edward I thought we were going to....”

Edward leaned up on his elbow “oh but we are!”

Alfred’s smile widened “Edward ate you being creative?”

“I am, wait there” and he slipped off the bed and went over to the carved dressing table where he’d asked the servant to leave the remainder of cake earlier. Coming back, he placed it on the sheet next to Alfred

“Now” he said digging his finger into the cream “it is still your birthday” and he brought his finger up to Alfred’s lips who smirked at him & then licked slowly at the cream

Edward’s breath hitched, how did Alfred manage to look so angelic whilst clearly entertaining extremely sinful thoughts in his head

He picked up one of the little pastry balls and pressed it to Alfred’s lips who bit into it and flicked his tongue into the cream

He took another dollop of cream and grinned at Alfred “and where should this go?” and without waiting for an answer he smeared it across Alfred’s chest who spluttered with laughter “Edward! You are making a mess of me!”

“I plan to clear it up” said Edward winking at him and then leaning down dragged his tongue through the cream and then began to suck and nibble at the sweet liquid as it melted against Alfred’s skin

“Edward…” Alfred’s giggles at the mess he was in were turning to sighs

Edward reached over and scooped up more cream grinning wickedly “and this I believe needs to go lower down….” And his hand closed around Alfred’s cock

“Happy birthday Alfred” he whispered before lowering his mouth down
A bad fright

Chapter Summary

Edward and Alfred find it difficult to return to normal life after France, Florence is not enjoying being pregnant and has a scare.

Chapter Notes

aaaannnnd we're back on the angst train again

I cant imagine what it must have been like to have to wear a corset while you were pregnant!

August in London was stiflingly hot, the pavements burned with heat and at night no one could sleep. In their house in Pimlico, Florence was finding the heat unbearable, why had no one told her pregnancy could be so wretched? It seemed that she suffered from every ill effect; morning biliousness, back ache, swollen ankles, acid indigestion and as for her corset, well Florence would cheerfully have murdered the person whoever it was (probably a man!) who said women should wear them until they were 6 months pregnant. Hers would come off in 3 weeks and she couldn’t wait! Her mama had come to stay with her in June whilst Edward had been in France and she had quickly realised it had been a mistake. Her mother seemed intent on treating her as if she were still her little girl which having been mistress of her own house for over a year, Florence found deeply irritating. Her choice of everything was questioned from dinner to colour schemes for the nursery to the ideal qualifications for a wet nurse. Even more infuriatingly, Edward had returned from France rested and happy, a far cry from how Florence had felt. She turned over in bed a lot more slowly now and looked at Edward in the moonlight as he slept. Even now she was still amazed at how handsome he was, how fine his profile was, how classic the planes of his face were but she thought, did she know him any better now than when they were first engaged? They talked of the coming baby and she knew he was genuinely delighted as the prospect of becoming a father, of his career and the doings of their friends and society as a whole but of the two of them, they did not talk. Edward seemed to feel no need to discuss their feelings for each other or their marriage in any way. Florence had no way of knowing if this was normal or not, she did not want to discuss her marriage with her mama or papa or her friends. Perhaps she thought, he might talk to Lord Alfred, he knew Edward better than anyone, surely he would know if he were happy in their marriage or not?

At his house, Alfred couldn’t sleep either, London was abominable in this weather and he longed for the fresh air of Plas Newydd. The Queen was talking of moving the court to Windsor, something with which he heartily agreed, Windsor would at least be cooler. However that would mean not seeing Edward and Alfred was worried about he and Edward. Their two weeks in France had been heavenly but being able to be with Edward for two whole weeks, had made their return to London and normal life much more difficult to live with. Although Edward did not talk much of Florence, Alfred knew she was finding pregnancy difficult and that as a consequence she had become quite
attached to Edward, wanting him home more and more, and as Parliament was in recess it was
difficult to find excuses for him to visit Alfred. He could tell by Edward’s manner that he was
struggling but also that because they didn’t as a rule discuss Florence unless absolutely necessary,
there was little he could do other than impress upon him how much he loved him. As a consequence
their time together was limited to the point where sometimes Edward didn’t even take off all his
clothes so little time did they have. This however bothered Alfred less than the fact that they didn’t
have time to talk any more. He missed discussing his day with Edward and hearing what he had
been doing in return. He wanted more than to just make love with Edward, he wanted to share his
life with him, or at least what he could of it but that seemed to be coming under increasing pressure.
He did not want to think about what might happen when Florence gave birth and how it would affect
their relationship.

Edward was woken by the sound of Florence vomiting, he sighed and rubbed his eyes ‘poor
Florence’ he thought pregnancy did not seem to agree with her. He heard her ring for the maid to
bring clean water and a fresh nightgown. He looked at his pocket watch, 7am, far too early to be
awake, what could he do? He lay back against the pillows, how he wished he were back in France.
being with Alfred for those two weeks had been a taste of what their life could have been like if only
society would be understanding of people like them. However he thought that it would never
happen, certainly not in his lifetime!

In the bathroom he could hear Florence and the maid talking; he got up and pulled back the curtains,
it looked like another fine day, perhaps he should go for an early morning walk and should that take
him near Alfred’s house, well then that was all the good he thought. He went into his dressing room
and pulled on his breeches underneath his night shirt before pulling it off over his head, he went back
into the bedroom to retrieve his watch only to find Florence in there

“Florence” he said startled “I thought you were still in the bathroom”

“No” she was staring at him in a way that made Edward feel uncomfortable “I was about to return to
bed”

“I was going to go for an early walk” he said “while the weather is still cool”

She nodded still staring and Edward blushed and retreated to his dressing room to put on the rest of
his clothes

Florence climbed into bed, it was odd, but she had not seen Edward without his shirt on in daylight.
At night they kept the lights off and Edward would undress in his dressing room before coming to
bed. She had felt his body against hers but never seen it until now. She felt most peculiar, she had
likened him to a classical statue before but that had only been facially, now it was clear that extended
to the rest of him.

When he emerged from dressing, all properly buttoned up she felt a shiver as she realised how he
looked under those clothes. They had of course ceased martial relations so as not to harm the baby
but once it was born, well she hoped they would resume very quickly.

Edward was looking at her oddly “are you quite well my dear?” he asked

“Very well Edward” she stretched and smiled

“You just seem a little flushed”
“The water Edith brought was a little warmer than usual”

“Ah” he stood there as if about to say something else and then he came and kissed her cheek

“I shall be back for breakfast my dear” he said and left the room

When he had gone Florence seized the fan she kept next to her bed and began to fan her face, Edward was right, she really did feel a little warm.

Edward hurried through the streets, with luck he would reach Alfred’s before he had to leave for the palace. On reaching the house, he rang the bell and the door was answered by Jones the butler

“Good morning Mr. Drummond sir”

Edward smiled at him; Alfred’s parents had done well with the servants they had engaged. Not only did they have no fear they would expose them but they seemed genuinely happy when Edward and Alfred could be together

“The master is still abed sir” he added “would you like me to wake him”

“No” said Edward “I shall surprise him”

“Very good sir, well you know you way” and he gestured to the stairs

Edward cautiously opened the bedroom door, Alfred was clearly fast asleep, he’d kicked the quilt off in the night and was covered in just a sheet. Edward grinned, quickly slipped off his clothes and slid under the sheet

“Alfred” he nuzzled his lips “Alfred”

Alfred twitched in his sleep and frowned

“Alfred” he kissed him and Alfred wrinkled his nose

“Waaaa? Edward?”

“Good morning” said Edward stroking his hair “I have come to surprise you”

Alfred’s sleepy happy smile was enough and Edward rolled him on top so their legs were tabled together and Alfred’s downy sleep warm skin pressed against him “my love” he whispered and pulled him down to kiss him

At home in Pimlico Florence dozed and dreamt she was giving birth, she pushed and pushed but nothing happened, the pain was intense and she called for Edward but he didn’t come, ‘Edward’ she screamed ‘Edward’

She woke with a start, she really did have pain, oh god! what was wrong? the baby, please let nothing be happening to the baby! She rang the bell by the end and called out as well “Edith” she cried “Edith come quickly”

Edith came running “madam, what is it?”
“I have a pain Edith, such a pain”

“Do not worry madam” said Edith trying to be calm; surely she was not losing the baby

“May I?” she asked and she peered under the sheets, thank heaven! There was no blood

“There is no blood madam” she said “but I will send for the doctor”

“Yes please at once” there was another hit of pain and she gasped, where was Edward? she wondered, she needed him

Edward reluctantly slid out of bed

“I have to go” he said “I told Florence I would be home for breakfast”

“Of course Edward” said Alfred trying to quell as always that little stab of jealousy “it was an unexpected pleasure that you came” he looked solemnly at him and then winked and Edward burst out laughing, was it possible he could adore anyone as much as he did Alfred?

He dressed quickly and then kissed Alfred goodbye

“I shall see you as soon as I can” he said “I love you Alfred” and with a wave he as gone.

He opened the door and was met with a relieved Edith

“Oh thank goodness you are home sir!” she exclaimed “the mistress...she has had pains sir…”

Edward was immediately panic stricken “it is too soon” he said “much too soon” and he ran up the stairs

“Florence, Florence” he shouted with Edith hot on his heels

“You can’t go in sir” she panted “she is with the doctor”

“But I….”

“Sir you can’t” Edith took his hands, “you must wait sir” Edward looked at her wild eyed and then nodded and dropped into a chair his head in his hands. He would not he thought bleakly forgive himself if something had happened to their baby while he was with Alfred

At length the door opened and the doctor came out, Edward jumped up

“My wife” he began

“is fine sir, nothing more than severe indigestion, I suggest she leaves off her corsets from now on but she and the baby are quite quite well”

“Oh thank god” Edward felt tearful, “may I see her”

“But of course! I do not stop husbands seeing wives because of indigestion!” and he laughed

Edward nodded still flooded with relief and knocked on the door
“Florence” he said hesitantly peering around it

“Edward, come in” she held out her hand

He came over to the bed and knelt down

“How do you feel?” he asked

“Very foolish” she laughed “bringing a doctor all this way because I ate too much at dinner last night!”

Edward smiled at her “It was better to be safe than sorry, if anything had happened to the baby…” his voice choked with emotion

“We are quite well Edward” she said and then she winced “Edward, the baby is kicking”

“Kicking” Edward looked at her belly with surprise “it can do that?”

“Of course Edward, it is moving about quite a lot, here” and she took his hand and placed it on her tummy “do you feel it?”

“No…” and then beneath his fingers there was definite impression of tiny tiny foot pushing out, he looked at Florence in astonishment and then laughed “I feel it, Florence I feel it!”

She laughed “they are getting quite active”

Edward shook his head with amazement “I had no idea” he said

And he hadn’t, before the baby was an abstract thing even as he watched Florence swell but now feeling it beneath his hand, a love surged up so strong he almost gasped. Not since he fell in love with Alfred had he felt anything like it.

This baby, he thought, this baby would change everything
Are you happier

Chapter Summary

Miss Coke has some news, Alfred and Edward quarrel and Alexi returns

Chapter Notes

Thank you so much for all the comments, and Im so sorry I havent had time to reply to then yet. Life is just being rather overwhelming and I’ve had very little time to write :/

Confinement - pregnant women were expected to spend the last few months of their pregnancy confined to their houses in dimly lit rooms and not to be seen in public

I have been starting to feel that Edward is perhaps not as understanding of Alfred as he could be.....

“You look very happy Miss Coke” Lord Alfred smiled at her, “has something happened?”

“It is a secret” she said and blushed

“I am the soul of discretion Miss coke” said Lord Alfred with a wink “what is it?”

“John has asked me to marry him” she burst out excitedly “and my aunt had given permission”

“Why Miss Coke I am delighted for you,” Alfred smiled “I can think of no one more deserving of a happy life than you”

“Thank you” she said

There was a companionable silence and then Miss Coke ventured

“You still remain faithful to your love Lord Alfred? You do not consider marrying another?”

“No” said Alfred “I have learned to live with what I cannot have”

“And you do not feel lonely?” she asked timidly

Alfred considered the question ‘did he?’ He wondered

“Sometimes” he replied “but I would rather that than feel lonely in a marriage with someone I did not love as a man should love a woman”

Miss Coke nodded and changed the subject “I visited Mrs Drummond yesterday, confinement is rather a tedious time don’t you think?”

“I know little about it” said Alfred somewhat shortly “the Queen does not really confine herself during pregnancy”
“Florence told me about her scare & mistaking indigestion for a sign the baby was coming” and she laughed Alfred joining in with his special court laugh he used when he was expected to find something amusing and didn’t

“Of course Mr. Drummond was beside himself with worry but once he felt the baby kick, well Florence said she’d never seen him so happy….lord Alfred are you well?”

Alfred had made a choking noise

“Quite well, I just inhaled an insect” and he coughed theatrically before they continued their walk

“Come on come on’ Edward urged the meeting to draw to a close; he was due at Alfred’s at 7pm. He had an hour to spare for Alfred before he had to get home to Florence who was finding being confined in the house very dull. Although his life was rather hectic juggling his marriage, the demands of his job and Alfred, he was feeling really rather pleased that he was managing it all. He felt that perhaps at last he had achieved some equilibrium in his life. He only wished he could spend more time with Alfred; even though it was nearly a year since they had first lain together, he still wanted him with a fierceness that could be overwhelming; indeed he’d spent the day plagued by memories of their time in France especially licking cream off Alfred’s naked body. He’d nearly groaned aloud in one particularly dull meeting at the memory of Alfred’s moans as he’d taken him completely in his mouth and sucked and sucked....

As soon as he meeting was over, he gathered his papers and fled the room plead a need to get home as soon as possible but instead of turning left as he exited Parliament, he went right to Alfred’s house. He rang the doorbell and the door was opened by Jones. He handed him in his hat & coat and took several steps toward the stairs before there was a discrete cough

“The master is in his study sir”

‘Oh’ Edward was puzzled; Alfred knew he didn’t have much time! Unless he had a fancy for Edward to take him over the desk but really with all the servants here? Mentality shrugging he headed for the study

“Alfred?”

Edward came in to see Alfred say in one of the arm chairs set in front of the unlit fire, it was still warm although it was September and the twilight sun was turning the windows to gold

“Edward” unlike normal Alfred did not rise and hold out his arms; instead he sat twirling a glass of wine in his fingers

“Is something wrong?”

Edward was puzzled, normally as they had so little time, Alfred would wait for him naked in bed, but not only was he not in bed, there seemed no suggestion that bed was remotely on the horizon

“You did not tell me of your wife’s….incident”

“No why would I?” said Edward feeling faintly irritated, he never discussed Florence with Alfred if he could help it so why on earth would he tell him about something that had in the end turned out to be nothing

“It seems that you felt the baby kick and had never looked so happy” now Alfred did rise “I wonder
Edward if that is true, if this baby makes you happier than me?”

“Who told you that?” asked Edward wondering how on earth Alfred had found out he’d felt the baby kick.

“Miss Coke visited your wife who was very keen to tell her. Is it true?”

“Yes it’s true I felt the baby kick”

“I meant is it true that you have never been so happy?”

“You are taking the situation out of context Alfred” said Edward crossly “Florence has not seen me look that happy with her because she can only talk of how I am with her, she does not know how I am with you”

“That does not answer my question Edward” said Alfred “does this baby make you happier than I do?”

Edward shrugged exasperatedly “it is different Alfred! The baby…. ”he tried to put into words how he felt “it is a whole new person that I have helped to make, its mine in a way that nothing else can be because it is half me, you are mine because I choose you” he felt very frustrated, they had so little time and Alfred was wasting it with these pointless queries.

He came towards him and put his arms round him “I choose you” he said again “not because I have to but because I want to”

Alfred rested his head against Edward’s shoulder; he felt very despondent and just wanted to be held. How could he ever compete against Edward’s own child? A human being created by him and Florence? He had visions of a future where Edward came to see him out of pity or habit rather than because he loved him, of Edward sat in his club contemplating how he could rid himself of Alfred without a scandal. He wanted to ask Edward if he loved him still but he didn’t want to sound as if he were clinging to him.

Edward held Alfred tightly, how could he make Alfred understand how much he meant to him? He put his fingers under Alfred’s chin and tipped his face up so he could kiss him

“I love you Alfred” he said “more than anything in the world”

Alfred wanted to reply ‘more than anything that is in the world at the moment’ but he did not, it would not help, and gave himself to being kissed. It was lovely to be kissed by Edward, to rest in his arms and feel cherished even if only for a little while. He sighed and kissed him back harder.

Edward feeling Alfred’s response began to think of France again, images of Alfred laughing as they splashed each other in the pond, of his hands on his back as they pressed together. He pulled Alfred against him and slid his hands down. He felt Alfred flinch and pull away

“No Edward” he said quietly “not tonight, I am not in the mood”

Edward looked at him in surprise, ‘not in the mood?’ Alfred had never said this before. He very much wanted to make love to Alfred to prove to him how much he mattered and that his feelings hadn’t changed

“Perhaps” he said “I can help you feel in the right mood” and he kissed him again

“No Edward” said Alfred firmly “I do not want to”
Edward released him “I am sorry to have inflicted myself upon you then” he said sarcastically

Alfred’s eyes darkened “I see you are only interested in me if I can attend to your needs”

“Don’t be ridiculous” snapped Edward “we just have very little time that is all”

“And I suppose you feel it is a shame to spend it talking when we could be in bed”

“It is not a crime to want to bed you Alfred” said Edward, his voice rough with lust “looking at you I feel it is really quite normal”

“I am sorry then you have had a wasted trip”

Edward looked away but not before Alfred had seen the flash of disappointment in his face

“You do think you’ve had a wasted trip” Said Alfred furiously “Well then I must not disappoint you when you deign to make the time for me must I?”

And he began to tear off his shirt and waistcoat till he stood bare chested in front of Edward “there! That is what you came for is it not?”

“Alfred stop this”

“IS IT NOT?” shouted Alfred at him

“I think I should go” said Edward, clearly Alfred was in a peculiar frame of mind and further quarreling would only upset them both

“Leaving because you are not getting what you came for?”

Edward looked at him wordlessly and opened the study door

“I am not your whore Edward” said Alfred furious beyond measure that Edward was indeed going to leave “here to satisfy your whims”

“Do not use that word Alfred” said Edward angrily “it is demeaning to us both”

“Then do not treat me as one” shouted Alfred

“I am going to leave” said Edward firmly “before one of us says something we may regret”

“Go then” spat Alfred at him “back to your wife”

“Alfred…”

“I said GO” and he picked up a book and threw it at the door “get out”

“I am going” said Edward coldly ducking the book as it thudded into the door frame “and I may not be back”

“Good” shouted Alfred as the door closed behind Edward and then he slumped into the chair and put his hands over his face

“And have you spoken since?” asked Alexi as he and Alfred trotted along the path; their Wednesday rides together had become a regular occurrence, and something to which Alfred looked forward to
Alfred sighed “no. I know I behaved badly but I feel very *used* at times, I just want us to talk like we used to, about our day and what has happened instead of feeling like I’m only there to be taken to bed when Edward can fit me in”

“he does love you” said Alexi “I know he does” his mouth twisted in a smile “look at how he was when he thought I had ‘designs’ on you” and he smiled trying to cheer Alfred up “I thought he may call me out for a duel”

Alfred laughed “when my mother left her husband, my father was called out for a duel by her brother”

Alexi laughed in return “I hope one day to meet your parents Alfred, they sound rather splendid”

“They are, I am very lucky” but his face had already become sombre again “they believe I should leave Edward, oh they don’t say it, but it’s what they want”

“And what do you feel?” asked Alexi

“how can I leave him?” asked Alfred “I may as well cut off my right arm but I want to feel that I matter more than what occurs between the bed sheets” he sighed “and I do not want him to tire of me, that would be unsupportable and how can I compete with his own child? And what kind of a man am I Alexi that I am jealous of a baby that is not yet born?”

“I think that it is normal to feel concerned” said Alexi gently “all of these things that the two of you go through are new experiences for you both so do not be too hard on yourself”

Watching Alfred’s melancholy expression, Alexi felt a rush of anger at Edward. He knew of course why Edward had to marry and that he and Alfred could not be public with their affections but nevertheless he felt Edward did somewhat take Alfred’s feelings for granted. Alfred’s life could not be his own, dependent as he was on when Edward was available and the longer Edward was married, the more his career progressed and the more children he had, the more Alfred would struggle to fit in his life. He wondered if Edward really had considered how his life would be without Alfred in it.

“Come” he said wanting to make Alfred smile “let us gallop awhile, the horses could do with a good run out. 10 guineas I can beat you to the old oak tree at the edge of the park”

Alfred could not help the grin that slid across his face “Alexi would it not be easier just to give me the 10 guineas now? You will not beat me, you never do”

“I have been practising” said Alexi with a mock serious expression “this time I am sure I will have the edge”

“We shall see” said Alfred turning his horse and spurring it to life as it sprang forward

Alexi of course had no intention of trying to beat Alfred, he knew he could not; he just wanted him to have some enjoyment. He watched as he rode, he was always at one with his horse in a way that even he Alexi, who was a good rider, was not. Alfred was at least 100 yards ahead and going at full speed when out of the corner of his eye, Alexi saw a stray dog burst from the trees barking furiously. Alfred horse started and then reared up; for a moment Alexi thought Alfred would stay on but the dog barked again and the horse shied to the left throwing Alfred heavily to the ground, there was a
sickening crack and then silence.

Alexi dug his heels in and sped to where Alfred lay unmoving; his arm twisted at an unnatural angle. Alexi leapt off his horse and fell to his knees next to Alfred and leant down, thank god! He was breathing at least “Alfred” he said urgently “Alfred” but there was no response from the unconscious figure.

“Sir” he heard voices coming closer, a man and a woman “I saw what happened” exclaimed the man “your friend, is he injured?”

“I believe he is” Alexi sat back; Alfred needed medical help “can you stay with him? I need to find a doctor” he took off his coat and covered Alfred “do not move him, I will be back as soon as I can”

“Of course sir, we shall stay” said the woman

“Thank you” Alexi jumped back on his horse “I shall return with all speed” and he galloped off
aftermath of an accident

Chapter Summary

Alfred is left unconscious after his accident

Chapter Notes

Falling from a horse would be quite enough to knock you out for hours, days or even longer.....

Alexi looked worriedly at Alfred as he lay still comatose in the bed. His face was pale, so so pale. His arm had been set by the surgeon who had come to the house, fortunately while he was still out cold so he didn’t have to endure the pain as the bone was manipulated back into place and then bandaged.

The doctor had spoken to him after examining Alfred fully “I do not believe he has a permanent brain injury but I cannot tell until he awakes. At the moment this faint is the best thing, it will allow his body to rest but he must not be left alone”

Alexi nodded, he had sent the butler to the Houses of Parliament to find Alfred’s father and they should be here shortly, then Alexi knew he had to go and break the news to Edward in person.

A little while later the sound of the front door crashing open and then heavy footsteps on the stairs suggested Alfred’s father had arrived. The bedroom door burst open and Alfred’s father entered the room leaning heavily on his stick

“My lord” Alexi rose from the seat where he’d been sitting but Alfred’s father brushed past him

“My boy” he said his voice thick with tears stroking Alfred’s hair back from his forehead “my son”, there was no response from Alfred who lay with his face as cold and still as marble. Alexi watched him with a lump in his throat wishing his father had the same love and concern for him. Eventually Henry looked up

“You are Prince Alexi?” he asked

Alexi bowed “at your service sir”

“You were with him when it happened?”

“I was”

“Tell me what happened”

Alexi told him how they had wagered 10 guineas on a race and Alfred had been galloping at full tilt when his horse had been scared by a dog
“He was thrown and his arm and ribs were broken” Alexi paused “he also hit his head”

“Has he been conscious at all?” asked Henry

“No” replied Alexi “the doctor said that it is probably for the best, that it will help his body heal”

Henry rubbed his eyes and then sat down heavily in a chair “but he could also be damaged….please sir “he held up his hand as Alexi went to speak” I have been a military man all my life, I know what an injury to the head can mean”

“I am sure that he will be well” said Alexi, ‘what else could he say?’ he thought

“I have sent for his mother” said Henry ”fortunately she is staying with friends in Canterbury and should be here tomorrow. God willing he will be awake by then”

“God willing sir” said Alexi soberly

“Does Edward know?” Alexi was slightly taken aback, he knew Alfred’s father and mother knew of him and Edward but it was still rather shocking to hear them say his name so familiarly

“No” Alexi shook his head “I will take the news to him myself”

Henry nodded “you are a good friend to them both sir, I will not forget it”

Then he leaned forward, took Alfred’s hand in his and began to stroke it gently; Alexi took that as a sign he should leave and tell Edward

“I have a message for Mr. Edward Drummond” said Alexi to the doorkeeper at the House of Commons

“Very good sir, leave it with me” he said holding out his hand

“No you do not understand, I need to see him in person, could he be asked to come here?” said Alexi anxiously, he really did not want to break the news of Alfred’s accident to Edward in front of a room full of witnesses

The doorkeeper nodded “I will send a message to him sir, wait here”

Edward arrived quickly with a frown on his face

“Your highness” he said “what brings you here?”

“If you just come with me sir” said Alexi aware of the doorkeepers eyes on them and he drew Edward over to bench in the courtyard

“I have bad news” he said without preamble “there has been an accident, lord Alfred was thrown from his horse, no please let me finish sir he is not dead” as he saw the instant terror spring into Edward’s eyes “he has a broken arm and fractured ribs but he also hit his head when he fell and was knocked out”

Edward’s head began to swim, Alfred hurt? Unconscious? He jumped up abruptly

“I need to go to him” he said
Alexi nodded “I know you do” he said “I came here for that very purpose” he paused “I understand you parted on bad terms the last time you met but I know you love him”

“I do” said Edward “more than anything” and he began to shake, how could this be happening?

Edward remembered very little of their walk to Alfred’s house. All he could think of was how they had parted on bad terms and that he’d told Alfred that he might not come back. How he wished he could take those words back a thousand times, he was already regretting every single time he had not told Alfred he loved him when he saw him, every time he had just stripped off his clothes and taken him to bed instead of asking about his day. He found he was praying under his breath

“Please God don’t let him die, don’t let him die” he’d do anything, anything as long as Alfred lived

When they arrived at Alfred’s, his father there at his bedside

“How...” he moistened his lips “how is he sir?”

“As you see”

Edward looked down at Alfred; he seemed so small lying there, so still, and so quiet that it was unnatural. Absurdly he recalled how Alfred could never keep still for more than a few minutes at a time when they were together. Tears flooded his eyes, he wanted to fling himself on him and put his arms round him, to hold him and take whatever injury he had suffered upon himself but he could not. He looked helplessly at Alfred’s father who put his hand on his shoulder

“Alexi and I are going to speak with the doctor” he said quietly “we shall probably be gone for some 30 minutes”

Alexi opened his mouth to say he doctor had gone but closed it as he realised that Alfred’s father was giving Edward time to be alone with Alfred

Once they had left, Edward fell to his knees next to the bed and took Alfred’s hand rubbing it against his cheek

“Alfred” he said “Alfred my love can you hear me?”

He had thought, foolishly he realised now, that Alfred would wake on hearing his voice. On the way there he had told himself that Alfred would only have to hear him and he would awaken but he did not. There was nothing but the sound of Alfred’s regular breathing and the ticking of the clock.

Perhaps Alfred needed to feel as well as hear him, he climbed up onto the bed and lay down next to Alfred putting his arms around him and kissing him

“Wake up” he whispered “my angel, please wake up, don’t leave me here alone, Alfred please, please wake up”

But there was no response; Edward buried his face against Alfred’s shoulder and wept. What if Alfred never woke up? What if he was now alone here forever? The thought was too terrible to contemplate. Eventually he cried himself out and laid there his arms wrapped around Alfred’s motionless body, breathing in his scent and trying with all his might to transfer his strength to Alfred
He was not aware of the door opening and anyone entering the room until he felt a gentle hand on his shoulder.

"Edward" it was Henry.

Edward immediately slid off the bed.

"My apologies sir" he said.

"No apologies are necessary; I know how you feel about Alfred".

Edward tried to speak but the tears came into his eye again.

"Perhaps we can sit here together, you and I" said Henry quietly "at least until his mother comes, I think were he to wake, he would like to see you here".

Edward nodded and then he remembered Florence.

"My wife" he said "she needs to know where I am".

"I will send Jones with a note if you can write one".

"I will take it" said Alexi quietly from the doorway "I would like to be of use".

"I would be most grateful if you would sir" said Edward, he sat at the desk and hastily scribbled a note.

"My dear Florence

Lord Alfred has had a bad accident. I am here with him and his father hoping that he will soon awaken. I will stay until his mother arrives from Wales as I don't want to leave his father alone (which was only slightly a lie thought Edward) take good care of yourself and the baby

Fondest

Edward"

He rose and took the note over to Alexi.

"I want to thank you sir" he said "and to apologise for my ill informed thoughts and words to you in the past. You are a good a friend to Alfred and to me as any man could have".

Alexi gripped his hand and shook it "I only hope that he’s awake when I return”

Sadly Alfred was not awake; Edward and his father sat on either side of the bed. Alexi passed on a message from Florence saying he was not to worry, they were both well and wishing Lord Alfred a quick recovery.

Time passed slowly, Alfred would occasionally twitch and whimper in his unconsciousness state. Henry assured him that the noises didn’t mean Alfred was in pain but Edward’s heart broke to hear them, what if he was?

He must have fallen asleep because he woke with a start, his head pillowed on the sheet next to Alfred, his body bent at an unnatural angle aware of voices.
“my baby” it was Alfred’s mother clearly the carriage had galloped through the night to bring her here, “Alfred, mama is here”

Edward sat upright with a groan and Alfred’s mother saw him

“You” she said “I expect this is down to you”

“He was not even with him Charlotte” said Alfred’s father gently

“Well who was? Who let this happen to my little boy?”

“it was I who was with him” Alexi had slept in an arm chair by the window, not wanting to leave Henry and Edward both of who had seemed on the verge of collapse

“and who are you?”

“Prince Alexi Leonov” he bowed “believe me madam it was an accident, a barking dog frightened his horse and even as good a horseman as your son is, he could not stay on”

“well….” She turned away “I want you to go, both of you”

“but…” began Edward, how could he leave Alfred, what if he awoke and Edward wasn’t there? And even more terribly, what if something worse happened and he wasn’t there?

“Drummond, we should leave Alfred with his parents now, I am sure they will send word if there is news and that you can come back later” he said it casually but with an underlying hint of steel which Alfred’s father at least recognised

“of course” he said “you should both get some proper rest, if there are any changes we shall let you know and of course you may return later”

Alfred’s mother looked as if she were about to argue but a soft little moan from Alfred distracted her

“Alfred? Are you waking? Mama is here for you”

Alexi looked at Edward and shook his head, they had heard that sound enough times to know it didn’t mean Alfred was waking

“Come sir” and Alexi took Edwards arm propelling him reluctantly from the room
so many years

Chapter Summary

Florence has a surprise for Edward, Henry and Charlotte talk, Edward recalls his early meeting with Alfred and Alfred wakes up

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“Would you like me to accompany you home sir?” asked Alexi when they were outside

Edward shook his head, “you have done enough and more” he said “thank you but I would like to be alone for a while”

Alex nodded “I understand” he paused “how will you, I mean with your wife, Mr Drummond how will you conceal your feelings from her?”

Edward looked at him helplessly “I have no choice but to do so, Alfred and I have lived like this for so long now it is second nature”

“It must be a very great strain for you” said Alexi gently thinking that Edward looked on the verge of tears

“It is, it’s…..” and his voice wavered

“Deep breaths sir” said Alexi “you must not break down on the street” and he put his hand on his shoulder as he recovered

Edward took several huge gulps of air as he fought back the tears that had threatened to overwhelm him

“I can’t be without him” he said to Alexi “I can’t”

“I am sure he will awaken soon” said Alexi “unconsciousness is the bodies way of healing itself, are you sure you do not wish me to walk with you?”

“No, I will go home, my wife will be anxious and the baby, nothing must happen to the baby”

“Farewell then, I shall return later and hope to see you then” Alexi nodded to him and walked away with weary steps

Edward’s whole body ached from lack of sleep and anxiety and now he had to go home and see Florence

“Edward? Edward is that you?” Edward sighed, he had hoped that Florence might be asleep as it was still early but alas no

“It is I” he answered
“Edward what has happened, tell me is Lord Alfred well?” Edward closed his eyes and rested his head against the wall at the top of the stairs before assuming the mask of polite affection he wore around her

He went into their bedroom to see Florence propped up in bed looking as if she had not slept much either

“Edward you look dreadful, is the news bad?” she asked anxiously

Edward nodded and slumped down onto the bed “he was thrown from his horse and hit his head, he is unconscious and the doctors don’t know if….when…he will wake” and he looked at her, the misery written across has face

“Oh Edward” Florence’s heart went out to him, she knew that lord Alfred was his dearest friend “Lord Alfred is young and strong, I am sure he will recover”

“What if he does not?”

“He will! He must, we are to name our baby after him”

“We are?” Edward looked at her in surprise; she had not mentioned this before

“Yes” the idea had only come onto Florence’s head that moment but seeing Edward so bereft at his friends injury, she wanted to cheer him and that seemed a good way to do so

“Oh” Edward choked and then the tears that he had been fighting flowed down his face and he rested his head against her belly and cried as Florence stroked his hair and he felt the baby move beneath him.

It had been 5 days since Alfred’s accident, 5 days of ceaseless vigils by his bed from his parents, Edward and Alexi. Miss Coke and John Spencer had also visited along with Harriet and once to the consternation of the servants, the Queen and Prince Albert

Victoria had waved aside the apologies about the lack of readiness for her visit “I come as Lord Alfred’s friend” she said to Jones “that is all that matters”

All had talked to him as the doctors instructed to try and bring him round but nothing worked.

“What if he doesn’t wake Henry?” said Charlotte quietly voicing her fear at last. Alfred had barely moved in 5 days, she had washed him and attempted to spoon some thin soup between his lips but still his condition remained unchanged

“He will wake” said Henry his eyes fixed on Alfred as he held his hand

“But what if he does not, do we leave him like this forever?”

“What are you asking me Charlotte?” said Henry quietly

“I…don’t know” she said and she didn’t but she was seized with a terrible awful fear that her darling boy would neither wake nor pass on to heaven but stay trapped in this limbo

“We must have faith in the Lord my dear that is all we can do”

She nodded and going to him, sat and rested her head against his shoulder
“I am so tired” she said

“You should sleep my dear, I will say with him and Edward will come soon”

“Edward…” charlottes voice was bitter

“Now charlotte you know he loves him”

“I know he does but it’s hopeless Henry, he should leave Alfred alone and get on with his own life, he has a wife and a baby on the way, what does Alfred have other than this fantasy that we have built for him here?” and she looked around the room

“Alfred’s life is his to do with as he chooses Charlotte”

“I know I just wish he’d never met him that is all”

Henry squeezed her hand in response “go and rest my dear, I will be here with him”

She nodded and rose “wake me the moment anything changes”

“Of course”

Henry watched her go, he knew this was terrible for her; a mothers bond with her child was different to a fathers bond, not better but different. He didn’t know what she would do if Alfred didn’t recover

“Sir?” he heard footsteps and then Edward came into the room, he looked dreadful, pale and with dark circles under his eyes

“Edward” Henry beckoned him to the bed “my boy you do not look well”

“I cannot sleep# said Edward dully “I cannot think of anything but him”

“I know it is hard”

“Very hard” he rubbed his hand over his face “is there any change?”

“None sir, I would have sent word if there was”

Edward nodded “may I sit?”

“Of course I was going to go and rest if you will stay with him?” Henry knew that it wasn’t a question he really had to ask

“I will stay”

He nodded and patted Edwards arm “let us know if he wakes”

“Of course”

Henry left the room pausing at the doorway to look back at Edward who had taken Alfred’s hand in his with one hand and was stroking his face with the other

As was customary for him, he talked to Alfred of his day

“Work is hard my love, I can’t concentrate for worry of you and the situation in France is worsening
Nothing, Alfred lay there, his usually shining gold hair lank, his skin as pale as milk. Edward let go of Alfred’s hand and pressed the knuckles of his hands into his eyes. He was tired, so so tired; perhaps a cigar would help him keep awake. He knew Alfred’s mother had banned them all from smoking in the sick room but if he opened the window she would not know.

He took out his tinderbox thinking of the time he’d seen Alfred standing there in his uniform trying unsuccessfully to light his cheroot. He remembered how his breath had caught in his throat at the sight of him, the candlelight glinting off his hair and the buttons on his uniform, the sapphire blue of his eyes visible from across the corridor. He remembered Alfred saying “how well equipped you are” and he smiled despite himself, he now knew of course that Alfred had not been talking just about his tinderbox. He hadn’t understood his feelings then, he’d been confused at how his heart had leapt and his body had become warm every time he saw Alfred. How long ago it seemed now, so many years of yearning and wanting, of sadness and difficulties, of friendship and happiness, but most of all of love. They’d both known their love would not be allowed or even understood, in fact it would be condemned and that they could never be truly together but that did not matter. Being allowed to love Alfred and for him to love him in return was all he really asked of the world. The rest was just noise and meaningless activity to fill out his day until he could be with Alfred again. What he wondered would he do I Alfred did not wake up? What would be the point of his life without him? Perhaps he thought almost objectively if Alfred were to die, he would join him and then at least they could be together in heaven.

He took out a cheroot, lit it and inhaled deeply and then looked at Alfred, and was it? Did Alfred’s nose just twitch?

He leaned forward and yes there it was again, his nose wrinkled unmistakably and then there was the tiniest little cough

Edward’s heart jumped into his throat, was he waking? He stood and leaned on the bed watching intently and yes there was another dry little cough and those eyelashes, those beautiful long eyelashes were fluttering. He knew he should get Alfred’s parents but he couldn’t bear to share this moment, he wanted his to be the first face he saw when he woke

“Alfred?? He said softly “Alfred?”

Alfred groaned quietly and then opened his eyes, blinking several times to try and focus

Edward could have screamed with joy! “Alfred you are awake! Oh thank god thank god” and he seized him in his arms “I was so worried my love so worried” he pulled back and put his hands on either side of Alfred’s face and kissed him “how do you feel?”

But Alfred shrank back from him in confusion “who are you?” he croaked his voice horse “I don’t know you”

“Don’t know me?” said Edward “it is me Edward who loves you” but Alfred just looked at him fearfully “I don’t…..” and he cowered under the bedclothes turning his face away

Edward felt as if all his breath had been sucked from him and he stood turned to stone, Alfred didn’t know him he could see it in his face. His eyes when he’d looked at Edward had had no recognition in them at all; Edward was a stranger to him. Of all the things he had feared; that Alfred would die that he would never wake, that he would be permanently damaged in some way by the injury, it had not in his deepest darkest hours occurred to him that Alfred simply would not know him.
He swallowed “I will fetch your parents” he said and he ran from the room before the sobs coursing through his body could burst out

Chapter End Notes

Retrograde amnesia can result after a head injury, typically people forget things that happened closer to the time of their accident or injury but can recall things from further back.
Giving up so easily

Chapter Summary

Alfred is awake and his mother poses a dilemma to Edward

Chapter Notes

OK I PROMISE everyone this story does eventually have a happy ending but like all great love stories, their path never runs smooth but they will be happy in the end

and sorry this took so long but I've been on holiday x

Alfred’s parents had rushed to his bedside as soon as Edward had burst in and announced he was awake, and it had been clear he knew them straightaway. Alfred’s mother had cried and cuddled him and even his father had wiped away a few tears albeit discreetly, but it had also been clear that Edward was a stranger to him.

The doctor had been summoned and after examining Alfred he had returned to speak with his parents; Edward had been permitted to remain for the conversation.

“Is he well doctor?” Charlotte asked

“Physically he is quite well; his arm will heal as will the cracked ribs though he must remain in bed for the time being”

“Why does he not remember me?” interrupted Edward anxiously

Henry cast a warning look at him and repeated the question more gently adding “Edward and Alfred are dear friends these last few years”

“Ah” said the doctor thoughtfully “it is not uncommon in cases such as these for patients to be unable to recall more recent memories although longer term ones remain intact. Wait here”

Some 15 minutes later he returned

“I asked your son some simple questions about what he remembers. He knows her Majesty is Queen and that she is married but does not recall the birth of Princess Victoria or any of the other Royal children, he believes Lord Melbourne to be the Prime Minister and has no knowledge of Sir Robert Peel’s ministry or subsequent resignation. He believes himself to be 20 years of age and is puzzled as to why you” he bowed to Alfred’s parents “do not look as he remembers you. He is also adamant he does not know an Edward Drummond”

Charlotte let out a cry and Edward put his hands over his face to stop himself from doing the same. Alfred did not know him, in fact didn’t remember ever having even met him. The last 7 years of their lives had disappeared from his memory
“Will he ever remember these things?” asked Henry his voice shaking

“He may” said the doctor “those memories are still there, they are just locked away somewhere that has been damaged by the fall. You can talk to him about those years and try to reawaken them but” he looked at them with compassion “there are no guarantees they will ever come back. I will return tomorrow to see how he is” he put his hand on Henry’s arm “do not lose hope sir, I have seen memories return many times, months, sometimes even years later” he nodded to them all and left

There was a deep silence then Henry said

“Well it is clear what we must do. We will talk to him about these lost years and see if we can bring them back to him”

Edward nodded eagerly “I will do all I can do help”

“Indeed! Of course we must do it gently Edward, lead him through events slowly, we do not want to perhaps shock him with some of the things that have happened before he is ready to bear them”

“Of course sir, perhaps if I prepared a chronology of some of the key things?”

“Yes! That would be most helpful and…”

“No” charlotte’s voice cut quietly across both of them silencing them

“What did you say my dear?” asked Henry

“I said no” she repeated “you may work to bring back some of his memories but not all” and she looked meaningfully at Edward

Henry looked at her askance “you surely do not mean….”

“I do” she addressed Edward directly “remembering you will only bring him heartbreak Mr Drummond. He will have to relive his sorrow all over again, your engagement, your marriage, and your impending fatherhood. All of it will break his heart, you know it will. At the moment he is free of all that, if you love him, don’t make him go through it again”

Edward stared at her white faced “you cannot ask that of me” he whispered

“No indeed, charlotte please consider what you are asking” said Henry in a shocked voice

“I do consider it Henry, I consider it most carefully! You saw how he was when Mr Drummond married, how devastated he was when he came to Plas Newydd, do you want to see him like that again? And think Henry! It is illegal, what they do breaks the law, are you willing to risk Alfred’s safety again when you don’t have to?”

“Not being with Edward will not change who Alfred is Charlotte” said Henry but he looked uncertain

“No but perhaps we might teach him….”

“What? You might teach him what? To prefer women?” Edward glared at her “You would seek to change what he is and deny him the knowledge of how he has lived until now? How dare you madam!”

“I do dare it” snapped charlotte “I am his mother! Who are you to gainsay me sir!!!”
“Charlotte be calm please” said Henry “but Edward you cannot deny that what you two do is dangerous to you both”

“I do not deny it” said Edward “but it is Alfred’s choice to make in the full knowledge of what has passed between us”

“Only if you force him to relive your relationship” said Charlotte “Edward” she took his hand “I know you love him, I know you do but think! You cannot be together, you have a wife, you are about to become a father, what does Alfred have? A man he can never have, a love that can never be acknowledged, you may indeed be the love of his life and he may never find another but at least he would be spared the sorrow he lives with every day”

“I” Edward felt tears come into his eyes and a lump into his throat, she was right in many ways, he knew it but she was also so so wrong.

“Without him I have no life” he managed to choke out

“And he can have no life with you” she said softly

“Give us three days Edward” said Henry desperate to find a way forward. He understood how Charlotte felt, in some ways he agreed with her but Edward too was right, it was Alfred’s life not theirs “let us see how he is then, perhaps he may recall more things now he is awake”

Edward shook his head but Henry put his hand on his shoulder “please” he said “three days”

Edward nodded and then left the room barely able to see for his tears

And so he had done as agreed, he had kept away for three days but today he was returning to the house to see Alfred and no one was going to stop him!

When he arrived the door was opened by Jones

“Mr. Edward sir” he said

“Jones. Is there any change?”

“Not that I know of sir but then of course the mistress may not tell me”

Edward nodded “no perhaps not”

Jones smiled at him reassuringly “I am sure that seeing you will help”

Edward smiled back and mounted the stairs to their bedroom hoping that when he opened the door, that Alfred would look at him and a smile of recognition would light up his face. He knocked at the door an Alfred voice, much weaker than normal said

“Come in”

Edward turned the handle and entered. Alfred was propped up in bed, his arm still in a sling but his face had more colour than before and his hair had been washed and was the shining gold that Edward remembered.

“Lord Alfred” not even being able to say his name properly cut at Drummond’s heart
Alfred looked at him blankly and then said doubtfully “Mr. Drummond??”

Edward nodded and Alfred looked as pleased as a child who had mastered something difficult.

“Mama and papa tell me we are friends?” he said hesitantly.

Edward nodded “we are very good friends”

“Ah” Alfred looked downcast “then I am sorry I don’t remember you”

“I am very sorry too” said Edward wanting to howl with grief.

“Have we been friends long?”

“Some 6 years”

Alfred looked at him and then shook his head with a sad laugh.

“I cannot explain to you Mr. Drummond how odd it feels to have someone tell you they are your friend and yet you cannot remember them”

Edward bit the inside of his mouth to stop himself from crying, Alfred was looking at him with curiosity but no feeling, no love.

“Perhaps as hard as it is to have your best friend in the world not know who you are” he responded softly.

“I am sorry to have caused you this sadness sir” said Edward “they tell me my memories may come back but I do not know. I have lost a third of my life, tell me Mr. Drummond how does one deal with that?”

“I…do not know” said Edward sitting by the bed.

“Perhaps if you tell me about our friendship that would help. What do we like to do together?” asked Alfred.

“We er…like to talk of the court and politics and discuss the happenings of the day, we ride…we…” Edward choked on the words, how mundane, how useless it sounded. The love of his life reduced to discussions about politics for god sake.

“Politics….I do not care much for politics…at least I didn’t…”

No Edward wanted to say, you didn’t my darling, you only care now because of me, because you love me but he couldn’t say it so he just stared at Alfred who looked back at him.

“I wish I could remember” he said “you seem so sad Mr. Drummond”

A sob rose in Edward's throat, Alfred was looking at him with those beautiful eyes that had stared into his so many times soft with love but now there was nothing.

“I'm sorry I have to go” And he fled from the room unable to go on, his heart feeling as if it were being ripped from his chest.

At the foot of the stairs he met Alfred’s mother.

“You were right” he said weeping “it is too much, too hard; he doesn’t know me perhaps it is better
it stays that way”

Charlotte looked at him compassionately “it is Edward” she said “for both of you, live your life, have children, become the politician I know you will be and let Alfred live his”

“Promise me if he remembers that you will tell me”

“I will” said Charlotte “but Edward do not hold out hope for it”

Work, work would be his salvation! Florence was thankfully preoccupied with the impending birth of their child, their families were due to arrive the following week and her female friends had formed almost a guard around her from which men were excluded. They slept apart, Florence found sleep difficult and he pleaded a need to be awake for work to move to his dressing room.

He found excuses to stay at work late into the night, when he came home Florence as invariably asleep and he could go to his own bed, drinking until he eventually fell asleep. He supposed objectively at some point that the torment he was feeling would pass though how this would happen he did not know. He told himself it would be much worse if Alfred had died. At least he knew Alfred was still in this world and that gave him some meagre comfort. Nevertheless he felt he was not living, merely existing from one day to the next.

Over a week later, whilst leaving the Foreign Office he bumped into a familiar tall figure

“Prince Alexi” preoccupied as he was with his own troubles, he hadn’t given much thought to Alexi and whether he had seen Alfred.

“Why Mr. Drummond! How is Lord Alfred? I have meant to return to see him but with the ambassador ill, I have had to deputise and have had many calls on my time. I hoped that you would keep me informed but…..” He left it hanging but his meaning was clear and Edward felt shamed, Alexi had been so helpful to he and Alfred, he should have told him what had occurred

“Lord Alfred is recovering physically but his memory is…..” he stopped, even saying the words were difficult “he has lost many memories from his recent life and he does not remember me” he continued bleakly “I have decided therefore that I will not see him again, it is best that way”

Alexi gaped at him “but sir! Are you mad? Not see him? But why?”

“He has lost the memories of the last 7 years, he does not remember us even meeting let alone my marriage or the baby and…and… and his mother said….she said it was better he did not remember to spare him further grief”

“You let his mother convince you to stay away?”

“It is for the best”

Alexi grabbed Edwards arm and hustled him into a small side room “it is most certainly not for the best!”

“But”

“Sir you need to listen to me! You do not know why or how I came to be here and I wish to tell you
now. As you may have guessed I am like you and Lord Alfred and like you I also loved, his name
with grigori. As here, such love is also forbidden in Russia but we were so enamoured of each other
we became careless. Grogiri was a soldier, a member of an elite regient charged with guarding the
Royal Family. Members of his regiment found out what he was and believed it would bring
dishonour on them; they surprised us one night in my bedchamber and dragged him from my arms
and stabbed him to death in front of me” Alexi drew a deep shuddering breath and closed his eyes
while Edward gave a horrified gasp

“I have mourned him every day of my life since and I would sell my soul to the devil if it meant I
could have one more hour with him. Do not let Alfred’s mother deprive you of the man you love!
Go to him sir, help him remember, he deserves it and so do you! Let him make his choice in the full
knowledge of what he is to you. How can you give up so easily?”
In the Orangery

Chapter Summary

Fired up by Alexi, Edward returns to see Alfred to the displeasure of Alfred’s mother

Chapter Notes

No more sitting around crying, Edward is going back for his man!

Orangeries were like modern conservatories where wealthy people grew warm weather plants and kept fragile plants out of cold winds

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It was as if he’d been slapped in the face, Alexi was right! What on earth was he doing sitting around drinking and feeling sorry for himself and letting Alfred’s mother keep him away?

“By god sir you are right” said Edward shakily “what have I been thinking?”

“I do not know” said Alexi “but believe me sir whatever you have been thinking; you need to reconsider your actions!”

“I will” said Edward fervently “must urgently! Thank you sir, you are a good friend to Alfred and I”

Alexi smiled at him sadly “people like us, we need friends”

“We do” said Edward and then surprising both Alexi and himself, he put his arms around him and embraced him “Alfred and I are your very good friends to sir, do not forget it! If you ever need us, either of us, we will be there”

Alexi tightened his arms momentarily around Edward and then released them “thank you” he said “now you must excuse me, I have to attend a luncheon at the French embassy and find out the latest happenings in Paris” he shook his head “it does not look good for His Majesty”

Edward nodded “no indeed but he will not listen to anything Her Majesty says to him or advice from our embassy so” he shrugged his shoulders “matters will take their course. Good day to you, Your Highness” he said, and they parted.

Edward went for a walk, pacing around St James’ park. His instinct had been to rush immediately to Alfred but no, he needed to think. If Alfred’s mother was there she would most assuredly either try to keep him away or refuse to leave them alone together. He needed to go when she was out and he nodded to know when that was. Of course! Jones! He would send a note to him; he assumed he could read having been Sir Henry’s bat man and ask him to let him know when Alfred’s mother
would be out. He trusted Jones; he knew he and his wife understood. Returning to his office, he wrote a note

Jones

*I would like to visit Lord Alfred in private. Would you please notify me at the House the next time her Ladyship is out?*

*Yours cordially*

*Edward Drummond*

He sealed it and summoned a messenger; at last he was doing something!

Jones received the note and showed it to his wife.

""what do you think?" he said “the mistress did give orders Mr. Drummond was not to be admitted if she wasn’t here”

Phyllis shook her head “I believe she is wrong Daffyd, I told you that. It is so sad to see Master Alfred like this. It’s not right to not tell him of Mr Edward and what they are to each other and Daffyd, I am convinced one day he will remember and then what? How will he feel knowing it was kept from him?"

Daffyd nodded “you are right, I feel the same. The next time she goes out, I will summon Mr Drummond”

Two days passed before Daffyd and Phyllis were confident Alfred’s mother would be out for long enough to let Edward know. She was going to a luncheon at the Duke of Wellingtons which meant she would be gone for several hours at least. Jones scribbled a short note and sent it to Edward

In his office Edward had been on tenterhooks ever since he had received a reply from his note to Jones with one word on it “yes” which he took to mean they would summon him as soon as the coast was clear. Since then every time a messenger arrived in the office he had got his hopes up only to have them dashed each time

“A note for Mr. Drummond”

As always his heart beat faster as he tore it open and then *oh* his heart raced, it was from Jones “she is gone” it said

“I must go sir” he said to Lord Palmerston

“Is it your wife sir?” asked Palmerston with a smile “I know her time is close”

Edward stared at him momentarily confused, why would this be about Florence? he thought, he’d scarce given her a thought these last few weeks with his constant late nights at work and sleeping apart, he’d hardly seen her, on the other hand though it did give him a reason to go

“She has pains and it may be nothing but…”

“Of course sir, you must go at once”
Edward nodded and hurried off feeling somewhat guilty about using Florence as an excuse but there was only so much difficulty a man could manage at any given time he thought.

When he arrived at Alfred’s, Jones smiled at him.

“Lord Alfred is in the orangery sir”

“Thank you Jones”

Leaving his hat and coat with Jones, he made his way from the hallway through the drawing room, through to the library and out to the orangery where he and Alfred had been want to sit in the evenings enjoying the sunlight but sheltered from cool breezes.

He could see Alfred sat in a wicker chair by a low table with newspapers on it; he was dressed but his arm was still in a sling. His eyes were closed and Edward marvelled always at just how long and dark his eyelashes were when the rest of his hair, everywhere, thought Edward with a sudden rush of heat was so fair. His footsteps on the tiled floor must have disturbed Alfred and his eyes flickered open.

“Alfred” said Edward determined this time to awaken memories in him. “Mr. Drummond” Alfred smiled at him “it is good to see you”

“Edward” said Edward gently “my name is Edward”

“But do we….?” Alfred looked at him doubtfully, should he be using this man’s first name? was that not only for family and the most intimate friends?

“Yes we do” supplied Edward “we are very dear friends Alfred, very dear indeed and in private we always use each other’s names”

Alfred looked up at him and Edward just about restrained himself from dragging Alfred into his arms and kissing him till he remembered who he was and what they were to each other.

“Please sit Mr….Edward” and he smiled shyly.

“Thank you” Edward sat down and looked at him.

“How are you feeling?” he asked.

Alfred wrinkled his nose in a mannerism Edward knew, oh so well, “bored” he said with feeling “mama insists I am not well enough to leave the house and my arm keeps from doing many things I would want”

“Our mother has been very gravely worried” said Edward “as have we all”

“yes but none of you have tried to dress me as if I were a small child” said Alfred half laughing half cross “I had to be most insistent she send Jones to me instead”

Despite him Edward laughed “I would have liked to see that battle”

“she did not give up easily” said Alfred laughing with him and feeling suddenly oddly at peace; who was this man, his friend as he’d been told that he felt so comfortable and happy in his presence?
“Edward” he said “please tell me how we came to be friends. I know that I do not remember you but I feel strangely at ease with you and I am deeply saddened that I cannot remember someone who evidently has been such a large part of my life”

Edward swallowed, he wanted to cry at Alfred’s words but no there had been enough crying! Time to help Alfred remember

“I was Sir Robert Peel’s Private Secretary; do you know he became Prime Minister?”

Alfred nodded “so I have learned, a Tory! Oh sir I am sorry, I did not mean…” he trailed off embarrassed

Edward laughed “do not worry, we have had our disagreements on the issue many times but it does not stop us being friends. Anyway because of my job I came to the Palace many times with papers for the Queen and so we met”

Alfred was listening to him with rapt attention

“One day we were both present at a meeting between Her Majesty and Sir Robert when the Prince Consort spoke of the importance of science. It was agreed a soiree would be arranged to highlight the importance of science to the nation” he smiled “Her Majesty feared a room full of scientists would be rather dull and so asked you to suggest some artists” he paused; now this was where the conversation would become more difficult “you came down the stairs into the room holding Dash in your arms and smiling; I had never seen a more charming tableau” and he looked at Alfred directly hoping the meaning would convey itself

Alfred stared back at him, he could feel something tugging at the edge of his mind, a flash of a ballet, a man speaking Shakespeare, and he licked his lips

“Was there a play?” he asked

“Yes, yes! Othello, a man speaking of loving not wisely but too well, do you recall it?”

Edward leaned forward, his heart alive with hope, was he remembering?

“I…” Alfred shook his head trying to stop the memories that had flashed into his mind being washed away like writing in sand “I can see glimpses”

Edward wanted to sing for joy, he must carry on!

“And then later I came to the Palace after you had been out with Her Majesty, it had been a difficult day and you were trying to light a cheroot”

Alfred looked at him “and you had a tinderbox…” He could see Edward smiling at him and holding it out

“Yes!!!” Edward grabbed Alfred’s hand “you told me how well equipped I was”

Alfred laughed “did I? I believe I was right on that account” and then his eyes dropped to his hand being held by Edward and his voice changed

“You are married sir?”

“married??” and Edward looked down at his hand seeing the dull gold of his wedding band encircling his finger, it was such a part of him now that he didn’t even notice it but of course Alfred
would, how could he have been so stupid as not to remove it?

Alfred looked at him and Edward could see the recognition fading from his eyes; Alfred let go of his hand

“Thank you for coming to see me” he said “I am fatigued now and would like to rest”

“But”

“Goodbye Edward” and he closed his eyes

Edward hurried from the house cursing himself, how could he have forgotten to take his wedding ring off? Of course Alfred would see it, of course he would be confused! Well next time he would remember. He was rushing so fast, he forgot he had left his hat and coat at the house. It was not until he returned to the House that he remembered he’d left them behind and also that even though Alfred had asked him to go, he’d still called him Edward.

“Jones?”

“Yes m’lady?”

Alfred’s mother was holding Edward’s hat and coat in her arms “I found these on a chair in the hallway as I arrived back, what pray are they doing here?”

“I am so sorry madam” Jones heart beat fast “I forgot to hang them up, I will do it directly”

“I am not making myself clear Jones, what are Edward Drummond’s hat and coat doing here?”

“They are similar your ladyship but not...”

Charlotte held up her hand “spare me Jones, I am not a fool, they are Edward Drummond’s hat and coat. Has he been here? I would advise you not to lie”

Jones nodded “he has madam”

“And did he see Lord Alfred?”

“He did”

Charlotte drew in a breath; she should have known Edward would return eventually, she had to give him credit for his love for Alfred being so strong

“Where is Lord Alfred?”

“In the orangery madam”

“Very well and Jones? return these to Mr. Drummond” and she threw the hat and coat at Jones and stalked off to find Alfred in the Orangery

Her heart softened at the sight of him dozing and her resolve hardened. Her beautiful boy, her vulnerable child, always at risk from his own nature due to the stupid laws of the land. She would not let anything happen to him ever, she would protect him with her life and no one and certainly not
Edward Drummond was going to stop her

“Alfred?”

He stirred and yawned, “mama”

“How do you feel?”

“I am well mama though a little tired”

“And what have you been doing? Reading the papers I see”

“Yes I am reading of what has been happening; it still is very strange to read of people who I do not know or who were of no consequence under Lord Melbourne’s government rising to such prominence”

“Anything else?”

“No mama” for some reason that he didn’t understand, Alfred did not want to tell her Edward had been there. He sensed she would not approve and although he still did not understand the nature of his friendship with Edward, he knew it had been very important to him and if he could just remember all would be clear.

Looking at her son lie to her with his guileless blue eyes hardened Charlotte’s heart, and she said lightly

“I believe you need a change of air, we will return to Plas Newydd so you may fully recover”

Alfred frowned, he did not want to go to Plas Newydd that would be far from Edward and he knew, he just knew, he didn’t want that

“I would rather stay here mama” he said

“Nonsense! The fresh air will do you good, you look pale, you can return to London when you are recovered but now it is for the best that we leave”

“But mama”

“I wish to hear no more on the subject Alfred, we are going to Plas Newydd and that is final” and she swept out of the room

Chapter End Notes

will Edward follow them to Plas Newydd? and if he does, will he get past Charlotte?
Leaving London

Chapter Summary

Alfred’s mother is determined to keep them apart

Chapter Notes

This is only a short chapter and then things are going to get interesting as Edward goes to get his man!

Historical note - Jane Eyre was published in October 1847

Henry looked around in bewilderment at the boxes and trunks piled up in the hallway

“Jones what on earth is going on?” he asked

Jones avoided looking at him “her ladyship’s orders sir, she and Master Alfred are going to Plas Newydd”

Henry clamped his mouth shut to avoid saying anything he shouldn’t about his wife in front of a servant

“Where is her ladyship?” he asked

“In her bedroom sir”

Henry set off leaning on his stick, his stump was causing him pain today and he was feeling somewhat short of temper

“Charlotte?” he came into the bedroom “what is going on?”

“I’m taking Alfred to Plas Newydd; the change of scenery will do him good”

Henry knew his wife extremely well and he doubted this sudden move was not just prompted by a need for fresh air!

“What has happened?”

“Nothing” but charlotte would not meet his eyes

“Charlotte” said Henry warningly “do not lie to me”

Charlotte put down the jewellery case she had been looking through

“Edward was here”

Henry shrugged “so my dear? You did not really think he’d stay away did you?”
“He said he would! He said it was too difficult”

“Oh charlotte” said Henry exasperatedly “surely you did not think that would last! Edward loves him”

“Alfred lied to me about it”

“Did he now?”

“Yes he did, I found Edwards hat and coat here, he’d left them behind. Henry I cannot allow Alfred to lie to me. He does not know who Edward is or their relationship and it should stay that way, you know that it is for the best”

“Who is it best for? For you? For Alfred? For Edward?”

“For all of us! Henry, Edward’s wife is due to be brought to bed in less than a month, imagine Alfred’s heartbreak then and really Henry do you think Edward would continue to feel the same about Alfred once he’s a father? And let us not forget that Edward is also committing adultery, Henry nothing about this is right!”

Henry looked away, he knew objectively she was right but at the same time, he felt discomforted

“If Alfred remembers on his own Henry that is different but I will not have Edward here prompting him to remember things best left forgotten” she paused “Henry you know I am right”

Henry rubbed his nose and sighed “very well my dear, take Alfred to Plas Newydd but if he should remember Edward you must send word at once, do you hear me? At once!”

“Of course Henry”

He went back downstairs. He knew his wife and he doubted very much she would send word to Edward. He loved her determined spirit; only one woman in a thousand would have braved the frowns of Society and left their husband as she did. She was a rare creature and he would have fought a thousand duels for her. Nevertheless it did not make her easy to live with! No he needed a backup plan.

“Jones I hear Mr. Drummond left his hat and coat here, have they been returned to him yet?”

“No sir, I have been busy overseeing the packing, I was planning to go later”

“When you go perhaps you would deliver a note to him for me”

They exchanged an understanding look

“Of course sir”

At home, Edward was finding it hard to sit still, he was desperate to go and see Alfred again, he was sure he was on the cusp of remembering.

“Edward for the love of god please sit down” said Florence wearily. He’d been pleased to have him home early for once but his constant pacing was getting on her nerves, she felt very fat, very tired and her back was aching.

“Sorry my dear” he perched on the edge of the sofa and looked at her
“How are you feeling?”

“Uncomfortable and weary of this state”

It seemed thought Edward as Florence tried to get comfortable that pregnancy was not the happy state that he’d been taught it was. It was supposed to be what all women wanted but neither the queen or Florence seemed to be in the beatific state of calm serenity that paintings and books suggested they should be, he found it most puzzling

“can I do anything?” he asked

“Not really Edward”

He looked downcast and she softened, it was not his fault, well not completely, she felt in low spirits

“Perhaps you could read to me”

“Of course, what would you like me to read?”

“Gwendolyn sent me Jane Eyre, would you read me some of that please”

“Of course”

Edward picked up the novel, found the place Florence had marked and sitting down next to her began to read

Florence closed her eyes; Edward really did have the loveliest reading voice

Dimly she heard the doorbell ring and voices in the hallway outside before Edith came in and handed Edward a note

“My dear Drummond

It was so kind of you to visit Alfred today. This is to let you know that Charlotte feel a change of scenery would do him good and is taking him to Plas Newydd. Perhaps you could see him before he leaves? If not, I do hope that if circumstances allow, you can visit him there

With kind regards

Henry Paget

Edward clenched his fist to stop himself reacting. Henrys note although ostensibly a note thanking him for his visit was clearly a warning; Charlotte was taking Alfred away to Wales where Edward couldn’t get at him to talk to him and help him remember.

“Excuse me my dear” said Edward hoping he appeared calm as he certainly didn’t feel it “a note from the House, I must attend to the contents immediately”

Florence yawned “very well my dear I think I shall take a nap as I’m much fatigued”

Edward nodded and kissed her hand

“I shall return as soon as I am able”
Once outside the room, he took a deep breath, he should have known that Alfred’s mother would try and keep them separated. It wasn’t that he didn’t understand her fears, he did, but this was between him and Alfred and no one else. He was certain he was on the verge of remembering and he wasn’t going to let Alfred’s mother’s misguided intentions stop him.

It seemed as if another confrontation was inevitable and as he called for his hat and coat, he gathered his wits about him. He did not want to have to go into battle with Alfred’s mother but he would if he had too. He’d also prefer not to have to do this in front of Alfred but again if needs must he would.

As he hurried through the dusk towards Alfred’s house, he rehearsed the arguments he would make; ‘its for Alfred to choose’, ‘depriving him of memories was unethical’, ‘it could permanently damage his brain to not let him remember’, ‘they loved each other’ and honestly the way he was feeling, if none of them worked, he might very well just physically carry him out of the house and put him up in a hotel. He was tiring very rapidly of the complex mess his life had become; the 18 year old Edward Drummond with his plans and lists and dates to have achieved things by would have looked with consternation at the 25 year old Edward and wondered what on earth had happened. ‘Love’ said Edward to his 18 year old self ‘love happened and I wouldn’t change a thing about Alfred, but it does make life much more difficult’

As he rounded the corner he heard the sound of a carriage gathering speed across the cobbles and as it went past, he glimpsed blonde hair at the window and saw the Paget coat of arms and the door. He was too late; Alfred’s mother had taken him and left for Wales.
Edward wanted to slump to the floor in despair. He was too late, too late! As he stood there wondering what to do, he noticed the lights were still on at Alfred’s house, the entire household hadn’t gone then. He wondered, was it worth going to see who was there? Perhaps Henry had remained behind. He paused irresolutely and then setting his hat firmly on his head, he went up the steps to the front door.

“Mr Edward” Jones opened the door and immediately looked uncomfortable “I’m so sorry sir, Mr. Alfred isn’t home”

“I know” said Edward “I just saw him leave, I wondered if his lordship was at home?”

“He is sir; I’ll let him know you are here”

Edward waited in the library by the fire until he heard the sound of one heavy, one lighter footstep that signalled the arrival of Henry.

“Edward” he shook his hand “I am so very sorry that things have turned out like this”

“Could you not have stopped them sir?” asked Edward plaintively.

Henry sighed “Charlotte is a very determined woman, its one of the reasons I love her, and in this case she is utterly convinced that it is best for both of you to be apart”

“But why? Does she dislike me that much?”

“No of course not Edward, she has nothing against you personally”

“Aside from me being married” said Edward acerbically

“Well even you would admit that is far from ideal Edward” said Henry mildly; he did not want to upset him more than he already was “but it is not just that as you know, she is concerned for Alfred’s safety for both of you, you are breaking the law and the penalty is harsh!”

Edward sighed “I know that and if Alfred made a free choice never to see me again, I would be devastated but it would be his choice. At the moment that choice has been taken from him it is not right sir, you know it is not”

Henry sighed and rubbed his hands through his hair, he really did feel very torn “Can you go to Plas Newydd to see him” he asked

Edward gave a short laugh “I doubt her ladyship would admit me but even if she would I cannot, Florence is not far from her time now. It would be wrong of me to leave her”

“So he does care for her at least’ thought Henry, he was glad of that. He thought well of Edward and
while he did not necessarily think it was right for him to deceive his wife, he also understood the position he was in, and at least he did treat Florence well even if he could not love her.

“No it would not” said Henry “then perhaos I can make a suggestion? If you cannot go to Wales and Alfred I suspect will not be returning soon, why do you not write to him? Explain to him in your letter, slowly of course, what has passed between you. He may remember and return of his own accord, or you may need to go there once your wife has given birth”

“That is an excellent plan sir” said Edward suddenly feeling hopeful “I confess I find expressing myself with a pen easier. I can explain to Alfred over a number of letters what we are to each other”

“I just hope that it works” said Henry “I know you two truly love each other and whatever happens I would like it to be Alfred’s free choice”

They both stood and shook hands

“I wish you good luck” said Henry

“Thank you sir” said Edward

Back at home, Florence was resting and said that she would eat in her room. Poor Florence thought Edward, he hoped for many reasons that it would not be long before she had the baby.

After dinner, he sat down in his study with his ink, stylus and paper, how to convey to Alfred everything that had happened and all he wanted to say? Start at the beginning Edward he said to himself

My dear Alfred

I am sorry that I did not get a chance to say goodbye to you before you left for Plas Newydd. When we last spoke, we talked a little of memories that we shared and as I cannot be with you in person I thought I may continue this by letter.

You and I were both in attendance at a meeting between Her Majesty and Sir Robert Peel where she expressed concern about the weavers of Spitalfields. Sir Robert did not feel able to offer Parliamentary support and I suggested to her majesty that she should only wear Spitalfields silk. You could see that Sir Robert was perhaps not overwhelmingly supportive and quickly come to my aid, agreeing with me and adding that it would bring the matter to the public’s attention as nothing else could. I was most grateful for your help though I have to say Sir Robert was most displeased with me! Her Majesty had the idea of a ball where everyone would have costumes of Spitalfield weavers by the rich and influential. Has anyone told you how much you love to dance? how graceful you are? How elegant? Or indeed that you are Her Majesty’s favoured dance partner?

Her Majesty further decided that the ball would be fancy dress with a medieval theme possibly so that his Royal Highness the Prince Consort could for once wear a crown. Once again you came to my rescue as I had no notion of what to wear to a Fancy Dress ball at the Palace but you helped me with my costume. You suggested that we wear matching costumes as knights at arms to show, or so you said at the time, that we should match to show that Court and Parliament were in accord though I have come to believe since then that what you really wanted was in some way to show your feelings for me. I

The ball was such a splendid affair though Sir Robert rather sourly told me I was too easily
impressed by such things. I did not tell you at the time but we had a difficult time in Parliament over the Ball which Sir Robert defended heatedly even though he did not agree with it I remember you were much in demand as a partner and I tried always to dance next to you. You were also especially kind to Miss Coke who was rather heart broken over Prince Ernest who only had eyes for Harriet Sutherland. Watching you with her I felt melancholy; I did not yet know what good friends we were to become and I confess I was rather jealous of the ladies dancing with you and monopolising your time when I wanted to talk with you.

I left the room and came to stand outside by a painting, you followed me and quoted a poem by Keats, I can still remember it

“Oh what can ail thee knight at arms? Alone and palely loitering”

And you asked me why I was not in the ballroom delighting the damsels. I did not know what to say because your words seemed to carry extra meaning and so I asked you why you were not doing so either. You smiled at me and walked away. I think that was the first time I truly understand that our friendship was to be a special one.

I hope that this letter finds you well and that you write back soon

Yours Edward

He sealed it up and reached for a stamp. Tomorrow he would post it.

Plas Newydd

Alfred was cold, tired and his arm ached by the time they arrived. He was still not happy at his mother’s actions and he was confused by his thoughts about Edward. He could feel his memories of him were just there in the back of his mind somewhere hovering like moths trying to get to a flame. Their talk this morning had awakened not so much memories, although there were some, as much as a feeling! He knew this man, he brought him feelings of peace and security and happiness, or at least they had until he saw the wedding ring on his finger. Why did Edward, a married man, look at him the way he did? Why did he carry with him an air of such yearning? He needed to know and he sensed that only Edward could really help him.

His mother watched him anxiously, she could see he was in pain and his face was pale and drawn, and as she looked up at the house rearing up in the dark with only a few lights she wondered if she had after all done the right thing.....
Dear Alfred

Chapter Summary

Edward writes again to Alfred who is deeply frustrated at being at Plas Newydd

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

A week later

Dear Alfred

I hope that you are well and your arm is healing fast, it had not occurred to me stupidly that of course that would hinder you replying which is why I assume I have not heard from you

Edward chewed the end of the stylus, he really hoped that was the reason and not because Alfred still did not remember or that he did remember and wanted nothing to do with him or worst of all, he had become ill again. He would remain hopeful and send more letters

Nevertheless I will continue in the hope that even if you cannot reply, you are reading and it is helping. Not long after the ball, a tragedy befell Prince Albert; his father died and he had to return to Cobourg. I came to the Palace to convey the Governments condolences; I confess that at that time I was finding my life somewhat overwhelming and so I stepped out onto a balcony for some fresh air. I had not long been there when you joined me. We talked of how the Queen felt, you explained that the Queen wouldn’t accompany the prince to Cobourg because she had been in low spirits after the birth something which I did not really understand, she had secured an heir for the country, how could she not be happy? You smiled at me and said that “well I suppose we shall never understand the fairer sex will we?” I felt that you meant not just men generally but we two particularly.

The Queen’s continued to be “out of sorts” as you described it and Sir Robert was at his wits end to know what to do. Her Majesty became disinclined to leave the Palace or carry out any official duties while the prince was away. Eventually I turned to you for advice; Isambard Kingdom Brunel had completed his tunnel under the Thames and Sir Robert wanted Her Majesty to attend the opening. We met and talked of how difficult The Queen was finding the prince’s absence; you told me how hard when a person misses the person they care for greatly, and I that you were talking of me. It seemed to me very important that we found a time to talk but Buckingham Palace does not afford a man much privacy and nor would I have wanted such a conversation to take place in Parliament. Eventually however we had some luck or so I thought; I was dining at the palace, a gloomy affair with her majesty still so depressed, with the prince in Cobourg along with his brother and King Leopold, there were not other men at dinner and so when we withdrew we were alone. We helped ourselves to port and sat down in front of the fire; this was the chance I had been waiting for! Alas however Miss Coke came in looking for her copy of Chopin and you ever the gallant asked her to join us even though I could see by your face that you hoped she would not. Unfortunately she did not read the expression on your face and sat down eager to talk about Prince Ernst and so our chance was lost

Edward paused; he was fast approaching the time when he would have to explain to Alfred about
Florence and the engagement. He was fearful of writing about that because he was worried Alfred would immediately throw him aside as he feared he had the first time he heard of it.

Now my dear Alfred comes a part of this letter that is difficult to write and which you will find difficult to read. Nevertheless I must tell you of it as it is part of our story.

You noticed when I saw you that I wore a wedding ring. Several months before we met, I had become engaged to a young woman called Florence Kerr. It has always been my ambition to be a successful politician and as such it was always impressed on me that I would need a suitable wife. I had never given women much thought, I assumed I would marry as most men do and I also assumed at some point I would start to seek out their company and affections but I never did. I undertook the usual round of balls and luncheons quickly discovering that nearly all the young women put in my path were dull milksops seemingly lacking any wit or personality. Bluntly I found their company dull and made no effort to be agreeable; Florence was different that she pointed out my boorish behaviour and said that she was not interested in politics at all. It is hard to explain how refreshing that was. She seemed as good a woman as any to become my wife and I thought I loved her, though I know now that what I thought was love was not, though I did at least care for her.

And then Alfred I met you and I came to understand that I did not and would never love Florence. I did not want to tell you of my engagement partly because I was still confused by my feelings and partly because I feared it would ruin the special friendship that we had. I asked Florence to delay the wedding for 6 months to which she reluctantly agreed while I tried to work out what to do, she agreed albeit reluctantly but of course her father objected. I met him for lunch and he told me plainly that if I did not marry Florence he would sue me for breach of promise. It was a most uncomfortable lunch made one hundred times worse when, as I emerged, I saw you dashing up the steps of the club towards me. I would have given anything, anything, to have left that lunch 10 minutes later or for you to have airbed 10 minutes later but we did not and so we met on the steps. You looked at me so happily and my heart felt like stone as I explained to you why I was there. Your face fell; I could see I had hurt you very deeply and I hated myself.

For weeks after you could not bring yourself to talk to me, ignoring me, addressing remarks to others, scarcely looking at me. I understood the depth of your sadness because I felt it too. I felt as I was being buried alive by my future. However, a chance came for me to redeem myself when we had to accompany Her Majesty to France.

Initially despite my best efforts you would not speak to me but eventually you relented. The French court was somewhat freer than that of her majesty and we ended up spending much time together culminating in accompanying the prince consort on a walk through the forest. We came across a beautiful pool and his royal highness decided to take a swim, I do not know what came over me but I suggested that we join him. We disrobed and jumped in and Alfred you may be shocked to read that there in the pool we succumbed to urges that we had both I believe had for some time. To the outside world it looked like two friends playfully wrestling in the water but as we touched each other, our skin and bodies brushing together it felt like heaven and for the first time I understood who it as I truly loved and it was not the woman I was promised to.

Edward put down his pen that was enough for now; he wanted to give Alfred time to come to terms with what he had written.

Plas Newydd a few days later

“Alfred how are you feeling?” asked his mother

Alfred shrugged, he felt listless and weary. His arm was healing but his spirit still felt broken. His mother had talked to him of his life at the palace and his friendship with the Queen but he sensed she
was missing out details. It was enormously frustrating that he could not remember them for himself.

His mother sighed, more and more she was regretting bringing Alfred here. Perhaps she should take him back to London but no! Edward was there and more to the point, so was his wife and she was going to give birth any moment. She thought of the two letters from Edward concealed in the secret drawer in her writing desk. She was fortunate that she had intercepted Edwards’s first letter, the butler bringing her all the letters and she had recognised the London postmark on it. She could think of no one else who would be writing to Alfred other than Edward, anything from the palace would have come with an official envelope bearing the royal crest.

It was so difficult to know what to do and she found herself almost wishing that Alfred would remember about Edward on his own.

That night Alfred tossed and turned in his sleep, restless and dreaming. In his dream he was with Edward by a lake, it was a beautiful evening with the shadows lying long on the ground. Edward turned to him and kissed him and it was as if fire exploded in his heart. Just as he leaned up to put his arms around him, Edward turned and walked away. Alfred followed him but he found he couldn’t keep up, he ran and he ran but Edward was always just too far ahead, too out of reach. He cried out to him to stop but Edward kept on walking and then just as Alfred thought he would have to cease running Edward stopped and held out his arms. Alfred ran into them and they kissed and kissed. They fell to the ground and then Edward began to sink into the ground. Alfred tried to hang onto him but Edward just kept sinking as Alfred pulled at his arms in vain until eventually he’d disappeared and Alfred scrabbled at the earth trying to find him.

He woke with a sob; his heart ached from the sense of loss in his dream both of losing Edward but also because when he woke he couldn’t remember him. He wanted to punch the pillow with frustration. He shouldn’t be here in Wales, he should be in London talking to Edward and as soon as his arm was fully healed, he was leaving and there was nothing his mother could do to stop him!

London

Edward was woken roughly from his sleep by Edith

“Mr. Edward sir”

“whaaa??what?”

“The mistress sir, I think her pains have started”

Chapter End Notes

and so soon we will meet Edward’s baby or the drumling as it shall be known!
A new arrival

Chapter Summary

Florence and Edward welcome their new baby and there are developments at Plas Newydd

Chapter Notes

enter the drumling (for such is how I think of the baby Drummond)
apologies but I've never had a baby so forgive me if my description is unrealistic xx

“But it’s too soon!” Edward scrambled hurriedly into his clothes “Edith, her mother will not be here for another two days, the baby wasn’t meant to come for another 3 weeks”

“Babies don’t operate too timetables sir” said Edith

Now he was more awake, Edward could hear groans coming from Florence’s room

“Edith send for the doctor” said Edward hurrying into the bedroom “Florence my dear when did the pains start?”

“Edward” she reached out her hand “a few hours ago but I didn’t want to wake you in case it was a mistake”

He took it and looked at her anxiously as she gasped and leaned over “is it very painful?” he asked

She nodded “but I am sure it will not be worse than this Edward” she said bravely

Edward squeezed her hand not having the heart to tell her that he had stood outside listening as the queen gave birth, he knew it was going to get a lot worse.

Several hours later and Florence was groaning with pain with increased frequency; the doctor had arrived, examined her and said that there was still some time to go. At this Florence had gazed at him wild eyed

“How much longer doctor?”

“A few more hours at least I think Mrs. Drummond”

“A few more hours! There can’t be!”

“It takes longer than you think my dear” said Edward soothingly

“Be quiet Edward” snapped Florence; she had never felt anything like this pain before

“You must prepare yourself for the pain to intensify Mrs. Drummond” said the doctor gently
“**what?** It will get worse! I don’t want it to get worse; I can barely stand it now”

“*is there nothing you can give her doctor?*” asked Edward; he was holding Florence’s hand and she was squeezing it with increasing strength “*Florence my dear could you not grip quite so tightly? It is rather painful*”

“*Painful for you?!”* Florence glared at him “*you have no idea what pain is*” she stopped to cry out again “*if you have nothing helpful to say then be silent!*”

The doctor shook his head, he’d heard of this new idea of chloroform but he didn’t hold with it, god had ordained women should suffer during childbirth and it as unnatural to interfere with that

“I’m afraid not madam, you will just have to bear the pain and remember that at the end god willing you will have brought a new life into the world” and he raised his eyes piously to the ceiling

“That is easy for you to say” said Florence panting and groaning again as another wave of contractions hit her. Her hair was already sticking to her head with sweat and her nightgown had ridden up above her thighs. If she had thought about it she would have been horrified at men seeing her in this condition but as it was, she just wanted the pain to stop.

“Push madam” the doctor was between her legs and Edward was holding her hands as she screamed with effort

“You’re doing so well my dear” said Edward soothingly

Florence gritted her teeth; she swore that after this, Edward was never coming near her again if that was what she had to go through

“Nrrghhhh” she yelled as she pushed again “god”

“I can see the head madam” said the doctor “again!”

Florence could feel her strength failing but she bore down and pushed again

“One more should do it”

She took a deep breath, took a firm grasp of Edward’s hand ignoring his wince of pain and pushed again her eyes almost bursting with the effort

Edward had his eyes closed but as he heard the cry of a baby he opened them

“A girl” said the doctor sounding slightly deflated “a healthy girl”

“A girl” Florence began to cry “oh Edward we have a daughter”

The doctor wiped the baby down with a cloth and then wrapping it in a fresh shawl handed her to Florence

“*Your daughter madam*”

“Oh!” Florence took her in her arms “oh! Hello little one, hello. Mama is here, yes she is and papa too. Edward look isn’t she beautiful?”
Edward could feel his lip tremble as Florence held her up, she looked rather surprised, as if not sure what this strange new world was and then she yawned.

“May I hold her?” Edward’s voice was choked.

“Of course Edward, you are her father.”

Edward took her in his arms being careful to support her head as Florence instructed.

“Hello” he whispered “hello my darling girl” how little she was, how fragile and precious; his heart contracted with a love more powerful than anything he had ever felt since he had met Alfred. He could not quite believe that he and Florence had together made this tiny thing; he looked at Florence her hair still matted, exhausted and hollow eyed but glowing with happiness; he believed he would never come closer to loving her than he did at this moment.

“Thank you” he said the tears flowing down his cheeks “thank you, thank you! She is perfect.”

Plas Newydd

In the library at Plas Newydd Alfred was lying on the sofa with his eyes closed, his head was aching and he was so bored he could scream. His arm was much much better but still his mother fussed about him as he was an invalid. He had had about as much as he could stand!

She had even taken him to church that morning where the vicar had preached about the friendship between David and Jonathan. As he’d listened a dull painful throbbing had begun just above his eyes and had continued all day. It felt like someone had taken a hammer to the inside of his skull, as if his memories were trying to batter their way out. The wearer did not help, every since early afternoon it had been raining and now at 8pm the wind howled around the house throwing the droplets against the glass.

He rolled over on the sofa and stretched out his arm to see how it felt, as soon as he could stretch it without too much pain he was leaving. As he did so he dislodged a pile of books which fell on the floor. Sighing he rolled himself into a sitting position and picked them up turning them over and smiling; collection of the Greek classics, his father was a great admirer of Homer, yes there was even a copy of the Iliad in the original. Suddenly it was as if someone had turned a tap in his mind. He saw Edward and himself standing at the end of a gorge and saying

“I saw you reading the Iliad on the boat” and himself replying “not in the original I’m afraid”

He saw him following Edward down a slope as Edward explained his feelings towards Florence, felt himself briefly in Edwards arms as they hugged, felt Edwards hand in his as they danced a reel in the forest and then looking up into Edward’s eyes by a lake, and Edward looking back at him before they kissed.

He could hear himself breathing heavily and he bent forward resting his head on his knees as more and more memories flooded in.

Stroking Edwards chest in a boat house, Edward across the table from him at dinner his face dropping as he tried to stop him breaking his engagement, Edward dirty and still in shock from the near miss of being shot, leaning against the door in Edwards room as they kissed frantically.

He closed his eyes trying to calm his breathing as still more pictures cascaded into his brain.
Edward’s near hysterical face the night before his wedding, watching Edward marry as he gripped the spur in his picked till his hand bled, watching as Edward read out a poem which everyone thought was for his wife but which he knew was for him, Edwards anxiety ridden face in the carriage with his wife just back from honeymoon, Edwards eyes dark with jealousy as he danced with Florence and dilated with want as he tried to undo Alfred’s cravat in his study.

His house, his father handing him the key, his mother bustling around with a catalogue ordering furnishings, face down on soft white sheets, soaping Edwards back gently, seeing Edwards shock as he was told of his wife’s pregnancy, a tall man, Alexis? No Alexi! Almost propelling him from the room, Edward begging him not to leave, being kissed by Edward as first light crept across the room, throwing a book at Edward as he stormed out of the room and then riding, galloping fast across a park until there was a dog.

He was panting now, the vivid sights and sounds almost too much for him as they hurtled into his brain.

He didn’t know how long he remained there scarcely aware of the fire dying and the candles starting to go out as outside the storm blew stronger. Eventually though he opened his eyes, his headache was gone but his body was trembling at the realisation of all that had happened to him.

“Alfred?” he started at his mothers voice, he’d almost forgotten where he was “Alfred, my dear I was worried about you”

She came in and Alfred raised his head and looked at her and she reeled back her hand over her mouth at the expression on his face.

“Alfred?” she said tentatively, she had seen him angry, sad, despairing, but she had never seen a look like that on his face.

“Why did you not tell me mama?” he said his voice low and hard as if he were taking all his willpower to remain calm.

“Tell you what?” Asked charlotte bargaining for time

Alfred stood up looking down at her “do not play games with me mama, you know what! About Edward”

She looked away “there was nothing much to tell my dear, he is just a friend”

“Just a friend!” Alfred made an incoherent sound “mama don’t lie to me, I can remember it all”

She said nothing and he advanced towards her “why didn’t you tell me?” he said again “I am trying hard to understand why you would keep him from me”

“I will tell you!” charlotte glared at him, she was a Paget and she did not back “because he is wrong for you! Not because he is a man but because he is married, because he belongs to another, because every day you two risk your lives over a love that can never amount to anything!”

“You know I love him?”

“Yes I do Alfred but what good does it do? No good at all”

He looked at her again and then went over to the bell rope and tugged it
“Alfred what are you doing?”

When the butler entered, he said “Davies have my bags packed will you, I will leave at first light tomorrow”

“Very good sir” he intoned and left

“Alfred you can’t leave”

“Oh but I can mama and I’m going to”

“But your arm” she came over to him and laid her hand on it looking at him imploringly

“My arm is well enough to withstand a carriage to London”

“But Alfred”

“No mama, you have kept me from him long enough I am returning to London”
reunion

Chapter Summary

Edward and Florence's parents come to visit and Alfred and Edward are reunited

Chapter Notes

yes there are many romantic cliches here and no i dont regret any of them :D

Historical note: Queen Victoria likened women who breastfed do dairy cows and was so angry with her daughter Alice for doing so that she named one of the cows in the royal dairy Alice

2 days later

Edward stared down at his daughter, she was a lot less crumpled now and she had a thatch of dark hair and a very curious expression as if she were still considering what she made of this strange new world. He still couldn’t quite believe she was real, that he and Florence had made a whole new person that they were responsible for. Sadly as far as they were concerned as they would have preferred more time with just the three of them, Florence’s mother and father were arriving today as were his. He sighed; he really wasn’t looking forward to their coming. They would try to take over everything and he knew Florence was as apprehensive as he was. She was confined to bed as was the normal practice and at the moment nursing the baby herself, something they expected to be strongly challenged by her parents.

Also they hadn’t officially decided on a name for her; she wasn’t a boy and so they couldn’t name her Alfred and anyway something within Edward just didn’t want that, to call his children after Alfred. Alfred’s name was precious to him alone; he didn’t want to be shouting it at a 3 year old that wasn’t doing as they were told. Besides in his head he already knew what she was called, Blair after Blair Athol where he and Alfred had finally kissed. When (if his mind whispered but he shut it down) Alfred remembered about them, he would understand the significance. He expected a battle though, Blair was hardly a normal name for a baby girl but he was determined to stand his ground.

He went into Florence

“How are you this morning my dear?” he asked

“I am well Edward, very well” she said “I am just bored, I wish to get up and be with our daughter, not confined to this wretched bed”

“The doctor recommended at least 9 days rest my dear” he said placatingly “and besides imagine what your parents would say if they arrived and you were up. Your father would never forgive me”

“I know I know! And Edward? You must not let papa bully you! He likes his own way but you are my husband and a father now, and this is your house”
“Which your father paid for” he reminded her

“Papa cannot expect to have the final say over our lives just because he brought us a house as a wedding gift”

Edward laughed “I think my dear I shall leave you to explain that to him” and they smiled at each other. In the nursery, a determined wail started up

“She’s hungry again” said Florence “Edward if you would leave me please, I shall feed her and hope she goes back to sleep for a bit longer before they arr…..”

She was interrupted by the loud clanging on the doorbell followed by impatient knocking

“I think that hope is a vain one” said Edward ruefully “I shall go down and welcome them”

“Florence” her mother burst into the room a few minutes closely followed by Edward’s mother Frances and then they both stopped and recoiled in horror

“Florence!” said her mother again “surely you are not nursing the baby yourself?!!”

“I am mama” said Florence calmly

“But why? For god sake, can Edward not afford you a wet nurse? We will pay for one immediately”

“We can afford one mama” she said “I prefer to nurse her myself”

“But this is scandalous, Mrs Drummond pray tell me you agree with me”

“I do indeed!” said Frances “Florence, a refined lady does not feed her own child”

“Nevertheless” said Florence “I will nurse her”

“I am outraged at this behaviour Florence” said her mother “I shall speak to your father at once and to Edward as well”

“Mama” said Florence quietly “do you not wish to see your grand daughter?”

“I….” Caroline stopped “of course” she said “when you have finished what you are doing”

“Perhaps then mama you will send Edward to me”

She nodded and left the room; Frances’ eyes lingered more wistfully on the baby but she turned and followed Caroline out of the room. Florence leant back against the pillows and sighed, it was going to be a very long week!

There was a tap on the door and Edward’s voice

“Florence? Your mother said you wanted me?”

“Come in Edward” said Florence

He came in and walked over to the bed noting her expression

“Was it as bad as you thought?” he said
“Oh yes” said Florence shifting the baby to her other breast “I swear mama was about to liken me to a diary cow”

“I hope she has not upset you too much” said Edward, he admired Florence for taking this stand and he supported her in her right to nurse their baby as she saw fit. What did he know he thought? He didn’t know anything about babies, he wouldn’t ask Florence her opinion of the government’s foreign policy and he wouldn’t expect her to ask him what was best for babies.

“She has not Edward, as long as I know you support me then that is all that matters”

“I do” he said “wholeheartedly”

“Thank you” Florence smiled at him, she was indeed the most fortunate of women in her husband, he allowed her so much more freedom than any of her friends “I think she has finished, Edward would you like to take her downstairs to show them? I don’t want them all in here, I need to be calm in here so I can look after her properly”

“of course” he bent down and lifted the baby into his arms “come to papa darling one” he crooned and leant her up against his chest with her head resting on his shoulder, one hand rubbing her back, the other cupping her head.

“Be careful she does not vomit on you Edward” said Florence “you know how she does that”

“Perhaps I can persuade her to do it on one of our parents” he said and they both laughed

“Good god sir!” spluttered his father in law “what are you doing?” when Edward emerged into the drawing room with the baby

“I believe it is called ‘winding’” said Edward solemnly, laughing inside at the horrified expressions on their faces.

“But Edward! That is woman’s work” said his father

“I believe I can manage papa” said Edward gravely “it seems quite simple”

“Frances! Talk to your son, tell him to take the baby back to the nursery this instant”

“Your father is right Edward; it is not seemly for a man to do this”

In his arms the baby hiccupped and Edward grinned to himself, he knew what that meant

“Perhaps you are right mama” he said “Lady Lothian could you hold her a moment while I call for the nursemaid?”

“Of course Edward” said his mother in law taking the baby “that’s it come to grandma…urgh…oh my goodness…fetch me a cloth at once!” exclaimed lady Lothian horrified; just as Edward had expected, his daughter had vomited on his mother in law!

After that the day had gone from bad to worse culminating in an argument over dinner over the baby’s name

“Now what will you call her Edward? Victoria after the Queen?” said the Marques jovially
“No” said Edward “there are many Victoria’s, we hope to be more original”

“Caroline then after her grandmother?” said Edwards’s father with a nod to the Marques “Caroline Frances Drummond has quite a ring to it”

“Florence and I are not yet decided” said Edward firmly

“Oh come sir, she is two days old already, she must have a name” said Marques of Lothian “Albertina? Wilhelmina?”

“I think not sir” said Edward “we still have several days before the christening

“oh and on that who will stand sponsor?” asked his father eagerly

Edward could at least give them this “Sir Robert Peel, The Duchess of Sutherland and the Marques of Anglesey” at least he hoped Henry would, he hadn’t asked him yet, but he was sure he would accept

“Anglesey? That old rogue?” said the Marques of Lothian

“he is a hero of Waterloo sir” said Edward “remind me of your role in the battle?”

The Marques glared at him; he knew Edward knew full well he had not been at the battle.

Edward’s mother sending the tension continued with suggested names for the baby “Perhaps Georgiana” she said “or Edwina after you Edward”

Edward could stand it no longer

“She is to be called Blair, now if you will excuse me, I must check that Florence is resting” and he bowed and left the table leaving a hubbub of angry voices

“I’m sorry my dear” said Edward when he explained to her what had happened “I should have consulted you, the name has been in my mind for some time, an old Scottish name, original just like our daughter”

“Blair…” Florence tried it out “Blair Drummond, it is as good a name as any Edward, in fact I like it. She will stand out with that name just as she should”

Edward smiled feeling both relieved and as was often the case, slightly guilty about his deceptions.

“I feel I have had as much of our parents as I can stand my dear” he said “I will go for a walk. I need some fresh air. They can gather in the drawing room and agree what terrible children we are too them”

Florence laughed “indeed they can in fact I’m sure they’ll enjoy that very much”

“good night my dear” he said kissing her forehead wishing as always that things were different and that he could love her and not just be fond of her.

Edward’s walk took him as it always did past Alfred’s house. He had not had a reply to either of his letters or any news of Alfred at all for several weeks. In many ways he was glad he had had Blair to
distract him, it meant the ache in his chest at the absence of Alfred was bearable (just) but he did not know how much longer he could carry on without him. If he did not hear soon, he would have to go to Plas Newydd himself and stay until Alfred remembered, there was no other option.

As he walked it began to rain; he was without a proper waterproof coat but nothing would induce him to go back to the house for the time being.

For the last few weeks as he walked past the house it had been in darkness but tonight the lights were on, he caught his breath, could it be? But no he said to himself, it must be Henry at home. Nevertheless he looked in and then his breath caught in his throat, there walking across the drawing room was Alfred.

The rain was coming down harder now, making his vision blurry and dim but he saw Alfred turn and walk towards the window and then their eyes met, and oh god, Edward put his hand to his mouth, there was recognition in them, Alfred knew who he was. For a moment they stared wordlessly at each other, Edward outside, the rain now pouring down on him unheeded, Alfred inside lit by the soft glow of the candles, his hands against the glass and then he was running across the room and Edward was running along the side of the house to the front door. He bolted up the steps as Alfred opened the front door and then he was inside the hallway, kicking the door shut behind him and pulling Alfred into his arms. He was home, home at last.

For a long time they just stood there clutching each other tightly, Alfred’s head buried into Edward’s shoulder, Edward’s head resting on top of Alfred’s, his cheek against his hair.

“You came back” said Edward choking through tears “you remember me”

Muffled against his chest Alfred nodded “in church the priest talked of David and Jonathan and then I found a copy of the Iliad and suddenly everything flooded back”

Edward pulled back and bent down slightly cupping Alfred’s face in his hands “did my letters help?” he asked

“Letters? What letters?” said Alfred frowning “I received no letters”

“But I sent….?” Said Edward puzzled and then he realised, of course Alfred’s mother must have intercepted them

Alfred was looking at him anxiously and Edward decided to say no more, he would deal with it another time.

He brushed his lips against Alfred’s, tentatively at first, it felt as if it were the first time he was kissing him all over again. Alfred lips were warm and soft against his own cold ones and he wanted to cry with happiness at how at once they were both familiar and new to him.

Alfred put his hand on Edward’s neck and burrowed deeper into the kiss, sighing softly just the way Edward remembered, a little sigh that said “I love this, I love you”. Edward slid his arm down around Alfred’s waist and pulled him closer and Alfred shivered and broke away

“Edward” he said with concern “you are freezing and soaking wet”

Edward laughed “I don’t care” he said “I don’t care about anything except that I am here with you”

“You need to get out of those wet clothes” said Alfred “you will catch your death” and then his breath caught as he realised what he had said
Edward’s eyes darkened “I would very much like to be out of them” he said in a low voice, his forehead resting against Alfred’s “but are you well enough I mean your arm…”

“Is well enough Edward as you see” said Alfred his own voice rough edged “Edward I have missed you”

“and I you” Edward laughed again suddenly delirious with happiness that Alfred was here and his again; scarcely knowing what he was doing he swept him up in his arms

“Edward what are you doing?” said Alfred laughing in return “put me down”

“No I cannot be sure you can manage the arduous journey to the bedroom without my help”

“I can manage” said Alfred still laughing “Edward you ridiculous man put me down at once”

“I shall put you down” said Edward starting to climb the stairs with Alfred in his arms “when we reach the bed” and he carried on up the stairs
twinkle twinkle little star

Chapter Summary

Alfred and Edward are reunited but Edward needs to break the news of the birth of his daughter

Chapter Notes

so sorry its taken so long to update this! work has been mad and Ive been on holiday but here it is at last

notes
la petite mort or the little death was a euphemism for the male orgasm, peu des morts means many little deaths ;)
twinkle twinkle little star is an old nursery rhyme dating from the beginning of the 19th century
there were glass feeding bottles though in reality of course its highly unlikely that Edard would have been let loose on his own with a baby without being accompanied by a nursemaid but you know plot!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Once they had reached their bedroom (or so Edward always thought of it), Edward had laid Alfred down on the bed and just stood there looking down at him until Alfred had blushed and looked away

“Why are you staring at me like that Edward?” he asked

“Reassuring myself that you are here, that you remember me” replied Edward his chest constricting
“Alfred you cannot imagine….”

“Don’t think of it” said Alfred pulling him down “don’t think of it now, we are together and that’s all that matters”

Afterwards as they both lay there panting, he traced the outline of Alfred’s cheek with his hand; it felt like they had been apart forever.

Alfred snuggled into his arms “I fear I have missed many things being hidden away in Wales” he said “you will have to tell me all that has happened”

Edward tightened his arms around him “there is plenty of time for that later” he said wondering how to break the news that he was now a father “tell me, what made your mother decide you could return?”

Alfred laughed “she did not want me to come back but I couldn’t stay away from you one more
minute Edward once I knew what had happened”

“Then why did you not tell me at once you had returned?”

“I sent a note to Parliament but got no reply and as you know I am reluctant to send notes to your….house. I was planning to go to parliament tomorrow myself to find you”

Edward went cold, if he had done that, Alfred would have heard about the birth from his colleagues! thank god he had come past the house tonight, after the news of his engagement and then Florence’s pregnancy being broken in such abrupt ways, he could not have borne Alfred to have heard about Blair like that.

He rolled him up into his arms and kissed him “I missed you so much Alfred” he said “so so much” he decided it was not the time, if indeed it ever would be the time to tell Alfred would had passed between him and his mother or about the letters.

He looked at the clock and a shudder of alarm ran through him, he had stayed away too long, Florence might not enquire where he’d been but his parents certainly would!

But how was he supposed to leave this warm bed to go out into a cold rainy night when Alfred was in it soft, naked, utterly desirable and when they had been apart for so long? Thrusting aside his thoughts of what he should do he turned back to Alfred and pushing him down into the feather mattress kissed him harder as Alfred wound his arms around his neck and pushed up against him. They deserved this time after all that had happened.

When he arrived home some 2 hours later, his parents in law had left for the Lothian house in town and his mother was in bed, his father however was still up.

“Edward?” he came out of Edward’s study with a brandy in hand “I did not expect you would be gone so long”

Edward sighed inwardly; what he wanted to do was go to bed and hug the last few hours to himself, reliving his time with Alfred but it looked as if his father wanted to talk

“I found I needed a few hours to myself papa” he said “these weeks have been difficult”

His father winked at him “and of course it’s understandable that Florence cannot ‘attend to your needs’ shall we say at such a time”

Edward looked at him puzzled and then light dawned as he remembered the embarrassing talk they’d had before his wedding, his father thought he had been to a brothel. He opened his mouth to deny it, what kind of man did his father think he was? And then closed it; actually if his father thought he had been with a prostitute that was better than thinking he’d been with Alfred. So he tried to look sheepish instead

“I’m sorry papa”

“No need to apologise my boy, we men have needs do we not? Just don’t tell Lothian eh? I don’t think he’d like it though of course the rumours about him” and then he checked himself “but you do not need to hear those”

Hmmm thought Edward filing the information away for the moment, so there were rumours about Lothian were there? He sensed that there would at some point be a battle with his father in law and
he would need all his ammunition.

“I am rather tired papa; I would like to go to bed”

“Of course, la petite mort does make one rather sleepy” and he clapped him on the back

“Good night papa” said Edward heading towards the stairs thinking le petit mort? With Alfred it was definitely peu de morts

The next day not long after breakfast found Edward with Alfred’s father in the morning room at the House of Lords “I would like your advice sir and a favour if I may”

Henry raised his eyebrows “perhaps the advice first and then see if you still wish a favour of me”

Henry was relieved that Alfred’s memory had returned but he was troubled by the rift the last few weeks had wrought between Alfred and his mother. When she had returned to London she had sobbed out the story of what had happened on Henry’s shoulder

“He hates me” she wept “Henry you should have seen his face”

Henry managed to refrain from saying ‘I told you not to’; she did not need to hear that right at this moment

“He will come round charlotte” he said soothingly “give him time”

He hoped he was right, Alfred was slow to anger but when he was, it burned for a long while and he thought it would be sometime before charlotte was forgiven.

Edward cleared his throat “you may have heard but if you have not…Florence gave birth 3 days ago”

Henry could not stop a warm smile breaking out, he loved children and one of his biggest regrets for Alfred was that he would never be a father, well unless he suddenly married but Henry felt that would be most unwise, look at the pain it caused poor Edward Drummond

“Congratulations sir! And is it a boy or a girl?”

“A girl sir” Edward could not help smiling back, his precious tiny daughter already held such a place in his heart he did not know how to describe it

Henry shook his hand “I am delighted for you, delighted! A daughter is a great thing; ignore those who only value boys. I have the utmost respect for women, mark my words Edward, one day women will be seen as being as capable as men”

Edward smiled inwardly; Henry really did have some extraordinary ideas!

“Thank you, however of course with all that has happened Alfred does not know and…..”

He looked mutely at Henry

“And you don’t know how to tell him” finished Henry soberly

Edward shook his head “no, he has feared the birth for a long time, he believes it will change my feelings towards him, that he will become peripheral to my life”
Henry looked at him squarely “and will he?”

“Of course not! Alfred means everything to me”

Henry nodded “you will have to show him that he is part of your life still Edward, all of your life including your daughter’s if of course he wants that, which he may not, but you will not know until you tell him. My advice is to tell him as soon as you can and then if he is amenable, for him to meet her”

Edward smiled at him “thank you sir for your advice, I will do as you suggest”

“And do you still wish a favour from me?”

Edward smiled broadly “I do sir, would you consent to be her godfather? I owe you so much and I cannot think of a better man to help guide her and even more myself in life”

“Why sir, you do me a great honour” smiled Henry “I would be delighted”

The next day, Edward called on Alfred; finding him in his study surrounded by catalogues and samples

“What are these?” asked Edward as he kissed him

“I am thinking of redecorating, I find these rooms are no longer to my taste” said Alfred lightly

“Ah” said Edward softly thinking so this was how he was going to punish his mother, he was going to redecorate the rooms she had so lovingly done for him “I find them rather pleasing myself”

Alfred pushed the catalogues aside “perhaps I may wait, Edward it is lovely to see you but you look very serious, is something amiss”

Edward could feel his heart pounding “Alfred I have something to tell you”

The fear sprang into Alfred’s eyes immediately “I can see by your face that it is not good news”

“I do not know if it is or not” he said, he sat opposite Alfred and took his hands “my love” he said gently “while you were away, Florence…that is to say she…Alfred I have a daughter”

Alfred tried to pull his hands away but Edward held them firm “you knew this was coming Alfred” he said quietly “and I am sorry that it makes you sad”

Alfred looked down, his breathing shallow, Edward was right, of course he had known it was coming but that did not make it easier, he swallowed

“You daughter, she is healthy?”

“She is” Edward still held his hands

“Does she have a name?”

“She does but Alfred I would like you to meet her”

At that Alfred started shaking his head trying hard to tug his hands away but Edward held them even tighter
“please Alfred” he stopped aware that what he was going to say would sound almost insane but he carried on “I wish that you and I could have children together, that we could live together as husbands and wives do, that we could have a family of our own but we cannot and as we cannot have our own children but I would like her to be as a daughter to you too”

Alfred looked away, he was moved by Edward’s words, not quite able to believe that Edward had had the same thoughts he himself had had in the middle of the night when he couldn’t sleep and burned for Edward raging against a world that would not let them be together.

“Please” said Edward again seeing Alfred softening

“Very well” said Alfred “but only with you Edward not with her there too, I could not bear it”

Edward nodded “I understand” and he drew Alfred to him and kissed him again “it shall be as you ask”

“You’re taking Blair to see Lord Alfred tomorrow?” said Florence when Edward spoke to her after dinner later that day “can you not wait until I am allowed to be up so I may come to? I would like to express my good wishes to him now he is recovered”

“He is still not up to seeing more than one person at a time my dear” replied Edward feeling sad that Florence had only good thoughts towards Alfred whilst he understandably did not feel the same

“And is Blair not a person?” she asked smiling

“Well” said Edward grinning “she is, but a very small one and I think he could manage”

“Yes but can you manage Edward?” said Florence “I think that is more the question!”

“Of course” replied Edward sounding more confident than he felt

The next day Edward took the carriage to Alfred’s with Blair in her little travel cot. Florence and Edith had tried to insist Edith came to but Edward refused

“It is only for an hour” he said “I can manage”

They both looked disbelieving but had ensured the carriage was packed with extra clothes and a glass feeding bottle

Edward put the feeding bottle in the cot and carried it up the stairs and rang the bell, the door was opened by Phyllis

“Oh Mr. Edward sir and look! Who is this?”

“My daughter” said Edward proudly

“Oh look at her, still asleep, we mustn’t wake her, would you like to leave her with me while you and the master talk?”

“No” Edward shook his head “I have brought her to meet Lord Alfred”

“Ah” Phyllis nodded “he’s in the orangery sir”
“Thank you” Edward squared his shoulders looked down at Blair and made his way into the orangery, he could see Alfred in the far corner and he put the cot down on the table by the door and approached him

“Alfred?”

Edward came to him and put his arms around him

“Edward”

Edward could feel Alfred was trembling “you are shaking my love, what is wrong?”

“I do not think I can do this” he said “see the child you made with...with...with…..her”

Edward stroked his back “I know it is difficult” he said “please my love try, for me”

Alfred rested his head against Edwards shoulder for a moment and then nodded “very well”

Edward took his hand and squeezed it “come with me”

They walked over to the cot, Alfred dropping back hesitantly but before they got to it, there was a wail, and then another

“Ah she’s awake” said Edward needlessly as the wails became louder, he let go of Alfred’s hand and went over to the cot and reached in

“Papa is here” he crooned scooping her up “come to papa darling girl” and he rested her against his shoulder, his hand cupping the back of her head, the other supporting her under her nappy. Her wails did not stop but Edward carried her over to Alfred anyway

Alfred’s breath caught in his throat at the sight of Edward with his tiny daughter. She was so small his hand covered the whole of the back of her head but he was so gentle with her. His eyes shone with pride and love for her but, Alfred realised, a different kind of love to the love that shone in his eyes when he looked at Alfred.

“Alfred” said Edward “I would like you to meet my daughter, Blair, Blair this is Alfred, I want you to love him as much as you love your papa”

“Blair?” Alfred looked at him “after?”

Edward nodded “so every time I say her name I will think of us”

Alfred make a choked noise “let me see her properly” he said

Edward eased her away from his shoulder so he could see her face “here she is”

Alfred looked at her wonderingly and touched her cheek “she looks like you Edward”

“Do you think so?” Edward looked at her “I think so to but you know I may be biased”

Alfred smiled “as maybe I…..she is beautiful”

“Isn’t she?”

“She is” Alfred looked at Edward “congratulations” he said softly “sincerely Edward, I am so proud of you”
Edward blinked back the tears in his eyes “thank you and I meant what I said Alfred, I want her to love you as much as loves me”

Alfred smiled “she could never love me as much as she will love her papa but then I could never love anyone as much as you either”

They looked at each other sharing the understanding that Alfred’s fears were not as they were and that their love for each other would always remain intact no matter what happened in the world around them.

The moment was shattered by some very loud and determined wailing from Blair

“Edward I believe she needs feeding” said Alfred

“Oh” said Edward “I was given a bottle, could you get it for me please?”

Alfred fetched the glass bottle and Edward settled in the chair to feed her, unfortunately it soon became clear that whatever the knack was to using the bottle, Edward didn’t have it. Blair yelled and screamed and the milk dribbled from her lips. Edward looked helplessly at Alfred

“I don’t know why she won’t take it” he said as her cries became ear splitting

Alfred laughed “give her here” he said and he sat in the chair with her in his arms “and the bottle”, he raised his elbow so she was propped up and held the bottle to her lips with the other hand; at once Blair began to suck contently

“But…” Edward looked at him in astonishment “Alfred how do you know how to do that?”

“Edward have you seen the size of my family? How many nephews and nieces do you think I have? I learned how to do this years ago, it’s saved many a family picnic from being ruined by crying babies” and he smiled at him, gently rocking Blair as he did so and starting to sing to her “twinkle twinkle little star…”

Edward’s heart bounced in his chest as he watched Alfred singing to his daughter, Blair’s eyes were fixed intently on Alfred’s face as she sucked from the glass bottle. If only the two of them could live together with Blair and be a family together he thought but he knew that could never be.

Chapter End Notes

the next time Blair is christened and some meetings happen that will be very important in part 3

the christening will be the end of part 2
preparing for the christening

Chapter Summary

Alfred offers Edward the use of their house for the christening party (which is turning out to be somewhat larger than expected) and an unexpected visitor arrives

Chapter Notes

I meant this to be the last chapter but it got far too long already so it will b the second to last before Part 3 is embarked on :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Lord Alfred has offered us the use of his house for the christening party my dear” said Edward as he rocked Blair in his arms

“How kind of him” said Florence “and I’m so delighted he loved little Blair, she beamed at her daughter “but then how could anyone not?”

“He was very good with her but then of course he does come from an enormous family” he hadn’t actually told Florence he’d been unable to feed Blair and Alfred had had to do it or how he’d wanted to cry as Alfred had sang to her and Blair had looked at him and at the end when he’d stroked her cheek she’d determinedly gripped his thumb.

“He does indeed” said Florence “it is such a terrible shame that he continues to be in love with someone he can’t have Edward, he should marry and have children. I’m sure he would be a wonderful father”

“I’m sure he would too” said Edward sadly for he was sad that there would never be a little Alfred or Alfreda; how he would have loved his children and Alfred’s to have played together but alas it was not to be

“Well perhaps one day he may fall in love with someone else and change his mind” said Florence

“Perhaps” said Edward thinking ‘no no no’

He had been surprised but pleased when Alfred had made the offer the day after he’d taken Blair to see him. They’d been lying in bed, facing each other; Edward’s hand gently stroking Alfred’s back as Alfred curved himself around him, their legs inter twined

“Edward would you” he hesitated “would you like to hold the christening party here?”

“Here?!” said Edward in astonishment “in our house?”

“Well yes, I mean your house may be” he paused delicately “perhaps too bijou for such a party?”
Edward continued to look at him in surprise, he was right, their house was really too small to accommodate many people comfortably but on the other hand to bring Florence here? the only previous time had not gone well

“You would not feel awkward Alfred?” he asked “you know that on such an occasion I would have to spend most of my time with Flo…my wife”

“I know” said Alfred “but I can always regard you longingly from across the room as we use too when we first met” and he laughed

“Alfred are you sure?” said Edward doubtfully

“I am my love; my accident has made me see things in a different light. Whatever of yours I can share in, even if it is as a spectator, I will because we do not know what is around the corner do we?”

Edward shook his head “no we do not and if you are sure Alfred, then I accept most gratefully”

Alfred smiled at him “then I will begin to make the arrangements”

“You know I have asked your father to be Blair’s god father?” said Edward “I hope you do not object my love, I would have asked you but I did not know how you would react and he has been so kind to me”

Alfred smiled “dearest papa, I am sure he was thrilled”

“He was and…you do not mind?”

“Mind? Why should I mind?” asked Alfred puzzled

“That I did not ask you”

“Edward, I very much hope that Blair and I will be friends but godfather is a special role and one I am mayhap not worthy of”

“Not worthy of?” Edward sat up “why do you say that Alfred?! There would be no one better”

“I do not forget how we parted Edward, before my accident” said Alfred sadly “yes all that came back too. I am sorry for my behaviour that night”

“you have nothing to apologise for Alfred, nothing!” said Edward fiercely “I had become to consumed by my own needs and wishes, congratulating myself on how well I was doing managing both you and my marriage, not seeing how hard it was for you to see me go back to her every time we were together. It is I who should say sorry Alfred and I do from the bottom of my heart”

Alfred smiled at him “then we are both sorry Edward and need speak no more about it” and then he rolled on top of him regarding him with interest

“What else happened while I was ill?” he asked

“Well Alexi and I became friends, you know it was him who convinced me too….who ermm…..” he stopped, he had meant to say ‘who convinced me not to give up on you when your mother had told me I should’ but he did not want to Alfred to think worse of his mother than he already did

Alfred was looking at him puzzled

“Who convinced you to what?” he asked
“Convinced me that you would get better” said Edward kissing him “and he was right” and then his face grew troubled “he also told me more of his history, Alfred did you know what happened to his” he paused, how should he describe Grigory to Alfred? It was the same relationship they had but friend was laughably inadequate and lover suggested something far to transient “to his Achilles?” he finished softly

“No he did not” said Alfred recognising the reference at once, “I knew that he was like us, his love was discovered and he was sent away”

“Ah” said Edward softly “it was more than that” and he held Alfred tightly as he recounted what Alexi has told him

“Killed? Edward that is dreadful, dreadful!” Edward felt him shudder “poor Alexi! No wonder he understands what we go through. Edward you must promise me that if you ever fear we are discovered that you must leave me, no!” he held up his hand “I will not hear a word against it! Edward I could bear anything in this world, anything except that you were no longer in it. Poor Alexi I wonder how he lives everyday knowing he will never see his love again”

“I do not know” said Edward knowing that now was not the time to argue with Alfred over the wheres and whyfors of what would happen if they should be discovered “I do not know” he repeated holding him tightly

“You want to invite all these people?” Edward looked askance at the invitation list in front of him, he’d been envisaging just a quiet affair with family and a few friends but it seemed he was much mistaken

Florence nodded smiling “I do”

“It seems to be half of London my dear” Edward laughed nervously as the names in front of him spooled on and on

“Nonsense Edward” Florence plucked the list from his hand “it is family, friends, colleagues of yours and people that will help with your career. It is hardly half of London as you put it”

“Help with my career?” Edward realised he’d stopped being that interested in his career the moment he heard Alfred was unconscious; suddenly nothing that had been important before seemed to matter to him now

“Yes my dear, you’re a father now and hopefully there will be others after Blair” she dimpled at him “and besides you are a man of great abilities Edward, it is important for the country that you make the most of them”

“Mmmm” said Edward noncommittally suddenly having a flash of his future where Florence hosted parties and dinners for all the important people in the land urging him ever onwards up a ladder he understood he was no longer that bothered about climbing. He also hadn’t missed that reference to more children and he groaned internally, he’d become used, very used, to sleeping alone and not having those twice weekly couplings and now it seemed Florence wished to return to them

“Besides lord Alfred has a fine large house and we should make the most of it! Now are you happy with this list? Do you wish to include anyone else?”

“Err no” said Edward thinking he’d rather remove people but he was wise enough not to argue and besides, one person, two, twenty, a hundred made no difference to him as long as Alfred was there.
Alfred was in his element organising the christening party. It was now only a few weeks to Christmas and he planned a festive theme influenced by the Prince Consort’s Germanic customs. His connections at the Palace enabled him access to the finest caterers and florists; Edward and little Blair deserved only the best as did his father. As Alfred had correctly assumed his father was delighted to be asked to be a godparent but deeply saddened at the rift between Alfred and his mother. He had tried to discuss it with him

“She was only doing what she thought was best for you Alfred”

“She wanted to keep Edward and I apart papa, even though she knows how I love him”

“You couldn’t remember him Alfred, she thought it would be less painful for you if perhaps you did not remember again”

“It was my decision to make papa, no one else’s”

“She loves you Alfred, she was only doing what she thought was right”

but Alfred’s mouth was set in the same stubborn line he’d had since a small child when he’d insisted he could ride his pony without the use of a training bridle. Henry remembered watching him fall off repeatedly and get back on again, each time his little face more determined than the last. There was no arguing with him in such a mood; Henry just hoped for everyone’s sake there would be no scene at the christening.

The day of the christening dawned bright, clear and cold. Florence and Edward were dressed in their morning dress and little Blair was wrapped in the Lothian antique christening gown. It would have been customary for them to have used the Drummond christening gown, but Edward’s parents had graciously waved that aside. Edward was beginning to have a feeling that his parents were deferring to the Marquis of Lothian just a bit too much.

In the church, Blair slept soundly in Florence’s arms all the way through the service. When the time came for them to step up to the font, Edward positioned himself so that every time he looked up he could see Alfred. Next to him stood Henry, Harriet Sutherland and Sir Robert Peel. Edward had greeted the latter most warmly at the church when he had arrived with Lady Peel and their son William; it had been a long time since he had seen his old mentor and he had missed his gruff good sense.

In the congregation Alexi was standing between Alfred and his mother. Sadly there seemed no possibility of forgiveness as they both stared stonily ahead looking if only they knew it thought Alexi looking from one to the other almost exactly alike. He cast a quick look at Alfred to see how he was managing but he seemed quite serene at least with regards to the christening. He had called on Alexi to thank him for all his help after the accident

“You are the truest of friends sir, if there is ever anything Edward or I can do for you, all you have to do is ask”

And to offer his condolences about Grigory

“It is unspeakable that you had to suffer so, I only hope that you are able to find happiness again”
Up at the font, Henry, Harriet and Sir Robert were promising to fulfil their role as godparents in the eyes of God and then there was a loud indignant “waaaaaaaah” as the priest poured water onto Blair’s head waking her up.

“Blair Caroline Frances Drummond I baptize you in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.”

Everyone bowed their head and said “Amen” and then the service was over and Edward was leading Florence and Blair to their carriage and on to the party at Alfred’s.

“Is that the door?” said Phyillis looking up from where she was busy placing the last of the pine wreaths over the mantelpiece “it is much too early for them to have finished the service”

Daffydd put down the candleticks he was carrying and went over to the front door, pulled it open and stopped dead, his mouth open in astonishment.

“Lord Septimus! I thought you were still abroad with the army”

“Jones” Septimus beamed at him “you have not changed a bit”

“neither have you sir” and indeed he thought he hadn’t, Septimus the seventh and youngest Paget looked extraordinarily like Alfred except with brown eyes rather than blue “they are all at the christening”

“ah yes papa mentioned it in his last letter” he stepped over the threshold “I will come in and wait, it will be good to surprise them all”

“I am sure they will be very surprised sir, very surprised indeed”

Chapter End Notes

yes its time to deploy Septimus the best fictional brother in the world!
Septimus wondered through the house waiting for Alfred to return. So this was papa’s grand plan to keep Alfred safe then he thought, and like all of papa’s doings, there were no half measures. The house was very elegant he mused, very Alfred but then mama had decorated it and she knew Alfred so well, or at least he thought she had known him well; he still couldn’t understand what possessed her to interfere with things as she had.

His father had written to him telling him what had happened; fortunately being Master of Ordnance he could send letters securely and with great speed to his son. Through them Septimus had come to know of Alfred’s doings, his relationship with Edward though his father was careful not to write anything incriminating (Septimus was the only one of Alfred’s brothers who knew for sure of Alfred’s ‘leanings’ as his parents called them) of the accident and the aftermath. In his last letter he had written of the break between Alfred and his mother and urged Septimus to return if at all possible to try and heal the rift between them.

“Alfred listens to you Septimus, he knows you understand him” he had written “please, if you can, come home and help me”

How could Septimus refuse such a request?

He was also curious to see this Edward Drummond. He had known about Alfred since he had seen him out riding with George at Plas Newydd one day; he had been fishing in the stream and he’d heard Alfred and George’s horses, heard them stop and then seen Alfred reach over to hold George’s hand and seen the look on George’s face as he’d raised it to his lips and kissed it. He hadn’t quite understood what it meant then but he’d heard Alfred crying in the night when George had gone to be married and he understood that it was because George had gone. As he’d grown older he began to understand that Alfred wasn’t like him, he found women excellent company but he did not want to bed them. Septimus on the other hand took after his father, he adored women and had broken numerous hearts in London, Wales and wherever the army was stationed. It had never occurred to
him though that Alfred might form a lasting relationship with another man, he’d expected him to remain alone with visits to places that accommodated men of his needs should his urges become too much, or that he would marry and visit places that accommodated them. The idea that he might love another man baffled Septimus but then he thought ruefully, he had never been in love himself so what would he know? The fact that Drummond was married was to Septimus of no consequence plenty of men married women they didn’t love in his experience and he had comforted many a lonely wife, however he wondered about Edward’s wife, had she truly no idea of her husband’s real tastes? Could a man hide his nature that well? Or was she like many women of their class, brought up in ignorance and innocence of the ways of the world?

Alfred had left the church almost directly the service had finished to get back to the house to welcome Edward, Blair and of course her when they arrived.

He hurried through the front door handing his coat and hat to Daffyd who coughed delicately and said

“There is a visitor sir”

“A visitor? Today? It’s really not convenient for me to see anyone at the moment Jones” said Alfred frowning and then he heard a very familiar voice say

“I’m dashed sorry to be such an inconvenience Alfred”

“Septimus!” Alfred gave a cry of delight as his younger brother came over and they hugged “I thought you were still with the army”

“I have some leave owed” said Septimus “and of course papa sent me word about your accident; I wanted to see how you were and came as soon as I was allowed to leave the regiment” he did not tell Alfred of how his father had asked him to return to try and heal the rift between Alfred and his mother

“Well our party will be merrier now you are here” smiled Alfred “it is very good to see you”

Septimus smiled back and then his eyes grew concerned “and you are well now?” he asked

“I am” said Alfred “I am very well”

“And your” he scratched his head “forgive me I do not even begin to know how to describe your liaison with Mr. Drummond”

“Is none of you business Septimus” said Alfred gently but firmly “the less you know the better just in case anything should happen”

“You know I am on your side Alfred” said Septimus equally gently, not offended by his brothers response, he knew how dangerous it was for him

“I know” said Alfred smiling at him sadly “and I am grateful, I just would not want you to be become embroiled in anything unnecessary”

Their conversation was interrupted by a knock at the door and then voices interspaced with wailing; Edward, Florence and Blair had arrived

Septimus watched Alfred instantly compose his face into a polite mask
'What a way to live’ he thought, ‘forever dissembling’

“Mrs Drummond” said Alfred fighting back as ever the feelings of jealousy that swept through him
Florence held out her hand, deftly supporting Blair with her other arm and Alfred had no choice but to take it as she regarded him warmly “I cannot tell you how happy I am to see you looking so well Lord Alfred” she said “Edward was so worried about you after your accident weren’t you Edward darling?”
Septimus noted Alfred’ jaw tighten but he said smoothly “thank you for your good wishes Mrs. Drummond and I am delighted to see you fully recovered from your confinement; may I introduce my brother Septimus?”
Florence turned to Septimus who bowed over her hand, looked into her eyes as he raised his head and almost stepped backwards. It had not occurred to him that Mrs Drummond might be beautiful. Her hair was not gold like Alfred’s but of a paler blonde which with her pale blue eyes and flawless skin made her seem fragile and delicate. She was tall though not as tall as her husband and when she smiled at him, dimples appeared in her cheeks
“I am delighted to make your acquaintance lord Septimus” she said “Lord Alfred is such a good friend to my husband”
Septimus felt anger rise unexpectedly within him, such a good friend indeed, obviously she had no idea what was really going on. It seemed beyond unfair to him that such a woman, beautiful, charming and caring should be married to a man who preferred well, his brother!
“And this is Mr Drummond” said Alfred his voice almost unnaturally flat thought Septimus and Edward held out his hand for Septimus to shake. He could see why Alfred would find him attractive; he was indeed objectively a very handsome man.
“Lord Septimus” he said “I am very pleased to meet you. Your father has told me much about you” and he smiled at Septimus a huge happy smile that made it almost impossible for Septimus to remain angry with him
“Mr Drummond” said Septimus politely “I hope for your sake he only told of the good things” Edward laughed “and this must be your daughter” he added not wanting to feel he would like this Edward Drummond
“Yes” replied Florence proudly holding her up so Septimus could see her “she has her father eyes don’t you think?” and she smiled at Edward
“But the rest of her beauty belongs to her mother” said Septimus gallantly
“Ah you have your brother’s charm” laughed Florence
Just then the sound of more voices could be heard
“The other guests are arriving” said Alfred “perhaps you’d like to go through to the drawing room ready to greet them Mrs Drummond?”
“But of course lord Alfred, Edward are you ready?” and she made her way through the hallway
“Of course my dear” said Edward following her casting a longing look at Alfred which did not go
Among the throng of arriving guests, Edward spotted Alexi looking somewhat lost and he hurried over.

“Prince Alexi” Edward beamed at him “I am so very pleased you could come”

“It was so kind of you to invite me” said Alexi warmly.

“Florence, you remember Prince Alexi Leonov from the Russian embassy” said Edward.

Florence laughed “I do indeed; we met while you were out riding one day with Lord Alfred”

Alexi clicked his heels and bowed “I am flattered you remember madam”

“I believe you made a great impression on Lady Gwendolyn” said Florence.

“Prince Alexi perhaps I could introduce you Sir Robert peel our former Prime Minister” said Edward quickly anxious to intervene before Florence got ideas about trying to pair off Gwendolyn with Alexi. That was the absolute last thing he needed!

“It would be a great pleasure to meet him” said Alexi eagerly “I am a great admirer of his work”

“Come then” said Edward leaving Florence to greet more of their guests and he led Alexi over to where Sir Robert was standing with his wife talking to Alfred’s father.

“Sir Robert, Lady Peel may I introduce prince Alexi Leonov to you, Prince Leonov is attached to the Russian embassy”

Alexi bowed to them all.

“Prince Alexi how good to see you” said Henry “Alexi and Alfred have become great friends, indeed Alexi was with Alfred when he had his accident”

“I have heard what a great support you were at that time” said Sir Robert “I’m delighted to make your acquaintance”

“And I yours” said Alexi bowing again.

“Papa” a young man with black hair and brown eyes appeared at Peel’s elbow “have you seen…” and then he stopped looking wide eyed at Alexi

“Prince Alexi allow me to introduce my son, William, William this is Prince Alexi from the Russian embassy”

“Your servant sir” said William offering his hand.

“Likewise” said Alexi feeling an echo of a sensation he had never thought to feel again as he took it.

“Have you been in London long?” asked William his eyes flicking quickly up to Alexi’s and then sliding shyly away.

“Some 7 months” said Alexi his heart fluttering in his chest.
“Ah…” there was a silence broken by Edward who was watching them both closely

“Alexi I would like you to meet lord Alfred’s brother Septimus”

“I would be pleased to” said Alexi struggling to drag his eyes away from William “it was a pleasure to meet you all” he said and then he turned to follow Edward his heart pounding, was it possible that his heart was not dead after all?

After several hours Alfred felt in great need of a cheroot, the party was going very well with guests mingling and talking, enjoying the fine food and exclaiming over the décor. Blair had been extremely well behaved until her baby patience had worn thin and she began to express her displeasure at so many people cooing over her with determined yells. Florence had taken her away for feeding and was with his mother upstairs. He saw an opportunity to slip outside and sought Edwards eye in the crowd, there he was talking with Sir Robert again; Alfred smiled, dear Edward he really missed his old mentor. As if by instinct Edward knew Alfred was looking at him and he glanced over and Alfred indicated the terrace with a slight tilt of his head. Edward nodded imperceptibly and Alfred slipped out, he knew Edward would join him soon

Sure enough a few minutes later Edward arrived

“Lord Alfred” he said carefully in case anyone should over hear and then he came closer to him

“Alfred” he whispered

Alfred smiled at him, his eyes sparkling “I don’t suppose you have a tinder box with you do you?”

Edward grinned that perfect boyish grin that melted Alfred’s heart every single time “I never go anywhere without my tinder box” he said and he lit Alfred’s cheroot and they stood side by side looking out over the garden

He had not expected this thought Alfred, that first time he had seen Edward nearly 7 years ago now, not expected he would find within him this love and a contentment that only came from being with him.

“Edward” he said and stopped, sometimes he could not find the words to express how he felt. Edward stepped closer to him

“I know” he said quietly because he did know, he knew he filled Alfred’s heart with joy just as he filled his and he knew now that would never change, no matter what happened the light between them would never go out. With all that had passed since they met; the long build up to their full understanding, that soul flaming first kiss, his marriage, their first night together when he had wanted to die from sheer bliss, Florence’s’ pregnancy, their quarrels, Alfred’s accident, the birth of Blair, their love still stood firm, binding them together like two trees who had been planted apart but over time had grown towards each other so that their branches and leaves inter twined.

He put his hand on the balustrade and Alfred put his next to it and they interlaced their little fingers together turning their heads to look at each other

“How do I love thee” whispered Edward “let me count the ways”

And they stood side by side watching as the winter sun cast its last few shadows over the earth

End of part 2
Chapter End Notes

and so part 2 is done

and part 3 will begin soonish though i may have a little break to give my brain time to recharge and feed the plot bunnies
Part 3 - Summer 1848

Chapter Summary

Hello and welcome to part 3 :D its now 6 months on from the end of part 2

Florence is starting to wonder if her life is as it should be while Henry frets over Alfred and his mother and Septimus examines his feelings

Chapter Notes

sorry for the small amount of alfred and edward in this but actually they are the most fine of everyone at the moment :D and I need to update on where everyone is for you know plot!

1848 was tumultuous year in Europe with uprisings and riots in many countries. go read, its a fascinating time!

Florence stared out of the window of the nursery, the unsatisfied feeling she had nagging away at her.

Behind her, Blair was sitting propped up on the chair, supported by cushions; she could mostly sit unaided though occasionally she would slide sideways with a surprised look on her face. Florence adored her daughter, the way she would look at her intently as she sang to her, the way her fat little fingers would grab for anything shiny that Florence wore. She was the most incredible thing in her life and the time spent with her was the happiest of her days.

However, although Blair brought her much joy, the rest of her life she was starting to feel was not turning out as she had hoped. In particular she was concerned that Edward appeared to be in no hurry to resume their marital relations. At first she was grateful, the birth and the sudden change to her life that being a mother had meant had left her feeling permanently exhausted while her body had been sore and tender for a while. She’d listened to her married friends with children talk about how their husbands had pestered to be allowed to resume relations in the bed chamber before they were ready and had felt profoundly grateful for her kind and gentle Edward who had insisted on sleeping in his dressing room to allow her to rest. However 6 months had now passed, she felt fit and well and had begun to think of a brother or sister for little Blair, such a thing would not be possible while she and Edward slept apart.

Of course she had to remember it had been an extremely busy time for Edward. The problems in France which had been simmering for some time had finely come to a head. In February, political meetings and gathering were already banned in France so as Edward had explained to her, men began to meet at political banquets instead to discuss their rising dissatisfaction with the many injustices that remained within French society. When the banquets were also outlawed, crowds of Parisians flocked to the streets, erected barricades and fought with the municipal guards. The Prime Minister Guizot resigned and the people marched on the ministry of foreign affairs, the officer in charge ordered the crowd to withdraw but they refused. A frightened soldier accidentally fired a shot
and other soldiers panicked began shooting too. By the time the carnage was over 52 people had been killed. Louis Philippe in fear of his life had abdicated and fled to Britain. However France was only one of a number of countries were there had been uprisings Sicily, the German States, Denmark, the Hapsburg Empire and Hungary. Edward worked through the night with Lord Palmerston as they struggled to manage the impact of these revolts and how to ensure that similar uprising did not spread to the UK.

She sighed, she would have to tackle Edward about this extremely delicate subject and she tried to quell the thought nagging in her mind, was Edward having his needs met elsewhere?

In Ciros Edward, Alfred, William Peel and Alexi were lunching together.  
“Russia remains stable Alexi?” asked Edward “no sign as yet of any difficulties from the people?”  
“None” said Alexi “his imperial majesty Nicholas retains a tight grip on power, and I believe the people know he acts in their best interest”  
Alfred looked sideways at Edward, he personally believed Nicholas 1 was a repressive and somewhat stupid autocrat but he would never have said so publicly.  
“How strange to think her majesty could have married his son Alexander” he said lightly “think of how mighty the Anglo Russian Empire would have been”  
“I do not think her majesty could have resided in this country and been tsarina of Russian” said Alexi “and I do not believe anyone would have preferred the king of Hanover installed as a regent here instead”  
“Indeed not” responded William with a shudder and a shy smile at Alexi “and is her majesty quite recovered from the birth of Princess Louise, Alfred?”  
“She is” replied Alfred “as you know she always finds her confinements frustrating but she is back to work with vigour”  
“That is good to know” said William.  

Afterwards they strolled in the park, Edward and Alfred dropping behind Alexi and William who walked together absorbed in each other  
“I am so pleased to see Alexi so happy” said Alfred “he deserves it so much”  
“He does” said Edward “though I confess I had no idea William was…was…well as we are”  
Alfred hid a smile, it had been obvious to him and he’d only met the man a handful of times but then he grew serious “do you think Sir Robert knows Edward?”  
“I am not sure” said Edward frowning “I think it unlikely”  
“Ah” said Alfred changing the subject “tell me Edward, how is Blair? It seems such a long time since I have seen her”  
Edward laughed “it was not 5 days ago at your family picnic Alfred”  
“5 days is a long time” Alfred returned laughing “she seemed to enjoy it so”  
“She did” said Edward fondly “I am so glad she has your father as a god parent and so can join in with all the innumerable children in your family Alfred”  
“And” Alfred hesitated, “Florence?” he was trying so hard to say her name without grimacing “does she not wish for more children Edward, do YOU not wish for more children?”  
Edward sighed “I do but….?”  
“But that would mean a resumption of that which you find unpleasant” said Alfred blankly  
“It would” said Edward “I do not know if I can do it”  
Alfred said nothing but squeezed his arm sympathetically. He really felt there was nothing he could say that would help especially as he would much rather Edward never shared Florence’s’ bed again.

In his office in Whitehall, Henry frowned over the dispatches he was receiving about the situation in Europe. He sincerely hoped that Europe was not again on the brink of war, he had hoped after Napoleon had been defeated that Europe might enter a long period of peace but alas it seemed not to
be. He was equally concerned with war on the domestic front; despite both his and Septimus’ best efforts, Alfred’s anger with his mother remained very strong. Septimus had reported back a conversation he and Alfred had had.

“Mother is so unhappy Alfred, why can you not see she just wanted what was best for you?”
“No Septimus, she wanted what was best for her” Alfred had replied vehemently “no need to worry about me bringing shame on the family”
“Alfred! That is completely unfair” said Septimus “you know that mama and papa do not judge what you are”
“They have no right to do so anyway” said Alfred furiously “what I am as if I am somehow defective”
“Alfred you are not as other men” said Septimus firmly “that doesn’t make you defective but I makes you different and as you well know, dangerously so! Mama and papa have done all they can t help you and keep you safe, mama does not deserve this treatment from you”

But Alfred remained stubborn, all he could think of was how terrible it would have been if he had never remembered Edward but that Edward remembered him, how Edward would have had to live every day with the memories of their love while he, Alfred would have been in happy ignorance.

He was glad at least that he had managed to have Septimus seconded to the war office meaning he could stay in London. As he grew older he liked to have his family around him as much as possible and in his eye that now included little Blair who he included along with her mother in as many family activities as he could. He felt very sorry for Florence, she was a beautiful and charming young woman; it was a thousand pities that Edward had not gone though with calling off the engagement. If only he had known then what was happening he could have intervened, he was not afraid of Lothian and would have got the man to back down, but as it was they were where they were and had to make the best of it.

Septimus too was brooding, he loved his brother and wanted him to be happy but he felt he was completely wrong headed about their mother. He was also finding it hard not to be angry with him and Edward Drummond for deceiving Edward’s wife which was an entirely new outlook for him. He himself had cuckolded a number of husbands and never given it more than a fleeting thought. If men could not satisfy their wives and their wives made it clear they were amenable to him doing it instead then why not? Everyone was happy. He’d always been careful never to promise anything, he certainly never spoken of love, for him it had been a purely physical experience. Florence Drummond had changed that. His father in his role as god parent had invited her and Blair to several Paget family gatherings along with Edward. He saw how she loved her husband and it ground away at him that he loved Alfred and that her love for him was in vain. She was beautiful, charming and intelligent, she deserved so much better than the luke warm affection she received from Drummond. Could she really be so ignorant that she did not realise how what she was receiving fell so far short of the love she deserved or were women brought up to believe that kindness and affection was the best they could hope for from a husband?

Edward arrived home late, after lunch he had returned to his office to find a telegram from Paris, really the invention of the telegraph was a most wondrous thing! News which would have taken days to reach the government now took minutes. There had been further uprisings in Paris with thousands of people killed or injured. He and Palmerston had met late into the night with colleagues to discuss how to respond and recommendations to make to her majesty.

“Edward?” Florence’s voice came from the drawing room, Edward sighed internally, he wanted nothing so much as to have a whiskey and go to bed but he knew with a pang of guilt he really had been neglecting Florence lately

“I thought you would have been in bed by now my dear” he said crossing to her and kissing her
cheek
“No I wanted to wait up for you; it feels so long since I have seen you for more than a few moments at a time”
“I know” as always Edward felt sad that he could not be a better husband to Florence, she did deserve better from him he thought even if he did not love her “I am sorry my dear, there has been more bad news from France”
“More bad news Edward?” said Florence anxiously
“Yes, it seems there have been huge riots and many people are dead or injured, order has been restored but for how long, no one knows”
“That is terrible Edward, so many people dying, so much violence, I worry for our daughter and what world she will grow up in” said Florence sadly
Blair, Edward felt his heart turn over with love “let us go and see her my dear” said Edward holding out his hand “I feel it would soothe me”

They climbed the stairs to the nursery and peered into her cradle. She was asleep on her front, her little nappied bottom stuck up in the air, her face turned to one side and a little velveteen rabbit next to her.
Edward bent down and breathed in her baby scene, it never failed to make him feel better
“I still cannot believe we made something so beautiful” he said staring down at her
“Nor I” said Florence reaching in to pull the blanket over her, she stole a glance at Edward who was looking down at their daughter with a look of pure love
“Edward” she said gathering her courage “I would like another baby, please, be with me tonight” and she slid her hand along the cot to grasp his fingers in hers.
marital relations

Chapter Summary

Florence wants her and Edward's sex life to resume and seeks advice from Charlotte, Alfred and Edward have a difficult conversation

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Edward froze as Florence took his hand, he couldn’t, not just like that, he had to prepare himself for their marital relations usually by retiring somewhere private and thinking about Alfred.

“I am rather tired my dear” he said and he saw the disappointment flare in her eyes and dropped his gaze ashamed at how he had to live his life.

“Perhaps tomorrow” he said “when I am less fatigued”

Florence nodded sadly “tomorrow” she said

Alas tomorrow never seemed to come, there was always a reason, Edward was too tired, or he had to work late. After a further 2 weeks of frustration, Florence could stand it no longer; she decided she would speak to him the moment he arrived home from work

“Edward” she came out into the hallway as he was hanging up his coat

“I had thought you would be asleep my dear” he said “it is very late”

Florence bit down the retort she wanted to make ‘thought or hoped?’

“How was your day?” she asked solicitously

“Tiring” said Edward yawning

“As always” said Florence trying hard not to sound irritated but honestly when did he ever not come home and say that?

Edward said nothing but just looked at her

“Edward I would like you to be with me tonight” said Florence softly determined to say what she meant too tiredness or not “it is over two weeks since we discussed this and still you have not returned to our bed”

“But…” and he stopped, he could think of no more excuse to make

“please Edward” said Florence softly feeling at once humiliated at having to ask for what the world had led her to believe, men were born to do

Edward closed his eyes feeling wretched; either he refused her causing her even more pain and rejection, or he tried to do his marital duty which frankly he wasn’t sure he would be able to manage. Perhaps if he were able to this night, at least it would be over with he thought. He nodded and
squeezing her hand led her to the bedroom.

Later in his bed Edward lay staring into the dark, he should have listened to himself he thought bitterly, what an utter disaster the night had proved to be. Despite his best efforts, he had been unable to have sex with Florence, his body simply refused to respond. No matter how many memories of Alfred he conjured up to arose himself, it was not Alfred’s hard body in his arms but Florence’s soft feminine one. Worse Florence had tried to help by touching him there where only Alfred touched him and without thinking he had knocked her hand away. The hurt in her eyes had been terrible to see and he had instantly apologised but he knew that for a second or two he had betrayed how he felt. Florence had of course said that it didn’t matter and she shouldn’t have pressed him as he had told her he was tired and had had a long day but that only made him feel worse. He had been foolish to hope that he and Florence could live together as friends he thought bleakly, it was obvious that that would not be possible.

Alone in her bed Florence also lay staring into the darkness. She had not mistaken the look in Edward’s eyes when she took his hand, fear, sadness, shame, was there something wrong with her that he did not want to be intimate with her? Had becoming a mother made her unattractive to him? Or was it something worse, was Edward finding satisfaction elsewhere? She did not want to think this was the case but she also prided herself on not ignoring the unpalatable. Edward was a man, men had needs, and they were not being met by her so they must be being met elsewhere. Or he was ill in some way and had not told her because he did not want to alarm her. All these thought raced around her brain and she sighed, she wished she could discuss this with someone, her own mother was quite out of the question, Gwendolyn was far too silly and her other married friends far too staid. Suddenly an idea came to her; perhaps she could talk to Alfred’s mother? She and Henry Paget had been so kind and welcoming, including her and Blair in many of the activities of their (vast) family and Florence had found her excellent company. And of course there had been the huge scandal of her divorce so she could marry Henry; Lady Paget was clearly a woman who knew the ways of the world. The more she thought of it, the more she thought it an excellent plan. She would send a note in the morning.

“Florence my dear” Charlotte beamed at her “you are looking most becoming this morning and Blair, my goodness how she grows in only a few days. I swear she seems different every time I see her”

Florence smiled back but Charlotte could see dark shows under her eyes

“You look a little tired my dear, one of the servants will take Blair and you and I will take tea in the shade of the willow tree and you will tell me what is wrong”

They sat in the shade of the tree and Charlotte poured the tea, handed Florence her cup and said

“Now tell me my dear what troubles you?”

Florence opened her mouth to speak but all at once her nose began to fizz and tears came into her eyes, now she was here she felt ridiculous and ugly, a woman whose husband did not want to lay with her

Charlotte patted her hand “take all the time you need” she said gently

“I would like to ask your advice Lady Anglesey” she said “about Edward”
Charlottes nodded but said nothing encouraging Florence to continue

“Since Blair was born we have…that is to say we have not….we sleep separately still”

“Ahhhh” said Charlotte softly

“Last night we tried….it has been some considerable time you see and Edward he could….he could not….“ she stopped, blushing

Charlotte took her hand and squeezed it

“It is not unknown for men to be unable to perform shall we say” she said kindly

“I thought perhaps there were some things I could do to help?” she looked at Charlotte “things that perhaps I may not know about”

Charlotte looked at her not quite understanding and then it dawned on her; she was asking her how she could help Edward become aroused.

“There are some things” said Charlotte cautiously feeling her way through this most difficult conversation “but first you should talk to Edward about this”

“I cannot” said Florence sadly “he seems so distant to me” she hesitated “I wonder if perhaps there is another….that he finds me no longer pleasing” she stopped her heart thumping, now she had said it out loud, she could not hide her emotions and tears spilled down her cheeks “he must be getting his needs met by another woman” she sobbed “he is a man, how could he go without coupling for over 6 months?”

Rage flared in Charlotte, how she longed to tell Florence the truth, that there was no other woman but there was another man and that there was nothing wrong with her at all.

“Listen to me my dear” Charlotte gripped her hand “there is nothing wrong with you, you are beautiful and kind and charming and I do not believe Edward is seeing another women”

“Then why can he not…..”

“Would you like me to ask Henry to talk with him? Find out what is bothering him? I think such things are best resolved by men between themselves”

Florence nodded tearfully “I would be very grateful. I would much rather than have to mention it to my father. He would not react well if he believed Edward was seeing another”

Charlotte patted her hand “then I will do so, now let us bring Blair out into the sunshine, I have a new nursery rhyme to sing to her”

Florence smiled at her gratefully “yes that would be most enjoyable”

After Florence had gone, Charlotte sent a note to Henry saying she had something to discuss with him at dinner and could they dine à deux? and then calling for her parasol and pelisse, she summoned the carriage. She was going to see Alfred and cared not two hoots that he was at the palace.

In the Queens drawing room, Alfred sat playing cards with Harriet, Miss Coke (soon to be Mrs Spencer Stanhope), Emma Portman, & the Queen. A page entered and bowed
“Lady Anglesey is here your majesty”

“Lady Anglesey?” said Victoria “were we expecting her?”

The page shook his head “I believe not your majesty, she has asked if he may speak with Lord Alfred most urgently”

Alfred went red “I am sorry your majesty” he said bowing and then to the page “tell my mother that I am otherwise engaged”

“Nonsense lord Alfred” said Victoria “we can spare you for your mother, escort her ladyship to the crimson drawing room”

The page withdrew and a frowning Alfred made his way to the crimson drawing room inwardly cursing his mother. What on earth had possessed her to come to the palace he wondered? They had barely spoken in months and, (although he would not admit it) he missed her greatly, however, she had made Edward suffer and that was not acceptable.

Following the page to the daring room, charlotte took several deep breaths. Her estrangement from Alfred was devastating to her but she still believed she had done the right thing. She entered the room to see Alfred standing by the unlit fire place, his arms folded

“Alfred” she smiled hoping to see a smile in return but there was nothing

“Mama” he said “what brings you here? I assume something urgent”

So there was to be no relenting she thought

“Something urgent indeed” she said “it concerns Edward”

Now she saw she had his full attention

“Edward?” he said coming across the room to stand in front of her “what is it?”

“Come and sit by me please” she said “I am not speaking to you while you glower over me”

Alfred reluctantly perched on the sofa

“Tell me” he said his eyes anxious “he is not hurt is he?”

“No he is not” said charlotte “but Alfred I fear he may be in trouble soon if he does not take steps within his marriage”

Alfred’s blue eyes immediately clouded over at the mention of Edward being married

Charlotte carried on “Florence came to see me, it seems that Edward has not lain with her since Blair was born”

“And I am meant to mind about that?” asked Alfred ironically

“You should if it means Florence suspects he is seeing another woman”

“She suspects that?” said Alfred “I confess I am surprised to hear it”

“She does and Alfred I believe that if the situation is not resolved, she will talk to her father”
“Her father?” now she really had Alfred’s attention

“Yes, do you honestly think Lothian would stand by if he thought Edward was having an affair? The queen and the prince have set new standards around marital fidelity; Lothian wouldn’t rest until he found out the truth”

Alfred put his head in his hands “she really believes he’s seeing another woman?”

“She can think of no other explanation for Edwards’s reluctance to sleep with her” said charlotte “Alfred you love him I know but you are also his friend, you need to talk to him”

“I??” Alfred sprang to his feet “mama you cannot mean it, to ask me to tell Edward he must sleep with flo…with her”

“Alfred if you do not I will be forced to ask your father to discuss it with him; I believe it would be far better for Edward to hear it from you”

Alfred stared at her with wide eyes, feeling his body shaking “I can’t” he said “mama I can’t”

“Alfred have you ever thought how it must for Edward?” said his mother quietly “you are lucky my dearest, you have only known what it is to lay with someone you love, I have known it” she paused “differently. And so does Edward as does Florence, no you will hear her name” she said as Alfred flinched “Edward does not love her, he loves you but for his sake, for both your sakes, you must tell him to resume marital relations. There must be no suspicion of his true nature or yours”

Alfred sat still as stone, the only sign of his emotions his trembling hands

“I know it will not be easy” she said taking his icy cold hands in hers “but Alfred it is too dangerous for you, for both of you. Florence must be able to put down Edwards lack of interest to fatigue and worry for her after the birth, nothing more”

Alfred nodded slowly “you are right” he said bleakly “there is no other way”

Charlotte shook her head “I am afraid there is not”

Alfred took a long breath “thank you for coming to see me mama” he said

“You’re my son Alfred, I love you, despite what you think of me, and I wish you to be happy”

Alfred looked at her “goodbye mama” he said quietly “and thank you”

Edward arrived in Alfred’s bedchamber, his heart already lightened at the mere prospect of being with Alfred. He was trying desperately to put last nights unfortunate events outs of his mind.

“Alfred” he pulled him into his arms “I have missed you”

Alfred retuned the hug, clinging to him fiercely

“Why Alfred” said Edward stroking his hair “it seems you have missed me too”

“I have” said Alfred his voice muffled “and I need to speak with you”

“That suggests something serious has happened” aid Edward undoing his cravat and flinging his jacket on the chair
“It has” said Alfred “your wife came to see my mother this morning”

At that Edward stilled the movement he’d been making to take off his shoes

“Your mother?”

“Yes, it seems Florence is concerned about your erm night time activities or perhaps lack of them would be more accurate”

Edward sat like a statue breathing hard

“Florence talked to your mother of our relations?” he asked hardly able to believe it

“She did”

Edward looked down, “what did she say?” he asked barely audible

“She believes you are seeing another woman”

Edward’s head snapped up “she does?”

Alfred couldn’t meet his eyes “yes and mama is worried that if thing between the two of you do not erm resume, that Florence will tell her father of her concerns”

Edward’s heart was pounding “are you saying that I need too…….”

“I am Edward” Alfred came and took his hand “her father wouldn’t rest until he found the truth, Florence needs to believe that you are faithful to her”

“You, you of all people telling me that I should…” he shook his head “Alfred I cannot”

“you must my dearest” said Alfred “god knows I don’t want you to, every night you are with her and not me, I burn with jealousy but Edward that is nothing compared to what would happen if we were exposed, if you were exposed, I cannot see that there is a choice”

Chapter End Notes

next time; alfred, alexi and william try to cheer Edward up….they deserve some fun!
a short break

Chapter Summary

Alfred and Edward are able to get away for a break with William and Alexi and Edward considers if there is a way out of his predicament

Chapter Notes

Before Drayton Manor was a theme park (I know!) it was the country estate of the Peel family https://houseandheritage.org/2017/10/27/drayton-manor/

However resuming relations was easier said than done. Edward was embarrassed and angry at Florence for consulting Alfred’s mother and at himself for being unable to manage what should be, he told himself a simple task, to couple with Florence as he had before. Alfred tried to talk to him but that was also difficult as Florence was simply too emotive a subject between them.

“Edward” Alfred was lying with Edward’s head on his chest stroking his hair “I must ask, how are things with you and your wife?”

He felt Edward tense in his arms “they are…acceptable” he said

“Oh Edward” Alfred kissed the top of his head “you are a terrible liar”

“On the contrary” said Edward sadly “I believe dissembling is one of my most potent abilities”; he always felt melancholy when he recalled how he’d once prided himself on his honesty and now lived a life where every day he lied to the people he had hitherto been the most close to

Alfred laughed and squeezed him “well I believe you have other more potent abilities” he said and Edward couldn’t help but feel his heart lighten, how did Alfred always seem to make his troubles that much less? “But you can never lie to me Edward, I know you! Things are no better are they?”

Edward shook his head

“Perhaps there is an element of truth that fatigue and worry are not helping” mused Alfred “perhaps some time away might help”

“Time away?” Edward raised his head

“It is Alexi’s birthday soon and I know William was hoping to take him to Drayton Manor; he mentioned to me whether perhaps we would like to accompany them”

“Will Sir Robert not be at home?” asked Edward

“It seems not, he and Lady Peel are visiting relatives, it seems that there is” he paused “tension between him and his father” Alfred hoped that this was just the usual father son problem and not because Sir Robert suspected where Williams inclinations lay.
“It would be the 4 of us?” said Edward

“It would” said Alfred “do you think you will be able to attend?”

“I will ask Florence” said Edward

Alfred nodded “I hope she will be amenable”

“You wish to go away Edward?” said Florence slowly

“It is Prince Alexi’s birthday and there is a soiree arranged for him at Drayton Manor”

“And Blair and I may not accompany you?”

“Prince Alexi is unmarried my dear, there will be no other ladies present, I do not think it would be seemly for you to attend an event with other unmarried gentlemen”

“hmmmm” Florence both looked, and was, annoyed, Edward was failing to live up to his marital duties, was always working and now he wished to go away…a terrible thought seized her, what if he were lying to her and was in fact going to be with another woman?

“Edward” her palms began to sweat “I must ask …do you…. is there…. another woman” she stopped a lump blocking her throat

“Florence” Edwards heart wrung with pity and he took her in his arms “there is no other woman”

“Oh….” she broke down and wept against his chest, convulsing with sobs as he stroked her hair and hated himself fiercely. Eventually she quieted down, enjoying the feeling of being held by him

“Why can you not…” she murmured “Edward I don’t understand”

“I’m tired my dear” he said, and he was, tired of all the lies and living two lives “the world is deeply troubling at the moment, all over Europe countries are on the brink of topping, Governments falling, it could happen here; we are working night and day to prevent it but it could”

“And you feel this time away would help refresh you?”

“I do” he said

She reached up and stroked his face “then go, rest and return to me more as your old self”

Edward nodded feeling a lump forming in his throat to, she was too good for him she really was and she deserved better. For the first time, he began to seriously consider if a divorce would be possible. Let her be free to find someone who really loved her.

Drayton Manor

“You have been here before have you not Mr. Drummond?” asked Prince Alexi

“I have” smiled Edward “it is most imposing!”

William smiled “grandpapa wanted to impress with his fortune and had it built in the Elizabethan
I am looking forward to showing it to you” he added smiling shyly at Alexi “though I expect it is not half as grand as your Russian palaces”

Alexi shrugged and smiled at him “or half as cold” he said with a grin

Alfred and Edward exchanged a look, Alexi and William had become very close and it was delightful to see.

When they arrived eventually at Drayton Manor, Alexi raised his eyebrows “and you feared I wouldn’t be impressed?” he said to William “it is magnificent”

William blushed and looked pleased “it is home to me” he said “though I cannot claim to be responsible for its creation, however we are not staying in the main house” he added “papa built a few cottages in the grounds for guests and I thought they may be more…comfortable, they afford greater privacy”

Edward smiled and stretched, he was cramped after the coach journey but here at last he would have a few days peace

Edward and Alfred gazed around “a cottage he said” laughed Alfred “perhaps not as one would think it”

“Indeed not” said Edward taking in the elegant villa which bore the name ‘Tamworth cottage’

“Alfred we have all this too ourselves for 3 whole days” he laughed too suddenly giddy with the feeling a happiness and freedom

“We do” said Alfred “entirely too ourselves”; in order to ensure complete privacy meals would be delivered by the servants and left outside and the used crockery and cutlery collected from outside as well. Both Edward and Alfred felt they could manage quite well for 3 days without new bed linen or towels, Edward suspected they would not leave the bed that much and it was far too warm to need a fire lit.

“Come then” Edward held out his hand and gestured to the stairs, Alfred however grinned at him

“I have a fancy to try somewhere else” he murmured

“Where” smiled Edward his body already warming to the look in Alfred’s eyes

“Everywhere!” said Alfred throwing himself into his arms “every room in the house”

Edward laughed and picked him up as he wrapped his legs round his waist “do you mean to wear me out?” he said

Alfred grinned and kissed him “oh I hope so Edward” he murmured against his mouth “I do hope so”

It was idyllic to be together and so completely alone, Alfred was following through on his belief they should try every room in the house until Edward begged for mercy as Alfred tried to haul him into the pantry

“The surfaces will be cold Alfred” he protested laughing as Alfred pulled off his shirt and laid it on
"This will stop you from getting cold" he said

"Alfred Paget you are insatiable and I need a rest" said Edward firmly

Alfred pouted at him "perhaps if I did all the work" he said hopefully

"That would be a blessed change Alfred and I most unusual one" said Edward laughingly "but no, come sit outside with me"

Alfred wrinkled his nose in disapproval but retrieved his shirt to put back on

"No wait" said Edward, an idea forming in his mind "Alfred take off your clothes"

"You have changed your mind?" asked Alfred hopefully

"No" said Edward wondering how Alfred’s appetites were quite so voracious "I would…”he hesitated "like to draw you"

"Draw me?"

"Yes, I have my memories of you Alfred but sometimes we go many days sometimes weeks without seeing each other, I would like something more"

Alfred smiled at him "of course you may, oh but Edward! Is it safe? What if your err….."

"I have a secret drawer in my desk Alfred; she does not go into my study"

"Then I will be delighted to pose for you"

Edward beamed at him, his huge smile lighting up his face and Alfred knew as he always did he would do anything for him

"How would you like me Edward?"

Edward looked round, the lawn that went around the back and sides of the hose protected by high walls had a large lawn which was speckled with daisies

"There” he pointed to a piece of lawn sheltered under a beech tree with daisies and buttercups

Alfred lay down and Edward ran and got a cushion from the house, placing one under his head

"Lay back” he said and he positioned Alfred so that his face was slightly turned towards him with his right arm bent above his head and his left resting across his stomach

"Now keep still….if you can” keeping still was not Alfred’s strong point

Alfred smiled and rolled his eyes affectionately "just be quiet and draw me"

Edward sat on the grass and sketched, drinking in his beloved, thinking that he could never do his beauty justice. True to form, after some 20 minutes Alfred became bored and began to wriggle but by that time Edward had the image of him fixed in his mind and did not mind. Eventually he was done

"You may get up now” he said
Alfred stretched grumbling good-naturedly that his leg had gone to sleep and demanding to see the sketch.

Edward handed it over “it is a poor likeness” he said bashfully.

Alfred stared at it “no Edward” he said softly “it is not” and it wasn’t, not because Edward had captured every piece of him accurately but because he could see how Edwards love for him come through the lines and curves.

Edward smiled at him happily “you like it?”

“I do”, he put his arms round him “I love you Edward” he said quietly “I love you so much”

“I love you too” said Edward burying his face in his hair and inhaling the smell that was essentially Alfred mixed in with scent of grass “Alfred?”

“Mmmm?” Alfred raised his head.

“When you said every room, did you also mean the garden?” said Edward looking at him and moving his hands down to stroke Alfred’s back and thighs.

“Do you know I believe I did Edward” said Alfred his breath getting slower as Edwards hands stopped tracing patterns around his back and began to trace patterns across his stomach and further down “I believe I did”

“Good” said Edward laying him down on the grass “it would be a shame to waste the good weather” and he slid on top of him and began kissing him.

On the second day they had gone for a walk, straggling lazily through the woods when they had heard a sound.

“What is that?” asked Edward pausing and frowning.

Alfred listened “I do not hear anything” he said.

Edward listened intently and then shook his head “it must have been a bird”.

They walked on a little further and Edward stopped again “I hear it again” he aid.

Alfred listened and this time he heard it too.

“It sounds as if someone is in pain” said Edward “come Alfred let us look”.

“No Edward” began Alfred, he knew exactly what the noise was but Edward had already stepped into the clearing ahead of them and stopped.

Alfred caught him up and then drew him back gently but not before he had caught a glimpse of Alexi and William naked and embracing; William was underneath looking up at Alexi with such love that Alfred caught his breath ‘was that how he looked at Edward?’ he wondered.

“Dear Edward, did you not realise what the noise was?” said Alfred looking at him lovingly as soon as they were out of ear shot.

“No….I…Alfred do we sound like that?”
Alfred laughed “oh Edward I adore you! I do not know if we sound exactly like that but it would not be dissimilar”

“Oh” Edward looked at the ground his ears flushing

“I am delighted for them Edward” said Alfred “both of them, I just hope neither of them is foolish enough to get married….oh Edward I’m sorry” he said as Edward went white and turned away from him

“Edward I did not mean it like that” said Alfred as Edward began to walk away “Edward wait” and he drew level with him

“No you are right” said Edward his head down “I was foolish”

“No you were not” said Alfred passionately “you did what had to be done”

“Did I?” said Edward stopping and looking at him “if I knew then what I know now, the Marques could have ruined me, had me flogged, imprisoned, anything would be better than living like this”

“Edward don’t say such things” said Alfred close to tears “please I cannot bear it”

“You do not have to bear it Alfred do you?” said Edward “I do, every day”

Alfred looked at him with pain filled eyes “I do to Edward” he said quietly “every day I live it too”

They looked at each other and then Edward sighed “I am sorry” he said “to be overcome with such melancholy, I just see them together William and Alexi, so happy, with nothing yet going wrong and I fear for them and for us”

Alfred reached up and took Edwards face in his hands “I would give up everything for you” he said “I should have listened to you when you wanted to break your engagement but I did not and I regret it every day but we have to live with what we have and what we have is more than many people ever have because we have each other and the love we share”

Edward looked down at him for a few moments and then kissed him “I know” he said and then he interlinked his fingers with Alfred’s “let us go back, we still have rooms as yet unused” and he winked and Alfred smiled grateful that the conversation seemed to be over

As they walked back, one thought kept rattling round Edwards mind ‘was it possible he could divorce Florence?’
Illness

Chapter Summary

Edward and Alfred discuss the possibility of divorce, they return to London and Edward arrives home to find Blair is ill

Chapter Notes

Historical notes

Divorce - Divorce was incredibly hard to obtain; there were no civil divorce courts, only a private act of parliament could grant it and the only grounds were adultery; until 1851 only men could petition for divorce

Childhood diseases like diptheria, whooping cough, measles & scarlet fever were very common and the younger a child was when they caught it, the more likelihood they would die. roughly one third of all children did not reach their 5th birthday

Edward lay on his back, the sheet pulled only up to his waist as it was so hot & watched Alfred as he slept. This was their final night together before they returned to their normal lives the following day. He didn’t know how he could bear it. Having Alfred with him every hour of every day was like paradise & he knew Alfred felt the same. He turned his head away and stared into the darkness. How was he supposed to live like this he wondered? He wanted to do right by Florence, he knew now he should not have married her, but the least he could do was return to her bed, at least for the time being, but every part of him inside & out yearned for Alfred. Parting from him would be very hard.

He turned over & lay on his side again facing Alfred & stroking his hair. Eventually he could stand it no longer & began to gently kiss him into wakefulness.

“Edward” Alfred smiled at him eyes soft with sleep

Edward kissed the tip of his nose

“I am sorry my love but I am already lonely for you”

Alfred snuggled into him “I will miss you too Edward” he said

Edward tightened his arms round him

“I was thinking” he said his mouth suddenly dry “that I may explore divorce”

“Divorce?” Alfred sat up staring at him “Edward...”

“It might be possible” began Edward but Alfred stilled his lips shaking his head & smiling sadly

“Edward you know that you would have to take a private Act of Parliament to obtain a divorce. And on what grounds? You know adultery is the only permissible reason”
“But...”

“It’s not possible my love” said Alfred gently his heart full of pity “The only hope is that Florence falls in love with another like my mother did with my father, but she is married to you Edward, to you! How could she ever want another?”

Edward rubbed his eyes scrubbing at the tears that had formed there at Alfred’s words. He was right; he had been foolish to think it may have been possible to divorce Florence. Watching him Alfred was filled with sorrow; he wrapped himself around him kissing him

“Edward whatever happens I will never leave you. I would rather have whatever portions of your life you can give me no matter how small they are than live without you”

Edward buried his face in his shoulder mumbling against the warm skin in anguish

“I just want to be with you all the time”

“I know my love and I do too”

Edward tightened his hold

“Make love to me Edward” whispered Alfred “make love to me one more time before we have to leave”

London

“Mrs Drummond?”

Septimus spied Florence in her carriage with Gwendolyn as he rode in the park feeling melancholy. He was missing life in the army, he chafed against the office rules & restrictions even though he was enjoying being with his family. He was glad to see if not a reestablishment of cordial relations between Alfred & their mother at least a thaw but the reasons behind it disturbed him greatly. It seemed that Edward Drummond was not fulfilling his marital duties towards Florence and his mother had talked to Alfred about it. The thought of this neglect made him extremely angry. He had had the opportunity to spend more time with Florence at some Paget family gatherings & his initial impression of a beautiful charming & kind woman had only grown. Moreover she was clearly very much in love with her husband - who was in love with his brother and treated her with the same tolerant kindness he would a pet! If he had the opportunity to have such a woman fir a wife he thought he would devote all his time to ensuring her happiness in all aspects of her life.

“Lord Septimus” Florence beamed at him, he was so like his brother but without that veneer of court charm which Florence found somewhat artificial at times “Gwendolyn this is Lord Alfred’s brother, Lord Septimus Paget, Lord Septimus lady Gwendolyn Moncrieff”

“I am pleased to meet you” fluttered Gwendolyn “Gracious the Paget's really are quite the clan”

“We are madam” laughed Septimus “when does your husband return Mrs Drummond?”

“In 3 days” said Florence “Blair & I will miss him greatly”

“And where is your daughter?” Asked Septimus

“At Home with Edith” said Florence “she had a slight temperature & I thought it best to keep her at
“I am sorry to hear that” said Septimus “I hope she is soon better”

“Thank you” said Florence “I am sure she will be”

There was a pause, Septimus tried to think of a reason to detain her but he could not

“Well….good day madam, Lady Gwendolyn” and he raised his hat and trotted off

“Goodness” said Gwendolyn staring after him “I had no idea lord Alfred’s brother would be as handsome as he is”

Florence smiled at her friend “yes he is indeed a very handsome man”

The journey back home was in stark contrast to the journey up. Alexi and William had clearly become much closer during the 3 days and spent the journey holding hands & smiling at each other. At first they made desultory attempts to include Alfred and Edward in conversation but Alfred bade them stop with a smile

“Please I know you have little time together as do we, enjoy each other’s company”

And with relief Alexi and William complied leaving Edward and Alfred free to simply be together. They leaned against each other savouring their last few hours together, not really needing to talk but just to enjoy their memories of their time together and steel themselves for their parting.

At length the carriage reached the outskirts and with unspoken agreement they all straightened up and separated, each to a corner of the carriage practising putting on their public faces.

“The carriage will take Mr. Drummond and Lord Alfred to Lord Alfred’s residence said William softly to Alexi “and then you to the Russian embassy

An air of gloom settled over the carriage at William’s words; Edward stretched out his hand and grasped Alfred’s, at least they could say goodbye in private before he went back to Florence.

When the carriage departed, Edward came inside the house for a least few minutes

“I don’t want to go” he said clinging fiercely to Alfred

“I know my love I know and I don’t want you to go either but you must” said Alfred gently disentangling himself “we shall see each other soon” he added “very soon”

“Edward thank god you are home” Florence flew into his arms and clung there for a few moments while Edward, puzzled, stroked her hair. She pulled back and looked up at him and he noticed her eyes were red rimmed and she looked deeply fatigued

“Florence what is wrong?” said Edward a feeling of dread growing in his stomach, the house was very quiet…

“Its Blair” she began to weep “Edward she has such a fever and when she breathes she wheezes so”
“Blair?” Edward ran up the stairs and burst into the nursery, Blair was laying in her cot very still, her little face flushed and each breath she took seemed to rattle in her chest

“Oh my darling girl” Edward knelt down by the cot and touched her forehead, she was burning hot

“How long has she been like this?” Edward asked Florence as she entered the room behind him

“Since yesterday” answered Florence wearily “at first she had just a slight temperature and her nose began to run but Edward she worsened so quickly! Within a few hours she was as you see”

“What did the doctor say?” asked Edward as he continued to stroke Blair who seemed barely aware of him

“He wouldn’t come” Florence began to cry again “I sent Edith but he wouldn’t come, he said that it was just a cold and children have them all the time”

“Did he now?!” said Edward furiously “then I will fetch him myself even if I have to drag him here by the heels”

He stormed down the stairs, beyond angry that the doctor would refuse to come out and treat his child, indeed any child.

“I shall be back” he said to Florence “with a doctor if I have to knock on every door in London!”

“Oh Edward thank god you are here now” said Florence “I did not know what to do, I thought” she bit her lip to stop from crying again “Edward I thought she might die and you would not be here, and Edward what would you have thought of me then?” she began to sob

“Thought of you?” Edward looked at her not understanding “Florence you are a wonderful mother! I would never never blame you if something happened….children get ill, it is normal sometimes they even, they even…”

He stopped, a lump forming in his throat at the thought of his baby girl dying while he was not there. How would he have felt if he come back and there had only been a stiff little body under a sheet in the cradle and he couldn’t stop a small cry of pain escaping his lips

Florence reached out a grasped his hand “thank you Edward” she whispered

He nodded and squeezed her hand and then his face hardened “I shall return with a doctor” he said and was gone

Florence sagged against the banisters almost dizzy with relief, Edward was home and everything would be alright, she was sure of it.
the doctor calls

Chapter Summary

The doctor visits Blair and Edward tells Alfred of her illness

Chapter Notes

Firstly thank you for all the comments and kudos and I'm so sorry I haven't had time to reply. Work has been soooo busy and I'm struggling to find time to write atm which is really frustrating.

Diphtheria killed 10% of the children it infected; now it is almost completely eradicated through vaccination. The treatments advised here would have made very little difference.

fun fact - Uxbridge House the London residence of the Marques of Anglesy is now the flagship store of Abercrombie and Fitch in London

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Edward was as good as his word returning with a doctor within the hour. He had had no compunction about dropping in his job with Lord Palmerston, his father in law being the Marques of Lothian and his close friendship with people very close to the Queen. In fact by the time he had finished the doctor was eager to accompany him and was almost obsequious on the return journey, asking how often Edward had been to Buckingham palace and met Her Majesty.

Back at the house, Florence's face brightened with relief as the doctor gently examined Blair as she and Edward stood in the corner clasping hands

"She has croup Mrs Drummond" said the doctor on finishing his examination "it is very common in children of this age. She must be kept very warm and use steam to clear her airways. A hot cloth, as hot as she can bear without burning should be kept around her throat, put a linseed poultice on her chest and give a half a tea spoon of ipecacuanha wine every 2 hours. I shall return tomorrow to see how she is"

"Oh thank you doctor, thank you" exclaimed Florence rushing to the cot "you see my darling, your mama and papa and the nice doctor are going to make you better"

The doctor looked at Edward and his expression took on a graver hue

"Let me show you out doctor" said Edward, feeling his alarm rising, there was clearly something the doctor wanted to say but not in front of Florence.

"I believe she has croup sir" he said when they reached the bottom of the stairs "but" he hesitated "I feel I must warn you it could also be diphtheria"

"Diphtheria!" Edward turned pale
The doctor nodded sombrely “if it is, you must prepare yourself; I do need to tell you how serious a disease it is”

Edward shook his head unable to speak; diphtheria was almost always fatal especially in children as young as Blair

The doctor patted his arm gently “I will return tomorrow, and then I will know for sure. Until then I would not say anything to your wife. It will not help to upset her unnecessarily”

“Thank you doctor” said Edward through bloodless lips “I will see you tomorrow”

The doctor nodded “I will pray for her sir” he said and left

Edward took a few moments to compose himself before he returned to the nursery; Florence must not suspect there was anything more to Blair’s illness than what she had been told.

“Edward!” she smiled at him, her face already lightened “thank god! Croup, I had that as a child you know and here I am safe and well. She will be well, I am sure of it”

Edward smiled back at her though it did not reach his eyes and put his arms around her “and here you are” he said closing his eyes and resting his cheek on her hair, what could he even say to her if it turned out to be diphtheria and not croup. Florence feeling Edward’s face against the top of her head in a way he never normally did couldn’t help a small thrill of happiness, perhaps she really did have nothing to worry about.

They sat up all night with Blair, wrapping cloths around her neck, asking Edith to bring up steaming kettles which in the end Edward helped with as poor Edith began to struggle under the weight of the large metal objects. They dosed her religiously with the ipecacuanha wine even though poor Blair screamed and turned her head away and vomited

“It’s to help you my baby” crooned Florence as she spooned it in; Edward watching was overcome with tenderness for her and her care for their daughter. If only he could love her as she loved him, how much easier everything would be he thought, but he could not.

At last at 4am Blair seemed to be sleeping, Florence looked as if she was about to faint from worry and lack of sleep and Edward sent her to bed

“I will stay with Blair” he said

“Wake me Edward” said Florence “if anything should happen”

He nodded “I will, now go and rest my dear; you will be no good to Blair if you are half dead from fatigue”

Florence left the room and Edward collapsed into a chair, he was exhausted and wished he could sleep but Florence needed it more; besides he needed to write to Alfred to tell him what was happening and that he may not see him for a few days. Rubbing his eyes, he checked Blair was sleeping and then went to his study. He picked up some paper and a pen, and then pausing he unlocked his hidden drawer and pulled out the drawings of Alfred he had done. There he was sprawled naked in the garden, leaning back in the chair smiling at Edward, asleep looking as innocent as Blair, Edward rested his head against them for a moment and then kissing them put them back and returned to the nursery. Seating himself at the desk he began to write
“My Alfred

I am afraid I have to write to you with very bad news. On my return home, I found Bair to be gravely ill. We have summoned the doctor and he has diagnosed croup, at least he did so in front of Florence. However, he spoke to me alone and raised the prospect that Blair may have diphtheria, diphtheria Alfred!” he paused to blink back the tears that were coming into his eyes “I dare not tell Florence, Alfred would I do I my darling girl dies? You cannot imagine how it hurts to see her coughing and struggling to breathe, I want to weep but of course I cannot. It is my job to be strong but I do not feel strong Alfred, I feel weak and afraid” he stopped again, aware he was pouring his heart out but to whom else could he tell his fears? “I wish more than anything you could be here with me, I know just the touch of your hand would calm me. The doctor will return later today and I am dreading it Alfred, dreading it. Write me by return of post”

Your Edward

He sealed it up and again checking that Blair still slept stole out the house to the post-box which luckily was opposite his house hoping Alfred would write back as he asked.

At his house, Alfred was in low spirits as he prepared to go to the Palace. He had had a sleepless night missing Edward and aching with jealousy that Edward must return to Florence’s bed and wishing with all his heart he had not had to puncture Edward’s dreams of divorce. He went to breakfast and saw that there was a letter waiting for him and his heart jumped into his throat as he recognised Edwards’s handwriting. He tore it open eagerly, read it and then dropped it in shock. Blair ill? This was terrible news, his heart constricted as he thought of when he’d last seen her, determinedly trying to turn over and crawl, occasionally collapsing onto her tummy with a surprised look as Edward picked her up and gently set her back on her hands and knees. And his beloved Edward being so afraid and feeling so bereft – he should be there! Edward shouldn’t face this alone. He went to ring the bell for the carriage and then stopped, eyes clouding over, of course she would be there and how could he hope to talk to Edward properly with her there? His eyes narrowed and then he summoned Jones as he scribbled quickly

“Dear mama

I have distressing news from Edward, little Blair is very ill, he fears diphtheria. I wonder if you would accompany me to the Drummond residence, I am sure his wife would value an experienced mother to talk to

Alfred”

He sealed it and rang the bell

“Jones, take this note to my mother”

Jones bowed “very good sir”

At Uxbridge House, Henry and charlotte were breakfasting when Jones arrived with the note. Charlotte read it and turned pale

“What is it my dear” asked Henry seeing her face. She handed him the note

“Oh but this is terrible news” said Henry “Blair is so young, let us pray it is not diphtheria” he
paused “will you do as Alfred asks?” he was aware that the rift although not as big, had not yet healed

Charlotte nodded “of course Henry, not just for his sake but for Blair’s and Florence’s. The poor girl must be out of her mind with worry. Jones tell Lord Alfred, will come to him directly in the carriage and to be sure to be ready”

“Very good madam” said Jones and left to return to Alfred’s

On hearing this, Alfred wrote to Edward, he knew he must be more circumspect, he could not risk Florence suspecting their true relationship

“Dear Edward

I was deeply distressed to hear your news. My mother and I will visit, mother has much experience in these matters and I’m sure can offer you sound advice on treatments. Be assured always of my deep concern for your welfare and that of Blair’s.

With affection

Alfred”

Not 20 minutes after he had sent Jones with the letter, he heard the carriage, his mother was arriving.

Edward was asleep when the letter arrived; Florence had woken at 8am, too worried to sleep longer and in turn sent Edward to rest. When the note arrived, Edith had put it in the hallway so Edward could read it when he woke. So it was then when Alfred and Charlotte arrived no one was expecting them

“Lady Anglesey is here madam with Lord Alfred”

“What?” Florence was stroking Blair’s forehead, she was still very hot and the cough rasped in her throat

“Lady Anglesey and Lord Alfred are here madam”

Flounce stared at her in panic “but I’m not fit to be seen and the house is a mess, Edith tell them to leave”

“I would be very sad to leave without at least seeing how you are my dear” said Charlotte coming into the room with Alfred behind her. She had suspected as soon as she and Alfred had entered the house, and seen how in disarray everything was, that Florence was struggling to cope.

“Your ladyship…” Florence became tangled in her words “I did not…I must apologise”

Charlotte held up her hand to stop the flow of words and then going over to Florence put her arms around her

“How are you my dear” she asked gently “you must be exhausted with worry”

Florence nodded tearfully against Charlotte’s shoulder “Edward and I are both deeply concerned” she said “I know croup is common but I had not thought it would be so distressing to see her like this”

“Where is Edward?” asked Charlotte gently
“Asleep” said Florence “he stayed with up with her all night”

Alfred was looking at Blair in the cot, he touched her forehead with the back of his hand and winced, she was still so hot but at the mention of Edwards name he jerked his head up

“Then let him sleep” said Charlotte looking meaningfully at Alfred who was about to protest, he had come here to comfort Edward not to have him sleep “he must be worn out”

Alfred closed his mouth, of course his mother was right; Edward would be half dead if he had been up all night, and he should let him sleep

Just then there was the sound of a bell ringing, they heard Edith answer the door and then there was a man’s voice before Edith could be heard trudging up the stairs

“The doctor is here madam”

“I must wake Edward” said Florence “he must be here”

“Perhaps if you will allow me” said Alfred “I am sure you do not want to leave Blair”

Florence nodded relieved “if you would that would be most kind”

Alfred bowed slightly and left, eager to get to Edward. When he reached his room, he found Edward tumbled on the bed still almost fully clothed, with just his jacket and shoes flung on the floor.

Alfred watched him for a few moments, he had clearly run his hands through his hair many times and disordered curls clustered around his head and on the pillow. His cheek was pressed against the white cotton, his skin flushed and as Alfred watched he frowned and twitched in his sleep.

Sighing that he could not just stay and watch him sleep, Alfred went over to the bed

“Edward” he gently kissed his forehead “Edward my love” he whispered “you must wake up”

Edward turned onto his other side, his lashes flickering before he settled down again

“No my love” whispered Alfred “you must wake, the doctor is here”

Edward made an incoherent sleepy noise and opened his eyes

“Alfred?” he moistened his lips “Alfred is it you?”

“It is I my dearest” said Alfred softly “please you need to rouse yourself, the doctor is here”

Chapter End Notes

We find out if Blair does have diptheria and Edward receives some important news for his career that will make a big difference to his life
Edward came slowly into the room to see Florence standing next to Alfred’s mother and the doctor already examining Blair. He felt sick and looked at Alfred whose face reflected his own fears but who, on seeing Edward look at him, smiled at him trying to reassure him.

“Edward” Florence came over and took his hand “did you rest?”

He nodded feeling too full of emotion to speak, what if it were diphtheria? They called it the strangling disease, people literally choked to death. He could not, he would, not allow Blair to die in such a horrible way! He would do something! Anything

“Edward?” Florence was speaking again, “the doctor wishes to speak to you”

“Mr. Drummond, Mrs. Drummond, it is whooping cough as I thought, nothing more serious” he was smiling and Edward wanted to sink to the ground with relief.

“Keep up the treatment, she is responding to it and I will call again in a few days although of course if at any time she gets worse, call for me straight away”

“Thank you doctor! thank you thank you” said Florence

Edward still couldn’t speak, his relief was so great and so he didn’t quite hear the doctor’s next words

“If it is possible, when she is more recovered, a spell out of London would help, some fresher air would do wonders”

“Fresh air?” said Edward somewhat stupidly, he was still processing that Blair did not have diphtheria

“A spell in the country” said the Doctor “do you have perhaps have an estate?”

“In Scotland” said Edward “our families have large estates there”
“I fear that would be too arduous a journey for her” said the doctor frowning

“I would be delighted to offer you Plas Newydd” said Charlotte ignoring the small noise that came from Alfred “it is by the sea and the air is wonderfully fresh”

“Oh Lady Anglesey that is so kind” said Florence “isn’t it Edward? We would be delighted to accept once Blair is better”

Edward nodded slowly feeling Alfred’s eyes boring into him; he knew Alfred would not want he and Florence there together in his family home but what could he do?

“I am so pleased that Blair is recovering” said Alfred trying to keep his voice normal “I’m afraid I must return to the Palace, the queen has a number of meetings I must attend. Mama will you be staying or returning with me?”

“I shall stay a while longer Alfred if you do not mind sending the carriage back” said Charlotte

“The carriage can remain mama, I shall walk” said Alfred “the exercise will do me good”

“I will show you out Lord Alfred” said Edward hurriedly knowing exactly why Alfred was leaving

They went downstairs and Alfred paused

“I am so pleased it is not diphtheria Edward” said Alfred gruffly

“I know” said Edward softly “Alfred about your mothers offer...”

“Plas Newydd is hers to offer as she chooses” said Alfred

“But you do not want me there” said Edward sadly

“Oh Edward, I would love you to see Plas Newydd” said Alfred “I have dreamed of showing it to you, you would love it so, as do I but for you to see it first with her, without me....”

“You could come too” interrupted Edward and Alfred laughed

“Oh Edward really? You and I and your wife? What a merry party that would be”

Edward looked down abashed “I am sorry” he said “I could say we have changed our minds”

“No it is I who is sorry” said Alfred “Blair needs to get well and that is all that matters. I must not be so selfish”

They looked at each other, conscious again of the thousand and one obstacles between them

“Goodbye Alfred” said Edward

“Goodbye Edward” replied Alfred “send me word of how she is, I expect we shall not see each other for a few days”

Edward nodded “I will”

Alfred clasped his arm briefly and then left, Edward watched him depart, blonde hair shining under his hat, his clothes as always just so but his shoulders slightly slumped. He longed to go after him and pull him into his arms and tell him all would be alright but he could not.
“Edward?” it was Florence's voice “are you there”

“Coming my dear” called Edward setting his face in a pleased expression “coming right away”

Despite the doctor saying Blair was getting better, Edward and Florence endured several more sleepless nights. Although Blair did not get any worse neither did she seem to get any better and they moved like automatons existing on a few snatched hours sleep. Charlotte sent over food and suggestions for medicine, Alfred sent a note enquiring after Blair’s health and kind wishes from the Queen “I know how I suffered with my own Princess Victoria” she wrote “and I send prayers for her recovery”

However on the afternoon of the fourth day, Florence touched Blair's forehead and was it her imagination or did her forehead feel cooler?

“Edward” she called “come, feel her, is she not less hot?”

Edward rushed over “yes” he said as he laid his hand alongside Florence’s “it does. Perhaps we may be over the worse?”

Florence closed her eyes “let us pray it is so Edward”

They stayed with Blair watching her closely but it was clear that her fever was waning and her cough didn’t rasp as it did before nor was it as frequent. Eventually the clock struck midnight, Florence was asleep her head resting against a cushion and Edward could feel his own eyes closing

“Florence” he whispered “go to bed I will stay with Blair”

Florence sleepily opened her eyes “no Edward” she said

“I insist” he said gently

Florence looked up at him “come with me” she said “you need to rest also”

“But Blair…” he began

“We will hear her Edward if she cries, please you look exhausted, we both are”

Edward nodded suddenly overwhelmed with the need to collapse onto a soft mattress “I will lock up” he said. He went downstairs and as always turned into his study and opened the drawer where he kept the pictures of Alfred. Just those few moments of looking at him and reliving the memories of their time away together had been keeping him sane. Gently he kissed the paper

“Good night my love” he whispered before climbing the stairs

He tumbled into bed next to Florence almost too exhausted to remove his clothes and immediately fell asleep dreaming of Alfred, of being in his arms, of raining hot kisses on his mouth and neck and throat.

Florence woke with a start, it was light, she had slept the whole night! She turned, Edward was still asleep, his handsome profile pressed into the pillow; she must go and see how Blair was she thought sliding out of bed. There was no noise from the cradle, what if something had happened? She rushed over; Blair was asleep, her eyelashes fluttering against her soft downy cheek. Florence touched her,
she was cool, and the fever had broken completely. Kneeling by the crib stroking her daughter, Florence began to cry tears of relief and of sadness too. How could she make things right with her and Edward? These few days they had been so close as they cared for Blair, she could see how much he loved her, if they could just resume their marital relations and have more children then everything would be perfect. Suddenly she rose to her feet, a determined light on her eyes. Blair was sleeping; she would return to bed and show Edward how ready she was to be his wife in all ways.

Edward was stirring from his dreams of Alfred, swimming up through layers of consciousness, feeling warm and so so comfortable. He registered the bed was empty and then, still only half awake, he heard Florence enter the room, felt her weight on the bed and then she pressed herself against him

“Hold me Edward” she whispered

He put his arms around him and she snuggled into him and they lay there in silence for a few moments

“Edward” she said again and then she began to kiss his neck “Edward…..”

Afterwards she wept as she had that very first time. Edward rocked her and tried to soothe her. As usual he felt overwhelming sadness for her. This time it had been a success if one could call it that in that he had managed to do his duty, fortified by his dream of Alfred but she would never know he thought how it was to be loved by someone who really loved her.

Charlotte was at home when she received a note from Florence

My dear lady Anglesey

I am sure you will be delighted to hear that Blair is much better and in another week she will be able to travel. If the offer of a stay at Plas Newydd is still open then we could very much like to accept your kind hospitality

Charlotte dropped the note on the table and beamed at Henry and Septimus

“That is from Florence Drummond, it seems Blair is much better and she would like to take up the offer of staying at Plas Newydd”

“How wonderful” said Henry

“Does Alfred know?” asked Septimus

“I do not know” said Charlotte it is not easy for Edward to write to him”

Septimus nodded “I will tell him tonight” he said

Septimus was not looking forward to his conversation with Alfred, he knew that Alfred did not want Edward and Florence at Plas Newydd, and he sympathised. Plas Newydd was their home, a refuge and he would feel that Florence too was invading there. However, he also knew that Alfred loved Blair and would want her to fully recover.

“Lord Septimus” smiled Jones “how lovely to see you sir. Lord Alfred is in his study”

Septimus nodded “thank you Jones”
Septimus knocked on the door “Alfred?”

Alfred looked up “Septimus” he smiled but Septimus could see he was not well, there was a sad tiredness around his eyes “what brings you here? Not that it is not delightful to see you” he added

Septimus knew from long experience that there was no pint in beating about the bush

“Florence has written to mama” he said gently “Blair is very much better and she is asking to go to Plas Newydd next week”

Alfred’s eyes became shadowed but he said lightly “well that is good news and of course mama must let them go” and then turned away

“Alfred” Septimus came over to him “I know this is difficult for you”

“Do you?” said Alfred flatly

“Yes” said Septimus quietly “I do”

Alfred stood there breathing heavily and then burst out “must she have EVERYTHING of mine?? Is it not enough she has Edward? Blair? Mama and papa’s help? She must have my home too, the one place that I can feel safe? Must she taint that as well?” Septimus could see he was close to tears and let him calm down

“I am sorry Alfred” said Septimus “I wish it was different for you, you know that” not least he thought because of his own feelings towards Florence though he understood that, for now at least, they must remain hidden from Alfred

Alfred sighed “but it is not is it? And so again I must yield to that woman”

Septimus looked at him sympathetically but could think of nothing to say; Alfred was right, publicly his relationship with Edward could never be acknowledged and Florence would always take precedence over him.

Edward returned to work gratefully. Although he adored Blair, now she was much better, he found being in the house all day every day with Florence a strain. He had managed to do his duty one more time, a fact which made Florence extremely happy and he hoped it was enough to keep her satisfied for a while.

“Drummond! I am delighted you are back” said Lord Palmerstone “I have missed your sound good sense”

“I am equally pleased to return sir” replied Edward looking around the office and inhaling the familiar mix of paper, ink, tobacco and wood polish that pervaded the room

“Excellent! Now I know you have been having a difficult time and I have news that I hope will cheer you though” he paused “I cannot deny it poses a challenge also”

“Oh?” said Edward intrigued

“You know how poor our relations with Russia are, I trust them not one inch! I am certain they wish to push through Afghanistan into India. Our envoy in Russia, Lord Bloomfield writes to ask for a new secretary to the embassy and I am minded to recommend you for the post”
Edward’s moth dropped open in astonishment “me sir? But I have no diplomatic experience!”

“I would not say that” smiled Palmerstone “you are most diplomatic with Her Majesty saving me from many a roasting I feel, plus I know you are close friends with Prince Alexi Leonov of the embassy here”

“But” began Edward again his mind reeling

“It is a great opportunity” said Palmerston “you could go very far in the diplomatic service, speaking bluntly you are too talented to remain a private secretary and the diplomatic service offers excellent career prospects besides I would like to have some people in the diplomatic service who understand my views”

Edward still could not speak his mind racing! Go to Russia? Leave Alfred? He couldn’t!

Palmerstone seeing how overwhelmed he was patted his arm

“Think it over, talk to your wife, and perhaps take a trip to Moscow to get a feel for the place”

Edward nodded slowly, he had a rather horrid feeling that Florence would think it was a wonderful opportunity.
Edward found it extremely hard to concentrate, his mind was whirring and churning; of course it went without saying he wasn’t going to go to Russia but how to turn down such an appointment? He was well aware of the step it represented and the consequences to his career if he turned it down. Since Alfred’s accident he had found he didn’t care that much about his career; however Blair’s christening had shown him that Florence most certainly did. He felt certain that if he discussed it with Florence, she would want him to accept it. He therefore needed to come up with reasons not to accept it, or of course and his eye narrowed, he could simply just not discuss it with her at all. The more he thought about it, the more that seemed the simplest solution! Take a few days to pretend to consider it and then turn it down regretfully on the grounds that Florence did not want to go to Moscow, perfect he thought, that was what he would do. Florence need never know at all.

Sitting in the House of Lord tea room, Palmerston considered his conversation with Drummond earlier. He had to admit he was slightly surprised by Drummond’s reaction to the offer of the Russian job. The young man he had taken on 18 months before would have jumped at the chance but Drummond seemed hesitant to say the least. He was ruminating on it when he saw the Marques of Lothian, he did not particularly like the man but he knew he was Drummond’s father in law, perhaps he knew why Drummond was reluctant.

“Lothian” he hailed him

“Palmerston” Lothian nodded at him

“Do you have a moment?” at this Lothian was immediately intrigued. He and Palmerston were in opposite political parties and did not normally converse though he knew of course that Edward was his secretary. A thousand pities he reflected again that peel had fallen! Edward had been well on the way to a career that he had no doubt would have carried into the higher echelons of politics. Instead, the Tory government had collapsed over those wretched Corn Laws and now Edward worked for that coxcomb Palmerston. What a letdown for his daughter and for himself. The marriage had turned out not to yield what he had hoped though Florence at least seemed happy which he supposed was a good thing.

“What can I do for you Palmerston?” he seated himself opposite him

“I offered your son in law a promotion to the Russian embassy in Moscow” said Palmerston getting
straight to the point “and he seemed how can I put it somewhat hesitant in accepting; I wonder, do you know of any reason why that might be?”

Lothian looked at him in surprise “no, my granddaughter has been ill but she is better now so it cannot be that. I do not understand it! I thought he would bite your hand off at such an offer”

“I also” said Palmerston frowning “it is very peculiar”

“It is, I shall tackle him about it, I am sure that he was merely overwhelmed at the opportunity”

Palmerston shrugged “perhaps, it would be a shame if he did not accept it. He could go very far in the diplomatic service, very far indeed”

“I assure you sir, Edward will be accepting the job” said Lothian determinedly “I can think of no good reason for him not to”

Lothian was most puzzled as he walked back to his town house. He was determined to find out why Edward was so reluctant to take up Palmerston's offer. He sent him a note asking to meet the following day and a note to Edward's father asking if they could meet that evening.

“Lothian”

“Charles”

The two men shook hands

“Whiskey?” asked Lothian

Charles nodded and laughed “you needed to ask?”

Lothian smiled and they clinked glasses

“Your note sounded rather urgent” said Charles “I presume it is about Edward?”

Lothian nodded “yes. I have heard some rather disturbing news from Palmerston”

“Palmerston? That rogue? Has he been maligning my Edward?”

Lothian smiled grimly “on the contrary he has offered Edward a promotion”

“A promotion? He has said nothing to me”

“I believe it all happened today”

“Still I am surprised Edward has said nothing to me, I cannot wait to congratulate him”

“It seems he has not yet accepted it” said Lothian

“Not accepted…I don’t understand! What is the promotion?”

“He has offered Edward a position at the embassy in Moscow”

“Moscow?”

Lothian nodded “prestigious is it not?”
Charles nodded slowly “and yet Edward has not yet accepted it?

Lothian shook his head “he has not and Palmerston is somewhat baffled as to why, as indeed am I and I wondered if you knew why?”

“No” said Charles “I do not understand it at all! It is an excellent opportunity Edward should be chafing at the bit to accept it”

“I have sent a note asking him to come to me tomorrow, perhaps if we confronted him together?” said Lothian

Charles nodded again “yes I agree, it is absurd to think he would turn down such an opportunity, I will not allow it”

Edward sent a note to Alfred asking if he was free that evening, it was too long since he’d seen him (that brief moment at his house didn’t count) he needed to see him properly, to talk about his day and the offer from Palmerston which he would not be accepting

Alfred replied that he was and Edward immediately felt lighter; he would tell Alfred about Palmerston’s offer and they would laugh over the absurdity of the idea that he would ever leave Alfred to go to Russia.

He sent a note to Florence telling her he would be visiting Alfred that evening, for once feeling he did not need to lie as he had not seen Alfred for some days.

When he arrived, Alfred greeted him with long deep kiss that had Edward wanting to take him to bed immediately

Alfred however laughed fondly at his impatience

“Could we at least eat first Edward?”

“I know what I wish to dine on” said Edward diving hungrily towards Alfred’s mouth again

“Edward Drummond I am shocked at this behaviour” said Alfred in mock horror “shocked!” as Edward rolled his eyes at him smiling

“Very well we shall have some food and then Alfred Paget you are mine!”

“Then come with me” said Alfred tucking his arm through his “I have had food laid out for us in the garden”

Edward went through with him to see a low table in the garden laden with food and with heaps of cushions around it

“I thought we would be informal” said Alfred pulling off his cravat and jacket “especially as it is so hot”

“I approve” sad Edward dropping onto the cushions and smiling as Alfred snuggled into him, he was he realised, very hungry

An hour later and they were drowsing as the shadows lengthened; Edward was slowly feeding grapes to Alfred who was laying eyes closed with his head in his lap
“You know” said Edward watching as Alfred bit into another grape “I had the most extraordinary offer from Palmerston today”

“Oh?” said Alfred feeling extremely content

“He offered me a job in Russia”

“In Russia!” Alfred opened his eyes with alarm

“Oh do not worry Alfred, of course I shall not be accepting it” said Edward “as if I could leave you and go to Russia” he laughed at the very idea

“I am relieved to hear it’ said Alfred closing his eyes and opening his mouth again as Edward gently rubbed a grape across his lips “I could not bear that Edward, you would be gone for several years”

“Indeed…oh I shall pretend to consider it for a few days so that Palmerston doesn’t think I am ungrateful but of course I shall not go”

They lay in silence for a few minutes and then Alfred said hesitantly “and Plas Newydd? Edward will you still go?”

Edward sighed “believe me Alfred if I could find a way not to go I would but you know how it would benefit Blair”

“I know” said Alfred “I just wondered if your wife could be persuaded to go without you? Could you not say you had important business at the House?”

“It would not be right for Florence to go there alone Alfred” said Edward repressively “most unseemly”

“Of course not” said Alfred trying not to sound impatient “but perhaps if she went with someone else?” he sat up nearly knocking into Edwards jaw “Perhaps mama could accompany her?”

“Your mother?” said Edward

“Why not? Who better to show her Plas Newydd than the chatelaine of the house? Then you could stay here with me”

A smile began to creep over Edward’s face “perhaps” he murmured “perhaps that could be possible”

“Just consider it Edward that is all I ask” said Alfred

“I will and now sir” he rolled Alfred off his lap and onto his back on the cushions “I believe we have unfinished business from my arrival”
Edward arrived home in an extremely good mood; being with Alfred just lightened his heart in a way that nothing else could. He marvelled that the passion between them did not die away but simply grew and deepened as the months and years went by. Sometimes he wondered if he and Alfred were allowed to be together as he and Florence were, married and residing in the same house, whether it would have ebbed but he doubted it. He could never imagine not wanting Alfred even when they were both old with silver hair.

Florence had gone to bed and he was glad for that, it meant he could have a quiet hour or two alone. He knew she was still recovering from the fright and exhaustion of Blair’s illness and needed rest.

On the table in his study were several letters that had come in the evening post. He flipped through them idly whiskey in hand and then stopped, one was from his father in law; he recognised the stern sloping script. He ripped it open and quickly scanned the words

“Edward

Your father and I heard some disquieting news today. Please come to Lothian House tomorrow morning so we can discuss it with you

Yours

Lothian”
To the point as always thought Edward mentally rolling his eyes but he noted the “we”, perhaps there was also a note from his father; leafing through he found that there was

“Edward

I heard most surprising news today from the Marques, I am sure it is a mistake but please call on him tomorrow morning. I shall be there and we can discuss it

Affectionately

Your father”

Edward sighed and sat down, his temples beginning to throb. Why, he reflected, could his life not be easier?

10.30am found Edward outside the Lothian townhouse, he had not mentioned the meeting to Florence and as she had said nothing at breakfast, he assumed that she as not privy to its existence. He decided that he would wait to see what his father and father in law had to say before he spoke to Florence, mayhap it was nothing that important.

He rang the bell and the butler opened the door

“Mr. Drummond sir” he said, as always the slight emphasis on “Mr.” making it clear he looked down on Edward for not having a title. There were few more snobbish than servants thought Edward as he handed him his hat and coat “his lordship is in the library”

Edward nodded and followed the butler who announced him and then stood aside so Edward could enter

“Edward” his father was already there and he came forward to shake Edward’s hand

“Father” responded Edward with a smile, his father didn’t understand him he knew that but he did, Edward believed, at least love him.

“Edward” the Marques perfunctorily shook Edward’s hand, now he had married off Florence to Edward and the Drummond money was there for them, he saw no need to regard Edward as anything other than a partner, a very junior partner at that, in the Lothian family business of keeping the estate together.

“Your lordship” Edward was under no illusion that his father in law did not like him. It was a pity, when he first courted Florence all those years ago now, they had been amicable but life and experiences had changed that.

“Please sit Edward” said the Marques “your father and I would like you to explain yourself”

“Explain myself?” Edward was puzzled, he genuinely could think of nothing he needed to explain.

“The Marques had a conversation with Lord Palmerston” said his father

“Ah…”the penny began to drop

“Indeed I did” said Lothian “and I am at a loss Edward as to why you would refuse such an offer from him”
“I have not yet refused it” said Edward quietly

“No but you have not accepted it either have you?” replied Lothian tersely

“no I have not” said Edward still keeping his voice low partly for fear he would rise and shout at these men who felt they had the right to interfere in his life

The Marques narrowed his eyes “but of course you will be accepting it” he said firmly

Edward shot him a look laced with dislike “it is my decision sir”

Edward’s father seeing Edward was becoming annoyed interjected “of course Edward of course, we just cannot understand why you are not champing at the bit! A posting to Russia is a huge honour and a sign of Palmerston’s great trust in you, why would you not accept it?

Why indeed? thought Edward, he could hardly say ‘because I could not bear to leave Alfred behind, that I would sooner cut off my arm than be without him, rather die than leave him here alone’

“It is complicated father; it is such a long way and would be for several years”

“And?” Lothian butted in again “what does that have to do with anything?”

“Because I can’t leave Al...Florence” said Edward starting to feel somewhat panicky at their relentlessness

“Leave Florence?” the Marques snorted “she is your wife man! Where you go, she goes”

“But she cannot” said Edward wildly “I cannot’

“But why Edward?” said his father seeing Edward’s distress “why not”

“Because she is with child” blurted out Edward and then he froze realising what he had just said

“With child?” said his father beginning to smile “why did you not say?”

“It is still very early papa” said Edward “we did not want to say anything until we were in the safe period”

“Well well pregnant again” said the Marques “I must say it is about time! This calls for cigars I think and whiskey” and he rang the bell

“Please” said Edward trying to recover his equilibrium “I beg you do not say anything to Florence, or to mama father, or to lady Lothian sir, after Blair’s illness, Florence is very nervous that something may go wrong. Please wait until after the third month and then we will announce it formerly”

His father clapped him on the back “don’t worry my boy, we know women must have their little fancies”

“Thank you” said Edward “and I must apologise but I cannot stay, I am needed back at the House”

“Of course Edward” said the Marques mollified now he knew the reason for Edward’s behaviour “and let us hope this time it is a boy! The Lothian estates need an heir”

“Indeed” said Edward repressively thinking of the contrast between his father in law’s attitude to Blair which was of mild disinterest simply because she was a girl and Henry’s delight in her and insistence to him that one day women would be regarded as equal to men.
Edward nodded to his father and father in law, took his hat and coat from the butler and walked down the steps, waiting till he got around the corner to lean against the railings and close his eyes. What had he done? There was now no option for him but to attempt to get Florence with child as soon as possible; he would have to go to Plas Newydd with her. He needed desperately to talk to Alfred.

At the Palace Alfred was standing listening as the Prime Minister Lord Russell tried to bluster his way through explaining to the Queen why the rebellion in Sri Lanka was not the fault of the Government. He was not succeeding very well; the Queen was furious that the rebels had attacked Kandy led by their newly proclaimed King leading to the Governor Lord Torrington who was the Prime Minister's cousin to declare martial law. The rebel leaders had been defeated and executed but the whole episode had made the Queen profoundly unhappy. Alfred knew Her Majesty liked to see herself as a benevolent ruler beloved by her subjects across the globe but the Chartist activities earlier in the year had shaken that belief severely and incidents like this did not help. Personally Alfred believed that if you needed to keep troops in place to cement your rule, then it was most unlikely the populace were welcoming your presence but he of course kept that to himself.

He found as always his thoughts turning to Edward. Their time together yesterday had been most enjoyable and he shivered as he recalled Edward’s fervour as they made love, pinning him to the bed and declaring he was his and only his forever.

“My lord” it was one of the pages handed him a note; Alfred smiled as he recognised Edward’s handwriting ask him if they could meet for dinner later.

In Verreys, Edward waited with trepidation, he was not looking forward to the conversation because he knew that yet again he would be upsetting and Alfred and how he wished he did not have to but it was for the greater good. If Florence did not become pregnant he would find his father, father in law and Palmerston would have him in Russia by Christmas!

He saw Alfred coming towards him and as always his heart turned over with love and he was taken anew at just how beautiful Alfred was. He noted with amusement how many eyes were drawn to him, it was almost impossible not to notice him with that halo of golden hair and the delicate blues and greys in which he dressed; he almost seemed to glow as he walked towards Edward.

“Edward” Alfred smiled at him with love and sat down and then paused “what?”

“I was just watching all the people looking at you” said Edward softly “thinking how lucky I am that you are mine”

Alfred blushed “I am sure they did not Edward and besides you are more than handsome enough for both of us”

Now it as Edwards turn to go red and look down and then they both laughed

“How has your day been Alfred?” asked Edward anxious to delay the conversation he must have a while longer

“I had to stand there and listen while Russell tried to insist the Sri Lankan rebellion wasn’t the fault of the Government” grinned Alfred “I cannot say the Queen was convinced”

Edward shook his head “what does Her Majesty expect? People are rarely happy when a much
heavier tax burden is imposed on them”

“Her Majesty wishes to be loved” said Alfred “she struggles when she finds it is not so”

Edward nodded “I remember the silk weavers ball, and of course the Famine”

Alfred eyes immediately grew troubled “do not speak of what happen in Ireland Edward” he said “it brings to mind that awful night of the corn laws”

“I am sorry” said Edward “I did not mean to awaken bad memories”

“I know” said Alfred with a smile “now Edward, to what do I owe the pleasure of this dinner?”

“Can I not just wish to dine with you?” Edward prevaricated

“Of course” said Alfred “but we rarely dine out unless you have something you wish to say to which I may respond unfavourably and where I cannot call attention to myself” and he looked directly at Edward

Edward looked down slightly shame faced “I had no idea I was so transparent”

“Only to me Edward” said Alfred gently “now what is it you wish to say that you do not think I will want to hear?”

Edward took a breath “I must go to Plas Newydd Alfred”

“And why must you?” asked Alfred “when you know how I feel?”

“Because if I do not I may get sent to Russia instead”

Alfred looked at him in astonishment “to Russia? Edward I fail to see the link! Why must you go with her to my family home to avoid going to Russia? I thought you had told me you were not going?”

“It seems Lord Palmerston had a conversation with my father in law” said Edward grimly “he sent me a note inviting me to meet him and my father this morning and when I arrived, I was grilled as to why I had not accepted this wonderful honour”

“Oh Edward” said Alfred sympathetically “I cannot imagine that was enjoyable!”

“Indeed it was not! I thought they were about to frogmarch me to Palmerston to force me to accept the offer”

“So what did you do?” Alfred was intrigued “how did you manage to forestall them?”

“Ah…..” Edward flushed “I told them I could not travel because Florence was pregnant”

As always when he heard Florence’s name, Alfred’s stomach dropped “and is she?”

Edward shook his head “I do not believe so”

“Oh” Alfred stared unfocused into the distance and Edward could see his mind working “but then…..”

“Yes” Edward knew he did not need to spell it out “that is why I must go to Plas Newydd with her”
Alfred swallowed “you wish Florence to conceive a child in my family home?”

Edward stared at him; he had not thought of it like that and cursed himself for not seeing it sooner

“It is merely that I must be where she is Alfred” he said gently trying to soften the blow “that is all”

Edward could see Alfred’s hands were shaking and he wished he could reach over and hold them, why had he not done this somewhere private where he could comfort him?

“And if she is not with child soon, then you will be sent to Russia?”

Edward nodded “I cannot see how I can avoid it” and then seeing the look on Alfred’s face he burst out “Alfred please! I am only trying to keep up together. I will do whatever is necessary to be with you. I know this is distasteful to you, it is to me also but things are not as we would wish, you know that”

Alfred sat stiff backed looking at him and then his shoulders slumped “I know” he whispered “I know, but Edward why must it be so hard?

“I do not know” said Edward “I only know that it does not matter how hard it is, I will not leave you to go to Russia”
Edward was thoughtful as he walked home, although Alfred had tried to rally himself at their dinner and tell Edward of the latest court gossip, he had not really succeeded and conversation had fallen flat as there was almost too much between them to be said.

Alfred was right he thought, it was unfair of him and Florence to go to Plas Newydd. He understood how bitterly Alfred resented the very idea that Florence would be in his childhood home, the place he regarded as his refuge. Equally, Blair needed the fresh air, although she was much much better, she still wheezed little coughs that made Edward’s heart hurt to hear her. He did not want her to suffer from breathing difficulties or a weak chest, she needed country air. As he walked he began to ponder more his whole situation and the fact that both is father and father in law seemed to feel that had every right to interfere in his life and did not regard him as an adult despite him being a husband, father and close to the heart of Government. As he turned into his road, he looked at his house which had been a present from his father in law; to be sure it was fine enough, elegant but perhaps somewhat small. It was about time that he, Florence and Blair had a larger house and yes, why not? Their own house in the country or perhaps on the south coast. His family was very rich; they could buy the Marques 10 times over. Edward had never paid much attention to money, possibly he thought ruefully because he had never known what it was like to not have money. He knew that with various trusts and investments he had more than enough money to purchase a larger property and a country residence. He resolved that that was what he would do.

“Florence”

“Yes Edward”

They were breakfasting together before Edward left for Parliament

“I wish you to write to Lady Anglesey and tell her that we must after all decline her invitation to Plas Newydd”
Florence’s head snapped up “decline it? But Edward I have accepted it, we accepted it”

“Nevertheless I no longer wish us to go” said Edward firmly

Florence was bewildered, Edward was usually amenable to matters to do with their family life and did not interfere “but Blair needs the fresh air Edward” she said “really I am most surprised as this sudden change of heart”

Edward raised his eyebrows at her tone, most unlike her normal calm one but said nothing to rebuke her; he knew she was worried about Blair.

“I know” he said “and it is of Blair I am thinking. I would like us to purchase our own house in the country or perhaps on the south coast where you and Blair can enjoy as much time out of these London smog’s as you like” and he smiled

“Oh Edward!” Florence got up and rushed around the table “our own house, that would be marvellous”

“I’m also minded that we should have a larger house” he said “this was fine before with just us two but Blair needs more room”

“Edward” Florence flung her arms around him “you are the best of husbands. I have been thinking now we have Blair we are a little cramped and of course when we have others…”she paused delicately “we will need more room still”

Edward patted her back kindly “then may I leave you to find us a house to rent in the country while we look for our own to purchase and to write to lady Anglesey? I am sure she will understand”

“Of course Edward” she said kissing him “I will see to it right away”

At Uxbridge House, charlotte tore open the note and made an exclamation of surprise

“What is it my dear?” asked Henry who was reading the newspaper

“Florence Drummond” she handed him the note “she and Blair will not be going to Plas Newydd after all”

“Oh?” said Henry in surprise “and why not?”

“She writes that she and Edward are looking to purchase their own house and will rent somewhere in Kent or perhaps Sussex while they look for somewhere suitable”

“Hmmm” said Henry “do you think perhaps that Edward may have had second thoughts?”

“Second thoughts?” said charlotte frowning

“Yes, you know that Alfred was unhappy about your offer charlotte, perhaps he conveyed that to Edward”

“But Blair needs the air to help with her recovery”

“Indeed and as Florence makes clear they will be going to the country just not to Plas Newydd”

“Who is not going to Plas Newydd?” enquired Septimus as he entered the room
“Mr. and Mrs. Drummond” said Charlotte “it seems they will be purchasing their own residence”

“Ah….,” Septimus sat down

“Ah? Is that all you have to say?” said Charlotte

Septimus shrugged “it seems much more sensible mama. You know Alfred did not want her there. Now he will be happy or as happy as he can be given the circumstances”

“Yes well….,” Charlotte was feeling somewhat put out, she had made the offer impulsively yes but with a determination to help and now it seemed it wasn’t wanted

Seeing her discomfiture Septimus rose and put an arm around her shoulders “do not feel put out mama, the offer was very much appreciated and that is the important thing and moreover Alfred will be much pleased”

He did not disclose that his own heart dropped a little, he had been planning to join the party at the last minute. He had told himself it was stupid that Florence would be there with Edward but he found he had not cared, all he wanted was the chance to see Florence and spend some time with her even if that were in the company of others.

“Not going to Plas Newydd?” Alfred stared at Edward hardly believing his ears “but the other day you seemed so determined Edward and besides do you not need to err….,”

“Florence and I will still go away” said Edward gently “we will rent somewhere while we purchase our own estate in the country”

“oh” Alfred looked down, he was happy that Edward and Florence would not be going to Plas Newydd, but they would still be going away together with the purpose of ensuring Florence as pregnant. The mere thought of Edward naked in bed with her almost made him want to vomit.

“You know I must Alfred” said Edward sadly knowing how much this was hurting Alfred “it has to be done”

Alfred rubbed the back of his neck “I know” he said quietly “but tell me Edward, how you would feel if you were me? If another was kissing me, lying with me, how would you feel?”

Edward shook his head “I only think of it in my worst nightmares. It is my biggest fear that one day you will tire of this, of me” suddenly he found he was close to tears “sometimes I wonder why you stay Alfred”

“Because I love you” said Alfred simply “I love you Edward and I will always be with you”

“And I with you” said Edward pulling him into an embrace “always”

3 weeks later

Edward held Blair looked around the house Florence had secured for them. It stood on the slopes of the South Downs facing the sea with a path that led down the white cliffs to a small sand and shingle beach. It had large windows and was very airy, with a garden sheltered from the winds off the sea by a high wall. She had done extremely well thought Edward, it was perfect
“What do you think darling?” whispered Edward to Blair “do you think mama has done well? Papa thinks she has”

Blair looked at him and then pushed her fingers against his nose

“Papa” she said “papa” and she beamed at him, Edward thought his heart might explode with love for her

“Florence!!” Edward’s yell startled Blair who reared back and looked at him whimpering “sorry my angel, papa is sorry, FLORENCE!!”

“Edward Edward what is it” Florence came running in from where she had been supervising the unpacking “has something happened to Blair?”

“Florence she said papa didn’t you darling? You said papa yes you did!”

“Oh!” Florence looked thrilled “oh you are such a clever girl! Can you say mama? Say mama” she cooed

“Mama” said Blair “mama” and she held out her arms to Florence

“Yes! Yes darling” Florence took Blair and bounced her up and down delightedly

“Mama, papa, mama” said Blair happily grabbing for Florence’s pendant “papa”

Edward and Florence shared delighted smiles “I cannot believe she said papa” said Edward in wonder

“She knows her papa” said Florence “and her mama don’t you sweetheart, yes you do. Say mama again”

Blair however had decided that she’d done quite enough talking and shook her little head firmly and began to make her ‘I would like milk now please’ noises

Edward laughed “she has a will of her own I think”

“Indeed she has” said Florence “come on precious girl, let us get you fed” and she left the room with Edward staring after them. Florence was a wonderful wife in so many ways and he would forever be grateful to her for giving him Blair, it was just impossible for him to feel anymore than affection for her; sexual desire, passion, love, all that was reserved for Alfred. He just thanked god that she had not noticed his lack of ardour and hoped she never did.

In London, Alfred was at his house supping with Alexi and William who had come to comfort him in Edward’s absence; he had consumed an unwisely large amount of wine and port.

“You know” he waved his glass at them both “I fell in love with Edward the first time I saw him. I had never seen such a handsome man” he was slurring his words and Alexi and William glanced at each other

“He is indeed handsome” said Alexi gently

“I wasn’t sure he felt the same but then one night he got his tinderbox out” and he chuckled happily

“Yes you have told us of it before” smiled William
Alfred leant over to him conspiratorially “did I tell you of the time we went swimming in France?” he giggled “we had no clothes on”

William nodded

“And then we kissed by the lake” he sighed and leant his cheek on his hand “he was so beau… beaut…..handsome. Don’t you think he is handsome?”

“He is very handsome” said Alexi again smiling at Alfred

“He IS” said Alfred “and he’s mine!” he looked at Alexi belligerently “MINE”

“We know” said William patting his hand

“Cept he’s not is he?” Alfred slumped down in his chair “he’s not mine! He’s hers! That woman!”

“Not by choice” said William “you know that”

Alfred shook his head morosely “you know he’s with her now? Trying to get her pregnant!” he spat the last word

William and Alexi looked at each other anxiously again “do not think about it” said Alexi trying to remove Alfred’s glass from his reach but he was too slow and Alfred grabbed it and cradled it

“What do you think he does?” said Alfred “to get himself so he is able to do his duty??”

“Alfred” said William helplessly “please, do not torment yourself like this”

“What?? He must do something? Alfred stared into his glass and then looked at them sadly “do you think he thinks of me?”

“I do not know” said William trying to keep the pity out of his voice

Alfred took another gulp of wine “thinking of me so he can do his duty to her” he began to laugh and Alexi and William hurriedly joined in before they realised the laughter had turned to sobs

“Why can he not be mine?” the tears ran unchecked down Alfred’s face “why?”

“He is yours in all the ways that matter Alfred” said Alexi squeezing his hand and offering him his handkerchief

But Alfred shook his head “it’s so hard” he choked “so hard”

“Alfred” Alexi came round and embraced him gesturing to William to remove the wine glass and bottle from the table “all will be well I promise you”

Alfred wept into his shoulder “you don’t know that”

“Edward loves you; all this is so he can remain with you here and not go to Russia isn’t it?”

Alfred didn’t say anything but his sobs lessened slightly

“Isn’t it?” repeated Alexi and Alfred nodded

“Well then!” said Alexi “now I think you should go to bed, things will be better in the morning”

“He does love me doesn’t he?” said Alfred
“Of course he does” said William and Alexi unhesitatingly “of course”

Down in Sussex Edward rolled of Florence relieved that he had managed to do what was necessary. He hoped that she would become pregnant quickly so he would not have to keep doing this. Next to him Florence lay silently in the dark and then she turned to him

“Edward” she said “do you love me?”
an answer to a question

Chapter Summary

This chapter takes us back over the the previous 3 weeks leading up to Florence asking "that" question to Edward and receiving an answer....

Chapter Notes

Historical notes - all the quotes come directly from "the Young Husbands Handbook" published in 1837 and "FRUITS OF PHILOSOPHY A TREATISE ON THE POPULATION QUESTION" By Charles Knowlton published in 1832.

3 weeks earlier

After Edward left, Florence sat smiling to herself at the breakfast table; Edward never ceased to surprise her. Buying their own house and one by the sea, she had already decided she would prefer a house by the sea, she found beaches such romantic places and of course Blair would adore playing on one.

She quickly penned a note to Charlotte Anglesey as Edward had requested, it wouldn’t be right to let her to continue to make arrangements as if she, Edward and Blair would join them at Plas Newydd but she also resolved to go and see her in a few days to explain more fully what had happened.

Walking to parliament, Edward congratulated himself momentarily that he would be able to send Alfred the happy news that he and Florence would not after all be going to Plas Newydd before gloom once again descended. He still had to get Florence with child again and at speed, before his plan to avoid Russia fell apart. He wondered if there were any ways he could improve the chances of Florence conceiving quickly; if she took too long his father and Lothian might start to calculate when they would have known and work out he’d been lying to them plus frankly, the sooner she was pregnant, the sooner he could cease those duties he found so unpleasant. As he walked he mused on the subject, the House of Commons library was one of the finest in the world, perhaps he could find answers there.

An hour later found him in the furthest corner of the library under the window, facing the door in case anyone should come in and enquire as to what he was looking at even though he was sure “the young husbands’ handbook” was a quite blameless and indeed wise publication. However after some time he began to revise his view. There was much on how women felt about love

“Women feel more acutely than men; their love is more ardent, more pure.”

And that it was his duty to respond to this by devoting “every energy and every care to their (women’s) perfect preservation”
It talked of where wives should be allowed to make decisions

“As to matters of little comparative moment – as to what shall be for dinner – as to how the house shall be furnished – as to the management of the house and of menial servants – as to those matters, and many others, the wife may have her way without any danger” but that any serious matters should be decided by him

And even that he should indulge any feelings of jealousy she may have “Though her suspicions be perfectly groundless; though they be wild as the dreams of madmen; though they may present a mixture of the furious and ridiculous, still they are to be treated with the greatest lenity and tenderness.” Edward wondered quite what the mentor would say about suspicious that were not groundless

However on sexual intercourse there was nothing which seemed to Edward a somewhat alarming gap in advice for young husbands. He would have found it infinitely preferable to have learned what was expected from a book then through his father’s clumsy attempts aided by licentious pamphlets.

He turned to the second book he had with him which seemed less promising “the fruits of philosophy a treatise on population question” by Charles Knowlton. 20 minutes later and he had changed his opinion; the book was most useful particularly in explaining female anatomy even though he wasn’t necessarily convinced by what it said for instance

The clitoris is analogous in its structure to the penis, and like it, is exquisitely sensitive, being, as it is supposed, the principal seat of pleasure. It is subject to erection or distension, like the penis, from like causes

Which simply could not be true thought Edward, Florence had never responded in anything like the way Alfred did to him though he supposed he had never tried to touch her in anything like the way he did Alfred. He shuddered slightly and carried on; the mere thought of touching Florence as he did Alfred was not one he wanted to dwell on.

The book suggested that “The circumstances under which a female is most likely to conceive are, first, when she is in health; second, between the ages of twenty-six and thirty; third, after she has for a season been deprived of those intercourses she had previously enjoyed; fourth, soon after menstruating” Florence fulfilled the first three thought Edward and as for the fourth, he had no intention ever of discussing such an issue with Florence! At length he laid the book aside, as interesting and useful it had been, it seemed there was no magic answer as to how he should ensure Florence fell pregnant quickly.

The book did say that regular intercourse was necessary, at least twice weekly for conception; Edward screwed up his nose thinking, perhaps if he had sex with Florence more often that would improve their chance of her conceiving, four times a week would surely mean she would be with child twice as quick. Of course it would be difficult to manage but not impossible, he was sure if he thought of Alfred enough and perhaps if he followed the books advice and abstained from sex with Alfred that might help though how Alfred would react to that he didn’t t want to think, he imagined not well.

“You want us to abstain from love making Edward?” Alfred looked at him askance “but why?”

Edward sighed; Alfred’s happiness that he and Florence would no longer be going to Plas Newydd was going to be short-lived. Alfred had been delighted by the news, kissing Edward over and over “thank you my love, thank you, thank you, I knew in the end you would not be so cruel to me” and
Edward had held him tight grateful that for once he’d been able to give him pleasing news. However it did not change the unpalatable fact that Florence needed to get with child.

“You know that Florence must conceive so I do not have to go to Russia” said Edward gently

“yes but I do not see what that has to do with anything” said Alfred nettled “she conceived Blair whilst we were regularly bedding each other Edward”

“I have been reading on the subject, she must become pregnant quickly Alfred within this month, or my lie to Lothian and my father will be found out”

“And? Edward I still don’t see the relevance to us” said Alfred crossly

“I will need to um fulfil my duties more regularly” said Edward hating the conversation more with every minute “and from what I have read, the longer a man abstains the more err his seed is potent and his wife more likely to conceive”

Alfred swore under his breath and walked away from Edward breathing hard; it seemed everything he was given with one hand was taken away with the other. Edward stood silently giving him time to regain his composure. Alfred lent against the window resting his forehead against the cool glass. He knew, didn’t he always? that Edward was right and that Florence must become pregnant but yet again it seemed he was to suffer too. He heard Edward come up behind him and then felt his arms round his waist, he leaned back against him as Edward gently kissed his neck

“I am sorry Alfred” said Edward sadly “I know this is hard for you”

Alfred let out a huge sigh “yes it is Edward; nothing is ever easy for us is it?”

Edward hugged him tighter “no” he said simply “perhaps one day it will be, I’m always hopeful it will be Alfred, I refuse to believe that love like ours is for no reason”

They stayed together, Alfred revelling in the feeling of Edwards’s arms around him and Edward resting his cheek against Alfred’s soft hair. Eventually Alfred spoke again

“Edward, this abstinence, when does it begin?”

“I hadn’t really thought” began Edward and then he caught the undercurrent in Alfred’s voice and he laughed

“I thought tomorrow” he said turning Alfred around in his arms and kissing him “definitely tomorrow”

“Mrs Drummond ma’am” the butler announced

“Florence” charlotte did not rise, she was still feeling somewhat put out by the Drummond’s refusal to come to Plas Newydd

“Lady Anglesey” Florence curtseyed “I have come to apologise to you in person”

“There is no need to apologise” said charlotte somewhat stiffly “it is of course entirely your decision not to take up our offer”

“Nevertheless I feel an apology is owed and an explanation” said flounce lightly but firmly
“Very well, sit” Charlotte waved her arm at the chair opposite

Florence sat “Edward and I were so very grateful that you offered Plas Newydd to us” she began “but if I may confide in you, Edward has been feeling for some time that we should stand on our own two feet more rather than trespass on the good graces of others”

Charlotte began to speak but Florence held up her hand “please if I may continue”

Charlotte nodded

“Our house, as you know was purchased by my father and Edward feels, and I agree, that it is time we had a larger house of our own and also a place we could retire to by the sea to give Blair the fresh air she needs and space to play. Edward has asked me to look into renting a house while we look for a residence on the coast and I believe I have found the ideal house on the South Downs. It is for that reason and that reason alone that we have declined your kind offer and I hope that one day we will both be able to come to Plas Newydd and that in turn you may come to stay with us by the sea” She finished her speech and looked hopefully at Charlotte.

Charlotte rose and came over to sit next to Florence

“Thank you for coming to tell me that my dear. I confess I was somewhat baffled by your sudden change of heart but that makes perfect sense to me and I am delighted that you and Edward are taking this course of action”

Florence smiled at her, she looked well thought Charlotte and she pressed on

“May I enquire as to how other matters are” she paused delicately “the matters you discussed with me a few months ago?”

Florence smiled again “they are better madam though I confess I did for a while fear they would never be. Edward explained to me the difficult affairs they are dealing with at the foreign office and his own fatigue and concern not to rush me back into my…..duties but now matters are as they were before”

‘poor child’ thought Charlotte sadly ‘so Alfred had spoken to Edward and somehow in someway relations had been resumed but how heartbreaking that it had to be at the behest of his lover and his lovers mother working to make it happen’

Florence continued on “Edward is the best of husbands lady Anglesey” she said earnestly “his concern for my welfare is paramount and as for Blair, he worships her; his fear and anxiety when she was sick were painful to behold and yet I could lean on him for all I needed. He was my rock. Relations between us may ebb and flow but he loves me, I know it”

Charlotte bit her lip, how distressing this all was. How she wanted to tell Florence the truth, that Edward did not love her, he loved her son but how could she? Not only would she expose Alfred to great harm which she would never do but Florence would be destroyed by the knowledge. All she could do was offer her what advice and care she could and hope that one day in some way the whole sorry situation could be resolved. She took a breath and smiled at Florence

“You are most fortunate my dear” she said “and now tell me, how is Blair?”

On the journey to the South Downs, Edward and Florence talked of Blair and how much better she seemed, and gossiped of their friends and acquaintances
“And tell me, how is Lord Alfred?” asked Florence “it is so long since I have seen him”

After so many years, Edward had got used to the slight drop in his stomach every time Florence mentioned his name and he smiled at her “oh he is quite well, his palace duties keep him very busy and as you know he is much devoted to the Queen” he knew Florence thought Alfred was in love with the Queen and it suited him to let her believe it.

He thought back to how he had left Alfred the last time he had seen him. It hadn’t taken long for Alfred to decide that abstinence for Edward did not have to mean abstinence for him.

“After all Edward” he said his blue eyes sparkling with mischief “it is only you who must not spend, I on the other hand…..”

“Alfred that is not being fair” said Edward

Alfred shook his head regretfully “alas Edward life isn’t fair” and he slid onto his lap kissing him and tangling his fingers in his hair “and here you are and I understand that of course this is hard for you…” he ground his hips against Edward “very hard” he murmured

“Alfred…..” Edward groaned against his lips “don’t tease me”

Alfred grinned against his mouth “very well because I love you I will cease teasing you with my touches” he got up and went over to the bed and lay down “however I need relief and as you can’t” and he slid his hand inside breeches where his erection was clearly visible and began to caress it

“Alfred…..” this time it came out as a low moan “please”

Alfred stopped and pulled off his shirt and layback down

“Are you sure I can’t tempt you Edward?” he said devilishly

“You could tempt the angel Gabriel Alfred” said Edward putting his face in his hands to hide the sight “for the love of god stop!”

“Very well because it is you and I love you. Edward open your eyes”

Edward cautiously took one hand away, Alfred was still lying shirtless on the bed but his hands were behind his head

“There you see” he said “how much I love you”

Edward took his other hand away

“Though” mused Alfred thoughtfully “the moment you leave I will be forced to pleasure myself thinking of how you thrust inside me and moan my name”

“Alfred I swear if you do not stop…..” Edward had been torn between shaking him, laughing and wanting to tear his clothes off

“Edward?” Florence’s voice interrupted his thoughts “are you listening to me?”

“Sorry my dear” said Edward “I was contemplating how we might keep Russia out of Afghanistan”
Florence rolled her eyes “now Edward” she said “no work for a few weeks”

“Sorry my dear” he said

“ah we are nearly there” said Florence putting her head out of the window as she recognised the farmhouse at the top of the road “Edward I hope that you like the house”

“I am sure I will love it my dear” he said

Florence was very gratified, Edward had loved the house, and he’d walked around it exclaiming at the view and the light

“Well done my dear, you have made a wonderful choice” he said squeezing her hand. She’d been supervising the unpacking when she’d heard him shout her name urgently and she’d dropped everything and run expecting to see some catastrophe only to see him smiling at her with such a smile the whole room seemed drenched in sunlight

“Florence she said papa didn’t you darling? You said papa yes you did!”

He looked ecstatic and her heart bounced with love for him and their daughter

She held out her arms “oh you are such a clever girl! Can you say mama? Say mama” and when Blair said mama she thought she would explode with joy. She looked at Edward and he smiled at her again, only they two knew this feeling she thought, this wonderful life affirming feeling of love for their baby girl and each other even if he had never expressly said it.

That night, Edward has joined her in the bedroom and she had barely turned out the light before he was pressing his affections on her, lifting up her nightdress, his fingers seeking her private place

“Edward” she gasped as he kissed her and then he was inside her quickly as he usually was, it was gratifying how he couldn’t wait thought Florence and she put her arms around him.

Afterwards he stroked her hair before rolling off her to catch his breath; she lay silently in the dark and then she turned to him

“Edward” she said “do you love me?"

Edward felt his stomach sink like a stone and his heart pounded nineteen to the dozen. How could he answer that? He *could* lie, he could say he did, just three words “yes I do”, he didn’t even have to say the word but he felt strongly, oh so strongly, that he just could not betray Alfred that way, he just couldn’t do it. He loved Alfred with all his heart and soul, more than life, if the sun ever burnt out, his love for Alfred would still be there shining forever, he could not tell Florence he loved her, the words would choke him.

He stared into the darkness and said as gently and tenderly as he could “I care for you deeply”

And Florence felt her heart crack in two at the sad kindness in his voice
aftermath

Chapter Summary

the aftermath of that question turns out to be not as Edward expects, Alfred & Septimus talk and there is an invitation

Chapter Notes

I feel i need to give some explanation for Florence's reaction. Victorian women were the ones charged with keeping the marriage happy; while men were supposed to love, honour and cherish their wives, if they did not, it was societies view that it was very much down to the woman being at fault. It's also true that sadly when we love people and they dont love us, we think there's something wrong with us that needs fixing and that if only we could fix it we'd be loved by the other....

historical notes: i found this website which is full of how to issue, accept and decline invitations which is brilliant
http://www.victorianlondon.org/publications/ladiesandgents-1.htm
the marques of hastings did once exist but the title is now in abeyance

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Florence lay there and Edward could feel her stillness, her whole body rigid with shock at his words. He focused on breathing in and out waiting for the storm, almost resigned to having to explain why he did not and the collapse of everything he had worked so hard to maintain but no storm came.
Instead after 5 minutes of total silence, Edward felt Florence’s weight in the bed shift and then she got up.

“Florence?” he said tentatively

“I'm going to see that Blair is sleeping well” she said her voice tight with the effort of suppressing her tears

“Would you like me to come? Asked Edward

“No” her voice was flat “you stay here and sleep” and then she picked up a candle from the corner of the room, opened the door and was gone.

Edward laid back, the shame and guilt threatening to smother him. 'poor Florence' he thought his heart aching with pity 'poor poor Florence'; he wondered what on earth had possessed her to ask him that question though he knew, if he were being honest deep down, that it had only been a matter of time before she did ask it. He’d never told her he loved her, not when they were courting, not when he'd asked her father for her hand, not when they became engaged, not even on their wedding day. It was only natural at some point that she would wonder. Turning over, he thumped the pillow angrily, she was his wife, and she had his name, his house, his daughter, the public recognition of marriage, his affection and his care, why could that not be enough? Why did she have to ask that
question? Because she deserves to be loved said his conscience and you don’t love her, she’ll never
know what it is to be loved properly and equally in return. Edward turned over again trying to quell
the voice in his head ‘it's not my fault’ he wanted to shout’ if everyone would let be with Alfred,
one of this would have to have happened’. Although perhaps he thought as he lay there calming
down it was not all bad? Perhaps this would give them the opportunity to have a more honest
conversation about their marriage? Perhaps this could be the first very tiny step on a road to a better
understanding between them? He hoped it was so.

In Blair’s room, Florence bent over the cot sucking in her breath; she felt winded as if she’d been
struck with a heavy object. It had simply not occurred to her that Edward wouldn’t reply in the
affirmative, that he would not declare his love or at least agree he did love her, but the sadness in his
voice as he said he cared for her had spoken volumes. He didn’t love her and he was well aware of it
and even worse, it grieved him that he didn’t. She knew with scalding humiliation that he felt sorry
for her, that he pitied her because he didn’t love her but knew she loved him.

She watched Blair sleeping; no matter what happened she knew she would always thank Edward for
her darling girl. She tucked the blanket around her more closely and stroked her cheek before picking
up the candle and making her way downstairs. She couldn’t contemplate going back to sleep next to
Edward just yet. She could not bear to hear that sad pity in his voice again.

She lay down on the sofa where the last embers of the fire were dying with her cheek on the cushion.
She would go upstairs later; she just needed some time to calm her head. Outside she heard the rain
begin to gently patter against the windows; she closed her eyes trying to shut her mind against the
memories of the night. Behind her closed eyelids, recollections of her time with Edward flickered
into life. The ball where they had met when she wondered if all she had heard about how handsome
he was had been true and how it had indeed proved to be the case and he had started when she
unlike other women had challenged him on his dull conversation and had seen for the first time, that
sun bright smile sweep over his face. His proposal where she had wept in his arms and their wedding
day when he had been so nervous she’d felt his hand shaking in hers. And of course their
honeymoon in Italy where they had spent happy days together and she had been so proud to see the
admiring glances of other women. Of course it had taken time for her marital duties to fully begin but
once they had she had been assiduous in them, never once refusing Edward and of course that
wonderful night at the Queens ball when she had found out she was pregnant and Edward’s joy at
the news. Of course like all marriages they had their difficulties….Edwards seeming reluctance to
resume their relations after Blair and of course Edwards’s heavy work load meaning she did not see
him as much as she would like but still! She was the most fortunate of wives; Edward was kind and
patient, giving her complete freedom in the house and a generous allowance never once complaining
over anything she spent on clothes or jewellery. He was also a wonderful father to Blair, taking his
cue from the Prince Consort and happily spending time playing with her, feeding her, taking her out
in the pram in the face of considerable parental opposition.

It was becoming cold in the room as the fire died and shivering she stood up to retrieve her shawl;  as
she did so she caught sight of herself in the mirror. Holding the candle up, she examined her
reflection. Clearly there must be something wrong with her if Edward didn’t love her. She thought
she was pretty enough, witty enough, that she pleased him; he’d never expressed any dissatisfaction
with her, not that she was aware of anyway. Perhaps she’d been overly immodest in the bedroom?
She had been putting her arms around Edward and he would have felt her breasts against him,
perhaps he felt this behaviour was unseemly? Or possibly she made too many demands on his time
and patience? Whatever it was, it was up to her to change and be a better wife to Edward, surely if
he could see what an excellent wife she was, he would fall in love with her. She lay back down
again wrapping herself in the shawl, she would just lay here a bit longer and then she would go back
Florence awoke with a start, she was now covered by thick blanket and daylight was streaming into
the room. Cautiously she raised her head; where was she, why was she not in her bed? She blinked
and rubbed her eyes and then opened them fully as the memory of the previous night came back to
her. She sat up, she must find Edward! Just then she heard sounds coming from the room next door,
frowning she cocked her ear to listen, it sounded like, yes it was, singing. Florence went over to the
door and opened it quietly, Edward was in there with Blair, she could hear her baby giggle as he
evidently did something funny, she opened the door slightly wider and watched through the crack in
the door; Edward was sat opposite Blair on the floor singing “the farmyard” doing farming actions
which Blair was trying to copy. How he loved her thought Florence, their beautiful girl. As she
looked on, Blair saw her

“Mama” she said stretching out her arms “mama”

Edward looked round and a look that was a mixture of sadness, guilt and worry shot across his face.
He picked up Blair and took her over to Florence

“Here’s mama” he said gently and he held Blair out to Florence who took her in her arms and
nuzzled into her hair as Blair curled into her shoulder sucking her thumb

“Oh you’re getting heavy” she said as she rocked her up and down and then she looked at Edward
who struggled to meet her eyes

“Thank you for the blanket” she said quietly

“Florence I…” he began but she cut him off, she did not want to revisit the previous night’s
happenings. It was clear she needed to be a better wife and that had to start right away

“I am sorry I placed you in a difficult position Edward” she said “It will not happen again”

“But…” he began but she placed her finger on his lips

“No Edward you do not have to say anything, It is clear I have failed in some way and I will do all I
can to make it up to you. Come along darling” the latter was addressed to Blair “let’s get you
dressed” and carrying Blair she left the room with Edward staring after her.

Septimus slapped Alfred on the shoulder “I do believe you are suffering from an excess of alcohol
Alfred” he said

“Do not speak to me Septimus” groaned Alfred “I have had to spend the day with Her Majesty
suppressing the most relentless headache and biliousness”

Septimus laughed “this is what happens when you spend too long at court Alfred. You forget how to
drink properly as we do in the army” he paused “was there any particular reason that you forgot
yourself quite so much?”

Alfred nodded and then winced

“Edward by any chance?” asked Septimus

Alfred sighed “am I that transparent?”
“As far as I am aware no one else causes you to feel so much pain Alfred” said Septimus trying and failing not to sound sharp.

“It’s not his fault Septimus” said Alfred “you know it is not. He would be with me if he could but he cannot, we cannot and so he must live his life and I must live mine the best we can”

Septimus looked at him shrewdly “it is more than that though, I mean forgive me Alfred but that is always the case, what else happened that caused you to drink so”

Alfred closed his eyes and lay back in the chair “he must impregnate that wife of his and soon or he will be sent to Russia”

“Russia?” said Septimus sounding as baffled as Alfred had when Edward had told him “I don’t understand”

“Palmerston offered him a position in Moscow, he was planning to reject it but his father and father in law caught wind of it and tried to bully him into taking it” he opened his eyes “the only way to put them off was to say he could not accept because his wife was pregnant and would be unable to withstand the journey”

“But the reason he didn’t want to accept it is because he doesn’t want to leave you” said Septimus softly, Edward Drummond did cause unspeakable upheaval in his brother’s life but he did love him, he had to give him that

Alfred nodded “but of course that means ensuring she is pregnant; that is why he backed out of accepting mamas offer of Plas Newydd and why they have gone to the South Downs instead. I couldn’t bear the thought of the two of them there having…”he broke off swallowing before continuing “relations in our family home”

Septimus nodded “I think that is understandable”

“And so instead he is on the South Downs with her doing his duty” he laughed bitterly

Septimus scratched his head, what an unbelievable tangle this all was.

“How does he do it?” Septimus wondered aloud and Alfred shot him a venomous look “no Alfred I don’t mean in that way, I mean how is with her all the time and never once lets the mask slip? Does she never suspect? And poor woman, to be with a man who prefers other men” it slipped out unthinkingly but Alfred flared up at once

“Poor woman? Poor woman!!! oh yes we should all feel mightily sorry for Mrs. Drummond, married to the most perfect angel on earth, being with him every day, waking next to him, able to take his arm in public, to call him my dearest in front of the world, to bear his child, to be acknowledged by the world as his love while I…I can’t even call him Edward in front of others!! Forgive me Septimus if my sympathy for her does not run deep!”

“I just meant…..” said Septimus feebly in the face of Alfred’s anger

“I know what you meant Septimus” said Alfred wearily “and do not think that Edward and I have not thought many times about how they could divorce but it is not possible”

“But mama and papa did it” protested Septimus “surely there must be a way?”

“Mama fell in love with papa and would have no other” said Alfred “how likely is that Florence married to Edward would prefer another? What man could compare to him?”
“But she doesn’t know him Alfred” said Septimus “how can she? He hides his true self from her and he is in love with you. Perhaps if she met another man, a man who was truly in love with her, that would change”

“Perhaps but” Alfred waved his hand “it is so unlikely that would happen as to be impossible”

“Perhaps” said Septimus “perhaps”

It was clear to Edwards growing dismay that Florence had decided to simply behave as if she had never asked her question of him. Instead of it being a conduit to discussion about their marriage, it was clear Florence had decided that it was her fault he did not love her and that if she became a better wife he would. She had become almost absurdly deferential to him in all matters until he wanted to scream. He had tried saying that it was up to her what Blair ate for example or where they want for a walk but she insisted he had the final word. He was torn between pity and exasperation; he felt suffocated by the cloying attention and at night she had become even less active during their coupling, not even putting her arms round him but laying there with her arms by her sides and her eyes closed. It was not of course that he wanted her to participate but equally if she lay there almost as if she were dead, it was unnerving, and it was hard enough to manage what he had to do as it was! He longed for Alfred with all his heart; with Florence’s constant attention he felt the only place he had for himself were the few inches inside his skull where his memories and dreams of Alfred lived. He felt these were going to be the longest few weeks of his life.

1 week later

Septimus opened the letter handed to him by the butler

My Dear Septimus

If you are disengaged on the weekend a week hence, will you give us the pleasure of your company here at Scotney? We intend to have Croquet and Archery in the afternoon on Saturday with a picnic on Sunday, and shall number about forty people. We even have hopes of dancing in the evening if the local regiment do not let us down! Should you have any friends you wish to bring with you, we shall be charmed to see them. Our son Charles has just come home on leave, and that is the reason we are getting up this little gaiety.

With kind regards

Hastings

Septimus let the letter drop onto the table by his plate thoughtfully. He knew the Marques of Hastings through his son Charles; they had served together abroad. He knew from experience their weekend parties were always joyous occasions and he would have accepted had it been taking place on the wilds of Northumberland; however Scotney was not far from the South Downs and the beginning of a plan formed in his mind. Perhaps he could take Alfred with him to Scotney and invite the Drummond’s to the party also. That way Alfred could see Edward and he could spend time with Florence though ‘why’, his brain also said to him, ‘you think that is a good idea I can’t imagine! she is married Septimus and very much in love with her husband’. ‘Yes’, the other half of Septimus's brain whispered back as he went to his writing desk to reply, ‘she is but feelings can change you know, feelings can change’.
Chapter End Notes

I promise the next chapter will have more Alfred and Edward together
on the beach

Chapter Summary

The Drummond's are invited to a party and Alfred and Edward see each other again

Chapter Notes

thank you so much for all the lovely comments and kudos I've had for the last chapter. It took me a while to work out what Florence would do and I'm so glad people understand why she's doing what she is doing.

and yaaaay it's time for our boys to be reunited again, the ending is a bit smutty but nothing graphic and yes I have gone for all the beach cliches!

dedicating this chapter to all in the Saltmine :D :D

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Florence turned over the envelope left by her breakfast plate frowning, she didn’t recognise the handwriting. Only a handful of people knew they where they were; her parents, Edward’s parents, Lord Palmerston and of course Lord Alfred but this looked like neither a letter from either of their parents or from Parliament which would surely carry an official seal and Lord Alfred rarely sent notes. Shrugging she took the letter opener and opened it quickly scanning the words

My dear Mrs Edward Drummond

Forgive me for writing when we have not yet been formally introduced but I understand from my son’s good friend Lord Septimus Paget that you and your family are staying in the area and I would very much like to make your acquaintance. We are having a gathering at Scotney this coming weekend, with archery and croquet and a dance in the evening. I do hope that you and your husband can attend.

With all kind wishes

Lady Hastings

“Well!” Florence smiled and Edward looked up from where he was trying unsuccessfully to encourage Blair to eat her bread and milk. Florence had tried to say that looking after Blair was woman’s work and that he was far too busy and important as a man but Edward had insisted. When they were back in London he was not able to spend as much time with her as he would like so he was determined to do so here. Though of course has another piece of milk soaked bread landed on his previously clean trousers thrown by a recalcitrant Blair, he was thinking Florence might have a point

“An interesting letter my dear?” he asked “now Blair don’t be naughty for papa please”
Blair looked at him with big brown eyes, squeezed another piece of bread between her fingers and rubbed it into his trousers.

“Blurgh” she said disdainfully and Florence hid a smile

“It’s from Lady Hastings” she said “and Blair be a good girl for papa otherwise there will be no beach today”; she knew Blair didn’t really understand ‘beach’ but the tone of her voice would certainly convey itself

Edward raised his eyebrows enquiringly “are we acquainted with her?” he asked; he knew he wasn’t but Florence might be

She shook her head “no but they know Septimus Paget who told them we were staying locally; they have invited us to a gathering at Scotney castle this coming weekend”

“Hmmmm” said Edward, he couldn’t say he was keen to go, soirees and parties were not his favourite past time, they reminded him too much of Alfred and the fun they used to have in the past before he was married.

“You do not wish to go?” asked Florence unable to keep the disappointment from her voice “I will of course then decline”

Edward mentally admonished himself for being selfish, poor Florence, she looked so woebegone, and why should she not go? He thought it would cheer her enormously

He smiled at her “of course we shall go” he said “it is very kind of them to invite us. Please accept my dear”

“Oh Edward” she said “thank you, it is always good to make new acquaintances and if Lord Septimus is there perhaps he may have some news of Lord Alfred”

“Perhaps” said Edward wincing as another piece of bread landed in his lap and trying to quell the rushing of his heart that happened every time he thought of Alfred.

“Its very kind of you Septimus really” said Alfred “but I have no wish to go”

“Now come Alfred!” said Septimus firmly “you have been moping and missing Mr Drummond, we all see it! Mama remarked to me only yesterday how low in spirits you seemed”

“I do miss him” said Alfred sadly “it may sound silly but even knowing he is in the same city helps me feel close to him when we are not together”

Septimus shook his head slightly, he was still baffled but also somewhat in awe of Alfred’s’ feelings towards Edward. How must it be, he wondered, to love someone that much?

“Then by your own argument you should come” said Septimus “Scotney is only a few miles from the Downs, he will be close by even if you do not see him”. He had decided not to tell Alfred he had suggested to the Hasting’s they invite the Drummond’s in case they did not do so or the Drummond’s declined. He would not be able to bear Alfred’s disappointment if he expected to see Edward and did not.

A glimmer of a smile crossed Alfred’s face “are you bullying me Septimus?” he asked
Septimus grinned “I am” he said “no one else will do it! Come with me Alfred, a weekend in the country is just what you need”

“Very well” said Alfred smiling at his brother “but only because I know you will give me no peace until I say yes”

Septimus smiled back “I am glad that you see reason” he said

As the days went past and the weekend drew nearer, Edward began to feel slightly hysterical. The lack of his own space, Florence’s constant need for his attention and reassurance, and Blair being particularly difficult meant he felt constantly on the edge of some inappropriate emotion. He had already snapped at Florence this morning over whether or not to take Blair to the beach

“I do not care Florence” he barked at her after a conversation that had already dragged on for 20 minutes about whether the weather was suitable to take Blair to the beach “take her, do not take her, I no longer care”

Florence’s bottom lip had immediately begun to wobble and Blair hearing Edward’s unaccustomed harsh tone had burst into tears. Edward had been mortified, rushing to pick up his daughter

“Shhhhhh” he crooned as he cuddled her “papa is just being a grumpy bear”

And to comfort Florence

“Forgive me my dear, I am feeling rather unwell”

“Perhaps I should cancel our attendance this weekend” said Florence anxiously “Edward perhaps you should go to bed, do you need a doctor?”

‘Oh lord’ thought Edward now he had simply set in motion another opportunity for Florence to fuss over him and prove her devotion

“No my dear, please, even if I am unwell, you and Blair should attend” said Edward a plan beginning to form in his mind

“You are quite sure you do not mind us attending without you?” asked Florence for the twentieth time as she drew on her cloak

“No my dear, I insist that you go” said Edward “it is only a headache and weariness I am unable to shake off. Some sleep and fresh air is all the cure I need I am sure of it”

“Wellll…” Florence couldn’t deny she was torn, on the one hand what better opportunity to prove her love than to forego the party and stay at home and nurse Edward but on the other hand it was undeniable that Edward had been irritable and difficult to live with these last few days. The prospect of an opportunity to dress up and have fresh company was extremely enticing.

Seeing her weakening Edward pressed on “please Florence, it would make me feel better to know that you were enjoying yourself, I know I have not been easy to live with these last days”

“If you are sure” she said

“I am” said Edward firmly “go and have a wonderful time”
Florence smiled “thank you” she said dropping a kiss on his forehead “rest Edward, and I hope that you feel better soon”

Edward nodded “I will”

Florence smiled again and left the room, and Edward watched from the window as she and Blair got into the carriage; she looked at the window and lifted Blair’s arm clearly telling her to wave and Blair solemnly waved her fat little hand at him. He waved back until the carriage disappeared from view and then slumped down on the sofa exulting in the silence! ‘At last’ he thought ‘some peace!’

“Lord Septimus how good it is to see you” Lady Hastings came forward “and this must be the famous Lord Alfred of whom I have heard so much” she held out her hand to Alfred who bowed over it

“Thank you for the invitation madam” he said “what an enchanting home you have”

“We only had it remodelled these last 5 years” said Lady Hastings “but we find the results most pleasing”

“Indeed they are” said Alfred looking around

“The other guests are in the old garden” said lady Hastings “I will take you through” and she led the way tucking her arm through Septimus and Alfred’s

“Why is it called the old garden?” asked Alfred as they made their way along the path

“It is where the old castle originally stood” said lady Hastings “a ruin now but it forms a pretty backdrop to the new rose garden. Please excuse me gentlemen, I must return to greet the other guests”

Alfred nodded and looked about him; the old castle ruin was reflected in the lake and an unexpected stab of pain shot through his heart as he remembered how he and Edward had kissed by the lake in Scotland. How long ago it seemed now he thought and he wished with all his heart Edward was here with him. Tears clouded his eyes for a moment and so he did not see the familiar figure approaching them exclaiming

“Why Lord Alfred! And Lord Septimus too, this is an unexpected pleasure”

“Mrs. Drummond” Septimus shot a worried look at Alfred who had turned pale “this is indeed an unexpected pleasure isn’t it Alfred?”

Alfred could feel the bile rising in his throat and his stomach churning, how was it she was here? He tried to answer but could do no more than make an incoherent mumble

“Alfred is tired from the journey” said Septimus anxious to smooth over the silence, perhaps this had been a terrible idea after all

“It is a long journey” agreed Florence “perhaps you should sit Lord Alfred and have some tea?”

Alfred stared at her, have some tea? Sit down? All he wanted to do was get away from her.

“Is your husband here?” enquired Septimus desperate now to find a way out of the situation

“Alas no” said Florence “he is unwell, really Lord Alfred you look most peculiar, I must insist you
sit down”

“Perhaps I will” Alfred managed to stutter out collapsing into the nearest chair

“Let me fetch you some tea” said Florence “we are picnicking in the French way” she giggled “no servants” and she hurried off

“Alfred for god sake” hissed Septimus “pull yourself together this instant”

“Did you know she’d be here?” asked Alfred through clenched teeth

“No I did not” said Septimus which was true, he didn’t actually know she would “and it matters not anyway, you will give yourself away with this ridiculous behaviour, dear god man do you want her to think you hate her?”

“I don’t care” said Alfred petulantly

“Well I do” said Septimus giving his arm a shake “now on your feet she’s coming back”

Alfred grudgingly stood up, Septimus was right, he couldn’t give himself away.

“Tea lord Alfred” said Florence handing him a cup

“Thank you” he said managing to sound, to his ears more normal, before another thought seized him

“You said Ed...Your husband is unwell Mrs. Drummond?” terrible were thoughts already hurtling through his mind, what if Edward was very ill? He should be with him! In fact why was she gallivanting about if Edward was sick? She should be looking after him

“He says it is just a headache and tiredness but you know how Edward can be” Alfred bit the inside of his lip as she so carelessly said Edward’s name, “he is not one to make a fuss”

“How disappointing he is not here” said Septimus

Florence nodded “I feel that I should not have left him alone but he was most insistent”

The blood was rushing into Alfred’s ears as an idea presented itself

“Perhaps madam you would like me to call on him to ascertain he is well?” he asked politely

“Oh would you lord Alfred?” said Florence eagerly “I am sure he would not mind seeing an old friend like you, in fact if he knew you were here today and he had not seen you, I feel he would be very upset”

Septimus looked sideways at Alfred whose whole demeanour had already altered

“I think that’s an excellent idea” said Septimus “and then perhaps Mrs. Drummond you would allow me to show you the old castle properly?”

“I would like that” she said

Down on the beach Edward lay back luxuriating in the sun. With no one around to see him, he had discarded his shoes, socks, cravat, waistcoat and undone his shirt far lower than decency would normally permit. He sighed with happiness, peace and quiet at last! The only sound was the waves
gently washing in and out of the beach and the occasional gull crying in the air. He closed his eyes,
determined to enjoy his time alone while he had it. If only Alfred were here he thought lying next to
him, the sun haloing his blonde hair and turning it to gold as he leaned over to kiss him. He sighed
and wriggled as more thoughts of Alfred flooded his mind as he imagined Alfred there similarly
attired to himself, and how he could trace first his finger then his lips down his chest, and hear that
familiar hitch in Alfred’s breath as he got lower, and then lower still. He could feel himself hardening
and he stroked his hands across the front of his trousers; he could, he thought impishly, satisfy
himself here if he wanted, there was no one to see after all. He began to undo his trousers so he could
slide his hand inside and for god sake what was that? Hastily he rebuttoned his trousers; he could
hear the sound of horse hooves on the track about the cliff. Surely no one was coming here to disturb
his rest? He stood up shielding his eyes looking up and then his heart almost burst his his chest surely
that was not?

“Alfred?” he called his voice cracked with emotion “Alfred?”

Alfred looked down on the beach, he had thought he had seen Edward there but he also thought he
saw Edward in many places, crowds, on the streets, at balls and sadly it was never him, just a
reflection of his own desperation but this time, yes this time, it was him.

He looked around and saw a path leading down to the sea; he tethered his horse to a tree and
hastened down it almost slipping in his eagerness. Edward was already running up the beach towards
him.

“Alfred” he crushed him in his arms “oh god Alfred it is really you”

And then there were kissing desperately, pressed together, holding each other tightly.

“My Alfred” Edward gasped out between kisses “my love what are you doing here?”

“Septimus brought me here for a party” Alfred struggled out when his mouth was free which was not
often, he did want Edward to stop kissing him for one second.

“Wait” Edward stopped his kisses “not at Scotney castle?”

“Mmmm” said Alfred chasing Edward’s mouth his hand clasped firmly round the back of his neck
trying to pull him down again.

“Did you see…?” But his mouth was enveloped with more kisses as Alfred became too impatient to
wait any longer and pulled Edward towards him very firmly, and he stopped caring about whether
Alfred had or had not seen Florence and began to care far more about how quickly he could get
Alfred in the same state of undress as himself.

“Edward” Alfred’s hands were inside his shirt and sliding over the plains of his chest “were you
expecting me?” he smirked against his mouth “I hope you have not taken to walking around like this
in public! I would be extremely jealous if it were so”

Edward laughed “I was enjoying the sun” and then he gasped as Alfred’s mouth found the nape of
his neck where he was always sensitive to be kissed and began to work its way down “wait Alfred”
he said and then he felt Alfred giggle against his skin and shake his head “I do not think I so
Edward” he said

“But you must” Edward pulled him back to face him “you are wearing far too many clothes….,”
Alfred grinned “indeed I am” and he undressed rapidly until he was just in his shirt and trousers and then he pulled Edward down onto the sand

“Kiss me Edward” he said as manoeuvred himself on top of him as Edward lay staring up at him

Edward needed no second bidding and cupping Alfred’s face drew him in, kissing him again as Alfred squirmed on top of him and he moaned as he felt his hardness pushing against Alfred’s thigh.

All of a sudden he felt a rush of cold water and he gasped and spluttered, laughing at Alfred’s sharp intake of breath as the cold water hit him too

“I fear we need to move Alfred” he said

Alfred laughed and stood up “I believe so” and he held out his hand to Edward

Edward stood up too, his shirt soaked and clinging to him

“I fear this is ruined, I should take it off” he said ruefully before noticing the look in Alfred’s eyes “what Alfred?”

“Edward promise me that you will leave that shirt on” said Alfred his pupils wide and dilated

“But” said Edward frowning

“Promise me” said Alfred stepping close to him smoothing his hands over Edwards chest again before bending down and licking the salt water droplets clinging to the skin.

Edward sighed and bit his lip as Alfred’s tongue traced patterns on his skin making him shiver where it touched.

“Edward” Alfred fell to his knees and began to unbutton Edward’s trousers “do you permit me?”

“of c…”and then he gave a strangled cry as Alfred not waiting for an answer which he knew would be in the affirmative had already guided his hardness into his mouth and was attending to it feverishly.

Edward felt his legs might give way and he dug his fingers into Alfred’s soft hair, Alfred was far far too good at this. Alfred looked up at him, huge blue eyes framed by long sooty lashes and Edward closed his eyes, he would become undone far too quickly if he looked at Alfred while Alfred looked up at him like that. Alfred hands were on his hips and he realised he was thrusting gently in time with Alfred’s ministrations. He need to stop him before it was too late, summoning the last of his will power he gasped his name “Alfred… Alfred I need you”

Alfred pulled away and Edward sank to his knees to kiss him

“Let me love you properly Alfred” he said urgently

Alfred moaned “yes! Edward please love me properly”
next time! Septimus and Florence get to know each other better
the rose garden

Chapter Summary

Septimus & Florence spend their first real time together and Edward tells Alfred about *that* conversation

Chapter Notes

and so at last after all the hints Florence and Septimus get to know each other a little better! I would like to say I know where this story is going but other than a few more big plot points and the ending I really don’t...but that makes it all the more fun to write :) 

Septimus watched Alfred almost run through the archway & sighed internally; he really must warn him to be more careful. What on earth must Florence think of his eagerness to get away?

“Alfred and Mr Drummond are such good friends” said Septimus for once not knowing quite what to say as Florence watched Alfred leave.

“indeed they are” said Florence “though since his illness we have not seen Lord Alfred as much as before, I understand from Edward he still tires easily?”

“Yes his health is not as strong as it was” said Septimus knowing full well that Alfred for all his delicate prettiness was as robust as an ox.

There was a pause and then Septimus said

“May I show you the roses in the old castle Mrs Drummond? I believe they are in their last blooming before the summer ends”

Florence smiled at him “I would like that”

Septimus smiled back and they set off across the lawn

“Are you enjoying your time here Mrs Drummond?” asked Septimus as they walked

Florence twirled her parasol “I am” she said brightly, perhaps *too* brightly thought Septimus

“And your husband? What a pity he is too unwell to join us”

“Edward finds it hard to let go of the cares of his job, he is most dedicated to his career and of course to the country” said Florence proudly “alas it leaves him little time for himself, he is at the House until all hours of the night almost every day”

Septimus felt a familiar wave of anger at Edward and yes at Alfred too, both of them deceiving Florence allowing her to believe Edward was not at home because he was hard at work where as Septimus would have laid odds at least half of that time he was with his brother! It didn’t help as he
walked along next to Florence that he was struck anew by her beauty every time he saw her. She was dressed in a pale lilac dress trimmed with silver and her bonnet had lilac ribbons while her parasol was of a deeper purple. Her blonde hair glinted in the sun and her skin framed over perfect high cheekbones was translucent, her eyes as she occasionally looked at him were wide and her mouth turned up slightly at the corners as if she was always on the verge of smiling. How in god’s name did her husband prefer his brother? It was beyond understanding!

But then he remembered the strained sad look on Alfred’s face in London and how he missed Edward, and how Edward clearly loved him back and it was hard to judge them for what they clearly could not help. What a mess it all was he thought gloomily. The least he could do was to try and make up for a husband that, even if she didn’t know it, neglected her most shamefully.

“Where is little Blair?” he asked anxious to change the subject away from Edward

“She is with the other children in the nursery” said Florence with a smile “it is good for her to mix with other children though of course we are hopeful that she will have a brother or sister soon”

Ah so he was still laying with her thought Septimus though god only knows what that must be like for her. He supposed Drummond might care about pleasing her but somehow he doubted it, he knew many husbands did not even when they preferred women.

“You must bring her to see papa when you return to London again” said Septimus “he was complaining to me the other day that he hasn’t seen his god daughter for months”

Florence laughed “He is incorrigible, it is no more than a month at most but of course I will”

Septimus led the way through the doorway of the old castle “watch your step Mrs Drummond” he said “there are many stones laying scattered around”

Florence nodded looking around “it is still impressive isn’t it” she said “even though it is a ruin”

Septimus nodded “I have always thought so; the roses are through here” and he stepped through a door way to the left and into what was at one time the great hall and was now a space open to the skies. In it the gardener has ingeniously planted roses along both sides of the hall and trained them up and over the windows so the room looked as if it were built of rose bushes.

“Oh how beautiful” exclaimed Florence “it is as if the room is made of roses”

Septimus smiled “it is”

“And the air!” Florence inhaled a deep breath “the air is just a perfume”

She wondered amongst the flowers stopping every so often to smell them. Septimus watched her graceful movements wishing he could just go over and take her hand but he knew he could not.

“Lord Septimus you must allow me to pick you a rose” called Florence

“I would be honoured” said Septimus

“Which colour would you like? asked Florence “I believe there is every colour of the rainbow here”

“I believe I would like a lavender one to match your dress” Septimus replied

Florence smiled “very well, now let me…” and she reached for the rose bush but it was too far away

“Allow me Mrs Drummond” said Septimus hurrying over
“I can manage sir” she said and furling her parasol she turned it round and hooked it over the end of
the rose to bring the stem closer “there you see?” and she plucked the rose from the stem and handed
it to him

“As a memento of this beautiful garden” she said handing it to him with a flourish

Septimus bowed and as he took the rose his fingers accidentally brushed against those of Florence.
Immediately he felt a tingle rush up his arm and into his spine and he looked at Florence feeling sure
the flush must show on his face. Florence was paler than normal but looking at him too and then she
looked down at her fingers as if in surprise but she did not immediately move them away. A few
seconds passed and then Septimus took the rose and tucked it into his buttonhole “you are most kind
madam” he said

“I…thank you” said Florence her heart beating strangely fast. Really she must have had too much
sun; she put up her parasol “perhaps we ought to return to the party”

Edward pulled Alfred’s shirt over his back as he dozed on his side in the sun curled into him.

“You must not burn Alfred” he said

“Mmmmm” said Alfred drowsily snuggling into Edward and yawning

“Or go to sleep”

Alfred grumbled “not even for 5 minutes?”

“Not even for 5 minutes” he laughed “you know that it is never just 5 minutes Alfred”

“But you tire me out Edward” Alfred looked up at him blue eyes dancing “really it is more than a
man should be expected to endure” and he clasped his chest dramatically

“I tire you out?” Edward sat up laughing “Alfred Henry Paget you are the most demanding energetic
imaginative thoroughly wicked….”but the kisses he was giving him in between each word belied his
tone and Alfred wrapped himself around Edward kissing him back and they fell back onto the sand
again.

‘Why can’t it always be like this?’ thought Edward as he tightened his arms around Alfred and tasted
his lips ‘why must it always be stolen and hidden’. He wanted to give himself up to Alfred’s caresses
but he knew he could not, Alfred needed to get back to his party and he needed to be at home
looking suitably wan and ill.

“Alfred” he said between kisses “my love, we need to get dressed”

“Nnnnooo” Alfred moaned his refusal against Edward’s mouth “I don’t want to”

“Neither do I my dearest but we must”

Alfred sighed and leant heavily against Edward for a moment and then nodded

“I know” he said

Silently they picked up their clothes and began to dress. When they had finished, Alfred stepped
forward and began to tidy Edwards hair with his fingers
“I fear your curls will not sit down” he said with a sad little laugh

Edward reached up and took Alfred’s hand in his own “Alfred you know it was as if I wished you into existence today” he said “I was lying there thinking of you and then suddenly there you were”

“I’m magic Edward” said Alfred solemnly “didn’t you know? Blair knows, I told her”

Edward laughed, he knew Alfred was he always did trying to lighten the sadness that they had to part and he knew the question he was going to ask would not help matters but he had to know in order to be prepared

“Alfred” he hesitated “did you see Flo…my wife at Scotney?”

Immediately the light that had shone from Alfred dimmed “yes” he said tonelessly “she was telling myself and Septimus that you were ill and so I took my chance to find you”

“Ah” said Edward knowing this was not the time to pass comment too much that that may have been somewhat rash “and no one thought that strange? You rushing to see me”

“Your wife said she was worried because you were alone” continued Alfred in the same monotone voice “I offered to reassure her that you were well”

Edward nodded, there was nothing he could really say

“I have a question too Edward” said Alfred not looking at him and kicking the sand with the toe of his boot “is she with child yet?”

“I do not know” said Edward “Alfred I feel I must tell you something”

“Must” said Alfred “or want to? And is it something I will wish to hear Edward?”

“I think that it may be” said Edward “though I confess it is making my life much harder”

At that Alfred’s expression changed “then you must tell me Edward” he said “you must not worry about things alone”

Edward nodded and sat down on the sand his arms around his knees, Alfred dropped to the sand beside him

“The first night we were here, Florence she…”he swallowed “she asked me if I loved her”

Alfred stiffened, his heart hammering, suddenly terrified of what he was going to hear, he looked fearfully at Edward

“Of course I could not reply that I did, I love only you Alfred, ONLY you” said Edward reaching out to take Alfred’s hand “I hoped, foolishly I see now, that it would lead to a better understanding between us, that she would understand that I do not and cannot not love her”

“And…she did not understand this?” asked Alfred squeezing Edward’s hand, he could only imagine how difficult a conversation it must have been between them

“No, she blames herself for failing me as a wife and says she will try harder”

“Oh Edward” Alfred put his arm around him “what will you do?”

“I do not know” Edward replied “this last week has been almost unbearable, she will not give me a
moments peace in her eagerness to please”

Alfred sighed “then all you can do is hope that she is with child soon and that she will focus her attentions on that”

Edward nodded sadly “It is Alfred”

They sat in silence for a few moments listening to the waves and then Alfred stood up

“I need to return Edward” he said not wanting to wait to hear Edward telling him he needed to go

“Yes” said Edward “and how I wish you did not Alfred, every time you leave, a small piece of me leaves with you”

Alfred refrained from saying, if that were true then by now you would be with me entirely; instead he stroked Edward’s face

“I will see you in London” he said “as soon as you return”

Edward cupped his face in his hands and kissed him

“You will”

He watched as Alfred climbed the path back to where his horse had been contentedly munching the grass and mount up. Alfred wheeled the horse, looked down at Edward on the beach and placed his hand over his heart. Edward waved and then watched tears in his eyes as Alfred tugged on the reins urging the horse to a gallop and then he was gone leaving Edward alone on the beach.

In the carriage on the way home, Blair slept and Florence sat deep in thought. She couldn’t remember the last time she had felt so carefree. No Blair to think of, no Edward to worry about and Lord Septimus really was the most charming company. As she recalled the feeling that had swept over her when their fingers touched, a blush rose to her cheek. After their little sojourn in the rose garden, Lord Septimus had stayed at a respectful distance as she had played croquet but she had been aware of his eyes on her and his enthusiastic clapping each time she sent a ball accurately through a hoop.

Now Florence Drummond!, she admonished herself, it did not matter how charming or good looking Lord Septimus was, she was married to Edward, the most perfect angel on this earth and the strange reactions she had been having that afternoon were clearly to do with being over hot.

As the carriage neared the house she saw the door open and Edward come out, clearly he had seen them coming through the window. He certainly seemed better than when she had left, less pale and lethargic.

As they drew to a halt, he came up to the carriage door and opened it

“Allow me my dear” he said and she held out her hand which he took in his and guided her down the steps

“thank you Edward” she said and she looked up at him; he looked back down at her and smiled but she saw with a pang that his smile did not hold the deep warmth that Lord Septimus’ had when he looked at her nor did he hold her eyes for very long.
“perhaps you could retrieve Blair” she said trying to cover up her disappointment “she is asleep” but Edward had already picked up the sleeping Blair and was cradling her gently in his arms, the look on his face when he looked at their daughter was entirely different to when he looked at her.

“You are feeling better Edward?” she asked swallowing hard against the lump in her throat

“Much better” he said “I rested here all day”

Florence nodded and followed him into the house wondering why if he had rested at home all day, there was sand on the sleeves of his shirt.
Much news

Chapter Summary

Florence and Alfred both have news for Edward and Florence continues to think of Septimus Paget

Chapter Notes

Queen Victoria visited Balmoral Castle for the first time on 8th September 1848 staying for 3 weeks; she and Albert finally purchased it in 1852

See the end of the chapter for more notes

One month later

Florence vomited into the china basin in her dressing room. She had no doubt that she was pregnant again. She had had this sickness with Blair and her breasts were already feeling tender to her touch. She knew she should be delighted and she was in many ways happy except for two things; firstly her relationship with Edward and secondly how Septimus Paget intruded more and more into her thoughts.

She had hoped after Edward had devastated her with his refusal to confirm he loved her, that her behaviour as a perfect wife would change his feelings but it did not appear to be doing so. He remained as he always had kind, considerate, caring, affectionate, but Edward was all these things with most people. Moreover it disconcerted her that he had lied to her that day of the party at Scotney Castle. He had told her that he had not left the house but when she asked him mildly why he had sand on his sleeves he had gone red and then when she had further asked him if he had seen Lord Alfred, he had gone white and stared at her

“Lord Alfred?”

“Yes Edward, Lord Alfred I saw him at Scotney and he said he would come to see if you were well”

At that his brow had cleared and he’d said “he did come here my dear”

“And you stayed here?” Florence didn’t know why she had challenged him but she found herself suddenly annoyed that he would lie about something so pointless

Edward had looked at her guiltily and said “no we walked on the beach”

“And that was how you got sand on your sleeves?”

Edward had nodded looking shamefaced “I did not want you to be angry I had gone on to the beach”

She had frowned at him in surprise “why would I be angry Edward? I’m sure the fresh air did you good”
He’d looked at her with relief on his face and said eagerly “yes, yes it did! Lord Alfred said it would help”

Since then she had tried to put it to the back of her mind but occasionally the thought would rear its head ‘why lie about something so inconsequential?’

Secondly, she found that she was thinking of Septimus Paget more and more. He had been charming company but then as she’d heard it once said, the whole family was ridiculously charming, but it was more than that. His tone and manner when talking to her made her feel peculiar, rather light headed in fact. She had kept her word and taken Blair to see Henry and Charlotte apologising again for not taking up the offer off Plas Newydd which Henry had waved aside.

“You will see it one day my dear and in the meantime I am just glad that you brought the little button over to see us”

Septimus had been there too and she had felt her heart do a little flutter at the sight of him. He had seemed quite sad at first and she had longed to ask him what was wrong. She had playfully asked him what he had done with her rose and he had said quietly “I pressed it and kept it as a book mark” and she had not known what to say at the look on his face.

Despite this interlude, they had had a very merry time with Henry performing his favourite parlour trick of taking off his leg and balancing it on his head which Blair found fascinating even though she did then spend the rest of the time crawling from one person to another and then pulling herself up on them to peer curiously at their legs. Lord Alfred had arrived some 10 minutes before she was due to leave and he’d picked up Blair throwing her repeatedly in the air and catching her whole she giggled and shrieked. So enamoured was he of playing with Blair that they had barely spoken but it was lovely to see how fond he was of her and Edward’s daughter she thought. What a change the Paget's loving boisterous household was from the visits to her or Edward’s parents where they sat politely conversing about the weather, the latest court gossip and all the many mistakes she and Edward were apparently making with Blair’s upbringing,

“Should she be quite so much the centre of attention dear Florence?” or “perhaps it would be better for her not to crawl on the floor, it will stunt her growth”

Well in 8 or so months Blair would have a brother or a sister she thought and no doubt they would bring them up wrong as well she thought; well she did not care, Blair was she and Edward’s daughter and they would bring her up as they say fit.

That night at dinner, she broke the news to Edward; they had just sat down when she told him

“Edward I have good news, I believe I am with child again” and she smiled at him tremulously hoping that he would be pleased

“why Florence!” he immediately came over and embraced her, holding her close and kissing the top of her head “that is wonderful wonderful news!” he held her away at arm’s length “you are certain?”

She nodded and he took her face in his hands and kissed her on the lips

“Thank you Florence” he said “you don’t know how much this means to me”

She felt tears come into her eyes, surely he must love her? What else could his reaction mean?
Edward wanted to shout with relief, thank god Florence was pregnant and he and Alfred were safe! He could stay here with Alfred instead of being packed off to Russia; he couldn’t wait to tell him but in the meantime he knew that he owed Florence a debt of gratitude for it even if she herself of course did not know that.

Once she had seated herself and the first course brought in, he smiled at her

“Now I think” he said “that we really must buy a bigger house”

She smiled back “I think so Edward” she said “perhaps somewhere closer to Parliament so that you may be home earlier”

“Or perhaps somewhere in Mayfair near to Uxbridge house” he said with a grin, he knew Florence had always wanted to live there and he would feel oddly better if she was near Henry and Charlotte. They were in many ways better parents to her and certainly better grandparents to Blair than either of their own parents.

“Edward” Florence gasped “Mayfair! And near Lord and Lady Anglesey, it would be delightful to live so close to them!”

“Then my dear perhaps you can begin to look at houses? Though” he stopped and bit his lip “it would not be too taxing for you? Looking I mean. You must take great care”

“No Edward, it will not” she smiled “It is still very early and I will be careful I promise you”

“Good” he smiled at her and picked up his fork

“How much should I look to spend Edward?” she asked, she needed to have some idea she thought

“Oh” said Edward as if that thought hadn’t occurred to him “I would think 10,000 would be ample”

£10,000! Florence could hardly believe it; she knew Edward was rich, that they were rich but she’d never paid much attention to money herself. It was not something a woman was expected to do. For 10,000 they could have one of the smartest houses in London. She began to eat planning to write to Gwendolyn directly after dinner to ask her to call tomorrow, she needed to make plans.

“I thought you would be happier Alfred” said Edward dejectedly when Alfred’s response to his news that Florence was pregnant was met with downcast eyes and a little droop of the shoulders.

“I am happy Edward” said Alfred “truly I am it’s just…..” he turned away, how he could explain to Edward how much it hurt when the evidence that he had been sleeping with Florence was presented to him.

Edward put his arms around him “it means we are safe my love, they can’t send me to Russia now and you know, Blair would love a little brother or sister”

Alfred rested his head against his shoulder “I know” he said his voice muffled “and I am glad Edward, really, the thought of you leaving me” he shuddered “is not to be borne”

“I’m not going to leave you Alfred” said Edward holding him tightly, he gave a little laugh “indeed remember how I was when I thought you were going to leave me, I was distraught”

Alfred turned his head and gave him a quick kiss below his ear “I remember” he murmured “turning
up at goodness knows what hour to see me”

“And do you remember what I said?” whispered Edward dipping down to gently nip his ear in return

Alfred nodded “you said that we had agreed that you would live this life for both of us on condition that I stayed with you always”

“That was the promise we made to each other Alfred, I would marry Florence and you would not leave me to live my life alone, I have kept to my side of the bargain”

“And I keep to mine Edward” said Alfred quietly “always”

“You know this baby will change nothing between us as Blair changed nothing”

Alfred said nothing and Edward pushed him away gently so he was at arm’s length and he could look into his face

“Alfred do you not trust me?”

Alfred nodded “you know that I do”

“Then cease fretting my love, Florence is pregnant, I can safely retire to my own chamber and” he swallowed “I will not return to her bed again”

“Not return” Alfred looked at him shocked, But Edward! Do you not remember what happened before when you did not resume relations?”

“I do not care” said Edward “I do not speak of it much Alfred as it distresses you but you don’t know what it’s like! It would be easier if I disliked her, if I considered her feelings unimportant but I do not. It makes the whole business wretched and I will not continue to put myself or her through it any longer”

Alfred was torn, of course nothing would give him greater pleasure than that Edward never slept with Florence again but he knew, he just knew, that it was not as simple as that. Despite his proclivities lying elsewhere, he knew from the amount of time he spent with the queen and her ladies that women could and did take delight in marital relations even if the resulting childbirth was unpleasant. Florence was in love with Edward, how would she take the news that they would not share a bed again? Not well he thought, not well at all. However one look at Edward’s determined face said this was not the time to disagree

“You must do what you believe is right Edward” he said and then seeking to change the subject “alas I too have news”

“Oh?” said Edward “news I will not like?”

“News neither of us likes Edward; as you know the Queen was much taken with Scotland, she and the Prince wish to travel to Balmoral, the estate is available for purchase and they have leased the house for 3 weeks. We leave on September 6th”

“3 weeks!” Edward dropped his arms from around Alfred and sat down on the bed with a thump “and in Scotland, our Scotland”

Alfred came to sit beside him, “I do not wish to be there without you either Edward” he said taking his hand “though Scotland will always hold the happiest of memories or me”
Edward turned to him and stroked his face “I still cannot believe I waited so long” he said “but I had never seen anything more beautiful that evening by the lake”

Alfred stared back at him with limpid blue eyes “I thought I would die from happiness when you kissed me Edward” he said “and even now I cannot believe I was so foolish as to jeopardise……”

“Hush hush now” said Edward kissing him “that is all in the past”

He felt Alfred pressing against him and he kissed him more fiercely, pushing him backwards onto the bed. He would not let Alfred’s imminent departure spoil their happiness; Florence was pregnant which meant an end to their relations and he could stay here safely with his beloved Alfred in London. His hands dropped to fumble with Alfred’s shirt buttons

“Alfred” he moaned as he felt Alfred’s hands burrow beneath his own shirt “Alfred my love”

Chapter End Notes

Next time - its party time and the return of Willexi!
a chance encounter

Chapter Summary

Florence and Gwendolyn go house hunting, Alfred asks Septimus for a favour which Edward isn’t happy about

Chapter Notes

Thank you everyone who is still reading my story!! I love you all 😄 😄 😄

I’m sorry - originally I had planned for the return of Willexi but the characters went off on their own again and so they are not here but they will def be in the next chapter

Historical notes - this is the real Lansdowne House
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lansdowne_House

“I must beg a favour of you Septimus” said Alfred

“Oh?” replied Septimus looking up from the morning newspaper, Alfred had come to breakfast with them, something Septimus had encouraged to try and repair the rift between Alfred and their mother. It was slowly healing over and Septimus hoped one day it would be mended completely. Alfred and their mother had been so close, thought Septimus but that had counted for nothing when he felt she was trying to keep him from Edward. It was an abject lesson as to what Alfred would do to anyone he saw standing in his and Edward’s way.

“As you know I am due to leave for Scotland in a few days” continued Alfred

Septimus nodded

“I would like to write to Edward but as I’m sure you understand, I cannot address letters to his house”

Septimus put down the newspaper, he felt sure he knew where this was going

“I wondered if I could send them here and you could deliver them to him in Parliament as you both work there”

Septimus stared at the table cloth; this placed him in a very difficult position. His immediate reaction was to say no, that he wasn’t going to deliver letters to Edward because he disapproved of their relationship but he knew Alfred would think it was because he disapproved because they were men rather than because they were deceiving Florence. He prevaricated

“Would it be so dangerous to send them to his house Alfred? I mean Mrs. Drummond knows you are friends”

Alfred frowned at him “surely you can understand I do not want to risk discovery Septimus, what if
she opened it by mistake?”

Septimus rubbed his face “I do understand that Alfred” and then another thought occurred to him “Alfred, does Drummond know that I know about the two of you?”

Alfred shook his head “I have not told him”

“Then don’t you think you should if you wish me to deliver the letters?”

Alfred leaned back in his chair, Septimus was right, he did need to tell Edward that Septimus knew but he also knew tat Edward would worry. The more people who knew, the greater the chance they would be discovered.

“Septimus” he said “I would not normally ask you this, you are my brother and I trust you but….” He took a breath and carried on “will you swear to me you will tell no one about Edward and I?”

“Alfred!” Septimus was taken aback and deeply hurt “how could you think I would betray you?”

“It is not for me I ask Septimus but for Edward” said Alfred “he would feel reassured if he knew you had promised”

“I’m not a fool Alfred” said Septimus hotly “of course I will tell no one!”

“Do you promise? Said Alfred

Septimus glared at him, affronted that Alfred would doubt him “I promise Alfred” he said tightly “I will deliver your letters and say nothing to anyone about you and Edward”

“Thank you” Alfred got up from his chair and came over to his brother “you don’t know how lonely it is Septimus to never be able to talk about Edward in anything but the most disinterested terms for fear of giving myself away. I want to tell people of his myriad perfections and abilities, of the things we have done together, of his plans, our hopes and dreams but I cannot. To the world he must always be ‘my good friend Drummond’ and that is all”

“I know Alfred” said Septimus “I wish it were different”

Alfred sighed “but it is not and it means a great deal to me that you will deliver the letters”

Septimus nodded, he had, he reflected, no choice.

Edward leaned up on his elbow, tracing his finger down Alfred’s chest and tugging gently on the golden hair scattered across it, he felt at peace as he always did after he and Alfred had made love.

Below him Alfred giggled and turned on his side so Edward's hand dropped down to his hip where it rested gently rubbing in little circles

“I love you Edward Drummond” Alfred said kissing the tip of his nose

“I love you Alfred Paget” said Edward “and I wish you didn’t have to go away”

“Alas Her Majesty commands Edward and I cannot refuse, I am after all charged with her keeping her safe”

“Which reminds me that I haven’t seen you in your uniform for sometime Alfred” said Edward his
hands beginning to slide down again “and you know how becoming I find you in it”

Alfred laughed and gently batted his hand away “Edward you are quite insatiable but I need to talk
to you first”

“Oh?” Edward leaned up again

“You know how difficult it is for us to write to each other when one of us is away? Well I have
found us a go between”

“A go between? What do you mean? Asked Edward curiously

“I have asked my brother Septimus to deliver my letters to you in parliament and of course your
letters to me can be given to him”

Edward sat up right in alarm “you mean Septimus knows about us? You told him? Alfred what were
you thinking??”

“Calm yourself Edward!” said Alfred “Septimus is my brother, I trust him with my life! He would
never betray us; he gave me his solemn promise”

Edward lay down still not entirely convinced, as far as he was concerned, the fewer people who
knew the better.

Seeing his concern, Alfred rolled on top of him so he could look into his eyes “Edward” he said
quietly “do you really think I would jeopardise you, jeopardise us if I wasn’t really sure I could trust
Septimus?”

Edward paused and then sighed shaking his head “no I do not”

“then let us not spend these last two hours together fretting” he grinned “I believe my uniform is not
yet packed and as you made such a special request earlier, I am happy to oblige” and he hopped out
of bed over to the wardrobe.

Florence did up the cornflower blue ribbons on her bonnet and stepped outside to where the carriage
was waiting with Gwendolyn already in it. Today they were taking a drive to Mayfair to look at
houses; she had found two to look at in the London Gazette. Edward was giving her complete free
reign and she couldn’t help but smile smugly as Gwendolyn exclaimed again over the amount of
money they had t spend

“Really Florence I am quite green with envy! Not only is Edward the handsomest man I have seen
but he’s kind and generous and so rich! Really you would never know it; he is so humble when one
meets him. You are the luckiest of women to be married to him”

‘Hmmm’ thought Florence there was a time when she would have completely agreed but there was
always now a tiny shadow at the back of her mind, a small voice that whispered ‘are you happy?
Really happy?’ and however much she tried to shut it out, she couldn’t.

AS they drove up Piccadilly, Gwen tapped her on the shoulder

“Is that not Lord Alfred Florence?” indicating a slender figure with bright blonde hair under his top
hat walking along the pavement
“No” said Florence her heart beginning to beat strangely fast “he is in Scotland with Her Majesty, it must be Lord Septimus”

As the carriage drove past, Septimus turned his head and their eyes met and Florence felt herself blush immediately.

“Stop” Gwen tapped the coachman with her parasol “Florence, we should speak with him”

“But” began Florence but Gwen was already hailing Septimus

“Lord Septimus” she called “how lucky we are to see you”

Septimus approached the carriage and bowed “Lady Gwendolyn, Mrs Drummond, what brings you to Piccadilly? Shopping for the new season?”

“In a manner of speaking” said Gwendolyn excitedly “Florence and I are house hunting in Mayfair, Mr Drummond has decided they need to move up in the world and we have a very large amount of money to spend”

Florence winced, Gwen was a dear friend but her lack of tact was legendary, thank goodness she hadn’t as yet told her about the baby.

“How fortunate” said Septimus drily “Mr Drummond is blessed with so many things in life” and he looked at Florence who smiled at him shyly.

“Why do you not join us” Gwendolyn barrelled on “you know the area well and I’m sure could give us useful advice”

“Surely your husband is more fitted to advise than I” said Septimus still looking at Florence

“He is very busy with his work” said Florence “and has given me carte blanche to decide”

Septimus shook his head internally; Florence couldn’t be expected to make such a weighty decision without male advice.

“If you are sure it would not be an intrusion” he said “I would be glad to accompany you”

“Of course it would not” said Gwendolyn eagerly “it would be most welcome, would it not Florence?”

“It would” she said smiling, she had been slightly nervous about going through such a large undertaking without any help; Gwendolyn did not really count as help though she did have a very good eye for fashion.

Septimus climbed in and seated himself next to Gwendolyn who fluttered and put up her fan, Florence felt her stomach droop that he had not sat next to her but then he fixed her with deep brown eyes and she felt herself flush again and she called out

“Drive on”

To cover her confusion.

When she returned home, Edward was for once home early and busy playing with Blair; he was helping her pile up wooden blocks into towers which she then knocked down with a shriek of
“Hello my dear” he said when he saw her “where have you been?”

“House hunting Edward” and then “hello button!!! “And she held out her arms to Blair

“Blair and I have something to show you” said Edward proudly “haven’t we treasure? Yes we have!”

He stood up, bent down and gently placed Blair on her feet; she clutched her hands around his fingers and Florence saw that she was standing wavering, very unsteady, but standing holding onto Edward’s fingers

“Oh you clever clever girl” she said clapping her hands “so so clever”

Blair beamed “mama” she said and then she sneezed and sat down with a surprised bump

“She cannot stand unaided” said Edward as Florence picked up Blair and cuddled her “but I think it will not be long until she walks, Florence how is it possible so much time has passed already?”

She shook her head “I do not know Edward” she said

He smiled “and she will have a brother or a sister”

“Yes” for some reason possibly connected to having spent the afternoon with Septimus Paget, she did not really want to talk about the baby

Edward sensed that something was wrong and changed the subject

“Did you see a suitable house?” he asked

“I believe I did Edward” she said and she smiled widely “Lansdowne house, do you know it?”

“Lansdowne House?” said Edward “did not Pitt the Younger live there?

“Indeed he did” said Florence “and I thought it would be more than suitable for another aspiring politician” and she laughed “you should see it too Edward but if you are agreeable, I think it would make a wonderful house. It is mid way between St James’ and Burlington Gardens so close to the Palace and the Foreign Office. We shall practically be neighbours with Lord and Lady Anglesey and Lord Alfred also”

“Why my dear, it seems you have done a splendid job” said Edward “I shall arrange to see it forthwith and you can show me around” and he smiled and embraced her.

But for once as Edward held her, Florence was not thinking of him but of another man also with brown eyes but with bright golden hair whose smile made her heart leap, Septimus Paget.
a letter from Scotland

Chapter Summary

dedicated to @MyCatsAreMyLife for her endless lovely and supportive comments xx
dammit why aren't you on tumblr so i can talk to you properly? :)

Alfred recalls his time in Scotland with Edward while Septimus continues to fret about delivering the letters and talks to his mother; the return of Willexi!

Chapter Notes

Historical notes
Punch https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Punch_(magazine) was a satirical magazine which poked fun at the establishment, right up Henry’s street!

Alfred stared out over the river watching as the Prince and his brother fished. Although his eyes were trained on the royal brothers, his mind was entirely elsewhere; a day 2 years ago when he’d stood watching Edward fishing. He remembered how fine Edward had looked, standing on the rock, casting his rod skilfully with broad shoulders and the firm outline of his….

“You look deep in thought Lord Alfred” his reverie was interrupted by Miss Coke who came to stand beside him

“Miss Coke” he smiled at her mechanically “I was recalling our previous Scotland adventures”

She laughed “it was a most incident strewn stay with Her Majesty going missing. I don’t think I have ever been more worried”

“nor I, when Mr Drummond” (as always his heart gave a little jolt as he said his name) “and I went to search for Her Majesty we really feared we would see her at the bottom of a ravine” he said shuddering.

“I remember how you both looked when you returned” said Miss Coke “in such low spirits and with such worry on your faces”

“Mmmm” said Alfred fighting back memories of Drummond’s anguished face as he had talked of his marriage and how he was afraid of going back to London.

“My aunt was very hard on poor Mr. Drummond as I recall” said Miss Coke “but you were quick to point out it was not his fault” she laughed again “I remember you once told me that you were afraid of being bullied by my aunt if I left court but I think now you were just saying that to make me feel better. I’ve never seen anyone look less likely to be cowed by Aunt Buccleuch than you Lord Alfred”

He smiled at her “but now you will be leaving court when you marry Mr Spencer Stanhope”
she nodded happily “truth be told Lord Alfred, I do not enjoy court life; the grand displays, the endless balls and soirees and luncheons always with the same people, the gossip mongering and the currying favour, it is not for me. All I wish is for a simple country life”

“I shall miss you when you go” he said “you are an oasis of calm in the whirlwind of madness that court life can be”

Miss Coke looked at him curiously “do you never wish to have a different life Lord Alfred? To marry and have children?”

“Oh it is much too late for an old bachelor like me” said Alfred trying to bring some levity to the conversation

Miss Coke burst out laughing “old bachelor? Lord Alfred you are not yet 28! And besides I have seen you with dear little Blair Drummond and Her Majesty’s children, you are a natural with them”

“It is much easier to be an uncle than a father” said Alfred wishing heartily she would change the subject

Miss Coke seemed to have divined he did not wish to discuss it any further as she returned to recalling their previous Scotland visit.

“Of course when Her Majesty did return, what fun we had joining the servants in the woods, my aunt would have been quite scandalised had she seen us”

“Yes” Alfred could recall as if it were yesterday Drummond flushed laughing face as they had whirled around arm in arm as the midsummer sunshine had dappled through the trees.

“It was a glorious evening” said Miss Coke gently “and such a romantic setting”

Alfred’s heart began to speed up; was she hinting at something?

“You and Mr. Drummond just seemed to vanish, one minute you were there, the next gone” she went on “but then I saw you later down by the lake deep in conversation”

Alfred’s heart began to pound nineteen to the dozen and he looked at her slowly

She paused and looked at him “I’m not quite the girl I was once Lord Alfred” she said “I have learned many things these last few years. One of them is that happiness can be very fleeting and one must take it when it is presented”

Alfred looked at wordlessly, his mouth dry; for once he really did not know what to say

“Anyway” she said lightly “I see the Prince has finished fishing, come Lord Alfred, perhaps you would escort me back to the carriage?”

That night Alfred wrote to Edward

“My dearest Edward

It is 2 days since we arrived and I confess Scotland is nothing without you; none of its grand mountains or pure streams move me as they would if you were here. Her Majesty and the Prince are quite entranced by Balmoral but between us I find it cold, cramped and draughty though perhaps that
is because I miss you so.

We fished today, well the Prince and his brother fished, as you may recall, I am not one for fishing, not like you my dear Edward. I was remembering how fine you looked that day at Blair Athol standing on the rocks fishing. I don’t think I had ever seen a more entrancing sight! Except perhaps at the silk weaver’s ball or at the banquet in France, in fact I tell a lie Edward; you were at your most entrancing at that devilishly cold lake in France”

He broke off, feeling uncomfortably hot as he thought of Edward stripping of his clothing by the lake in France. What he wouldn’t give to be swimming with Edward now he thought, no matter how cold it was; to feel his skin beneath his fingers, to tease and kiss and stroke and wrap his arms around him. He looked up into the mirror above his writing desk; he could almost see Edward behind him sliding his arm around his waist and leaning down to nuzzle gentle kisses along his neck. He swallowed, this was no good at all he told himself sternly, he would never get the letter done at this rate and Edward would be wanting to hear from him. Pushing the images firmly to the back of his mind he continued

“Miss Coke came and interrupted my thoughts; do you know Edward she told me she saw us by the lake, not like that I believe my dearest but she saw us afterwards. She said to me that ‘happiness can be very fleeting and one must take it when it is presented’. I do not know if she suspects or not, but I believe if she does, she is not without sympathy for our predicament.

I would like to write for longer but alas the Queen commands us to dinner and horrors a bagpipe recital. Do you remember how we tried to learn to play them with Miss Coke? I confess Edward I still blame you entirely for my inability to play them, the sight of your lips wrapped around the blowstick quite put me off my ability to concentrate

I hope that you are well dearest Edward and give Blair a kiss from her uncle Alfred

With love

Your Alfred”

He sealed the letter and placed it inside and envelope which he placed inside another envelope addressed to Septimus with a note saying

“Please give this into Edward’s hands only my dear Septimus and thank you, Alfred”

And then sighing and wondering if he could block his ears with something, he went down to dinner.

Septimus recognised Alfred’s handwriting and groaned inwardly, so this was no doubt the first of many letters he was expected to deliver. He knew on reflection he shouldn’t have promised to take them but what could he do? Alfred was his brother and it was far too dangerous to send the letters by post. Grumpily he opened it and read Alfred’s note, of course he would do that he thought, did Alfred think he’d just leave it with the nearest messenger boy?

His mother seeing his expression asked him what was wrong

“I hope the letter from Alfred does not contain bad news” she said noting sadly he had sent nothing for her

“It does not” he paused “he includes a letter for Mr. Drummond which he asks me to deliver”
Charlotte sighed “then you must do so Septimus, do not endanger your relationship with him as I have done”

Septimus got up and put his arm around his mother’s shoulders “he will come around mama” he said “it is better than it was”

Charlotte nodded “I pray so” she said “he was always such a stubborn little boy and he has not changed as an adult”

Septimus sat down again “do you not find it difficult mama, seeing Mrs. Drummond so often here with Blair, knowing what you know of her husband and Alfred? Do you not think it wrong that we are caught up in their lies?”

Charlotte put down her tea cup “of course I find it difficult Septimus. Mrs Drummond is a sweet and charming girl who knows nothing of her husband’s true nature but” she carried on as Septimus went to speak “it is his nature Septimus not his choice. No matter who he were married to, Edward would always prefer Alfred, I understand that now”

“And so you think then that is right we connive in their deception of her?” asked Septimus

“Right? What is right Septimus” replied Charlotte sadly “is it right that Alfred and Edward who love each other as much, or more, than any man or woman cannot be together openly? Is it right that if they were discovered they could hang? Alfred and Edward would see each other no matter what barriers are placed in their way because they love each other, your father and I believe it is better to try and at least keep them safe from discovery. And think Septimus, how would Florence feel if she were to find out? To be deceived not with another women but another man? How would she cope with such knowledge? What it be kind Septimus to enlighten her? Or would it cause her unbearable pain?”

Septimus stared at the tablecloth “what you say makes sense mama” he said quietly “but I cannot shake the feeling that this is wrong, that what we are all doing is wrong”

His mother got up and patted his shoulder “perhaps one day things will be different”

Perhaps thought Septimus but he did not see how

Edward was walking over Westminster Bridge to Parliament when he heard a familiar voice halloo him

“Mr. Drummond!” it was Prince Alexi walking with William

“Prince Alexi, William” Edward beamed at them “it is too long since I have seen you. Are you both well?”

“We are very well indeed” said William smiling happily at him “and how are you?”

Edward opened his mouth to say that Florence as expecting but then remembered that that was, for now, a secret.

He smiled ruefully “my life remains….complicated”

They both nodded sympathetically in unison “we understand” said Alexi “and Lord Alfred? How is he?”
“Currently in Scotland with her majesty” said Edward sadly

“Ah then you must have lunch with us” said William eagerly

“I am sure you would rather be alone while you can” replied Edward smiling

“No no we insist” said Alexi “don’t we Will?”

“We do” said William “we shall come to Parliament at 1pm and we will brook no argument!”

“I see I am to be given no choice” said Edward laughing “very well, I would be delighted”

Septimus glanced at the clock on the wall, his father was reading dispatches or at least, pretending to, Septimus was fairly sure he would see a copy of Punch tucked in between the pages the way Henry seemed to be suppressing his laughter.

“I am just going to take Mr Drummond’s letter to him papa” said Septimus “before luncheon”

“Very well my boy” said Henry; he glanced at him shrewdly “remember it is not your business, what happens between Mr. Drummond and his wife”

Septimus flushed “I know papa” he said

He picked up the letter and made his way to Lord Palmerston's offices; he knocked on the door and it was opened by Edward who started and then seeing the letter in Septimus’ hand, seemed to remember why it was likely he was there

“Lord Septimus” he said loudly “do you bring a message from Lord Anglesey?”

Septimus rolled his eyes, how on earth had Edward Drummond managed to conceal his true nature form the world? A child could have worked out from the tone of his voice that there was something more than a simple message being conveyed

“Perhaps you could walk with me” said Septimus tightly

Edward nodded and pulled the door shut behind him, they walked in silence along the corridor until they came to the Green outside. Septimus stopped and handed over the letter

“From my brother” he said and turned to leave but Edward detained him a huge smile on his face

“You help me greatly too sir” Edward continued to beam at him and something in Septimus snapped

"I am doing this for Alfred because I love him but sir do not think for one minute I approve of what is going on, not let me finish” he held up his hand as Edward started to speak "I give not two figs that you are both men, that is you affair but what is unacceptable is how you deceive your wife”

And he turned on his heel and left with Edward staring after him, visibly distressed by what had
passed.
Edward's dilemma

Chapter Summary

Septimus' outburst leaved Edward with a dilemma

Chapter Notes

Poor Edward his life really doesn't get any easier and this chapter contains some classic Drums reasoning when confronted with things getting complicated

Historical note - Willexi take Edward to Rules https://rules.co.uk/ officially the oldest restaurant in London

Edward was still standing there 10 minutes later when Alexi and William arrived; they had called at the Houses of Parliament for Edward but been told he had left with Lord Septimus 10 minutes earlier and had been last seen heading towards the Green. William & Alexi decided to head that way too to try and catch up with them; perhaps Septimus would like to join them for lunch as well

“Why Mr Drummond” said Alexi in surprise “whatever is the matter?”

Edward looked at him slightly unfocused

“I...” he looked down at the letter in his hand “I have a letter from Alfred” he said

“A letter? I hope it does not contain bad news” said William alarmed by Edward’s demeanour

Edward shook his head “I do not know, I haven’t opened it yet”

William and Alexi looked at each other, this was very peculiar

“Perhaps we should go for lunch Drummond and then you can tell us what has happened” said William gently

Edward stared at him looking nonplussed as if he’d never heard the word ‘lunch’ before

“lunch” repeated Alexi taking Edward by the elbow “come long, we shall have lunch and you can tell us what has happened” and they led an unprotesting but silent Edward away casting worried looks at each other as they went.

Once they had seated a still somewhat dazed Edward down in Rules and ordered mutton chops for all of them, Alexi urged a glass of port on him

“Drink this Drummond and tell us what has happened”

Edward sat there, not sure what to say; Septimus’ words had cut him very deep. He had in the past prided himself on bearing an honourable man, a truthful man but from the moment he had met
Alfred, all of that had fallen away. Instead he lived with lies every single day and could weep for the man he’d become when he looked back at the ideological boy he had been. Septimus’ blunt words had confronted him with what he already knew, of course he knew, that he was deceiving Florence in every possible way.

He moistened his lips “lord Septimus brought me a letter from Alfred” he began

“But that is good isn’t it?” asked William puzzled

“He also left me in no doubt about his feelings towards Alfred and me”

“What?” said Alexi in astonishment “surely he does not share the belief that you and Alfred are in some way unnatural?”

Edward shook his head “no it is not that” he said in a dull voice “he disapproves that I am unfaithful to my wife”

“Oh” William looked at Alexi and then at Edward “but it is not by choice Edward, please forgive my familiarity, if society did not frown on relationships like ours” he smiled at Alexi “then it would not be necessary”

“But it does” said Edward “it does frown, and he is right, I am unfaithful to Florence am I not? Not just with my body but with my mind and my heart”

Alexi sighed and ran his hands through his hair; it was far from unknown for Drummond to react somewhat emotionally at times.

“You have no choice Drummond” he reiterated “of course you would not live like this if it were up to you but it is not”

“I do have a choice though” said Edward his eyes fixed on the cutlery in front of him “I have all the choices” he smiled bitterly “look at me; young, well connected, a loving wife, a beautiful daughter, money, I have it all do I not? I can have almost anything I choose and yet still I crave what I cannot have”

William scratched his head, his father had said that Drummond although a man of deep intelligence, sound good sense and strong moral fibre could be dramatic at times and it seemed today was one of those times “but you have Alfred” he said “he is yours completely”

Edward smiled sadly “that is not what I crave” he said “oh do not misunderstand me, I adore and love Alfred more than anything but what I crave is to be with him all the time, to live with him in the same house, to share his bed every night, to be acknowledged by the world as a couple” he sighed heavily “but that will never happen and I wonder whether it is fair to any of us to continue like this always lying and sneaking around in shadows and corners”

Alexi forbade from saying meeting at lord Alfred’s house was hardly shadows and corners but said instead trying not to sound impatient “but you cannot have that Drummond, and you and Lord Alfred have more than most, can you not accept that and be grateful?”

Edward looked at him with flat brown eyes “I am no longer sure that I can. Alfred and I deserve better and so does Florence”

“Surely you don’t mean to break with Alfred?” said William aghast

“Perhaps before you make any hasty decisions, you should read Alfred’s letter” said Alexi gently
Edward felt in his pocket and pulled out the letter, Alfred’s familiar handwriting scrawled across the envelope. He hesitated and then laid it by his plate; he wanted to read it in private.

“I will look at it later” he said

Septimus regretted his outburst almost as soon as he’d made it, it had been foolish to express his feelings out loud like that, no good could come of it and Alfred would be very angry when he heard of it as he assuredly would. Hurrying back to the office, he slunk in quietly hoping his father had already gone to luncheon but alas not.

Henry looked up as Septimus came in, he could see straight way that something was not right.

“You delivered Alfred’s letter to Mr Drummond?” he asked causally

“Yes” muttered Septimus busying himself with the papers on his desk

“And what happened that you return looking so abashed?” asked Henry eyebrows raised

Septimus flushed “nothing”

“Come now Septimus, do not take me for a fool” said Henry bluntly “what passed between you and Mr. Drummond?”

Septimus swallowed and tried to look unconcerned “I merely told him that I disapproved of his infidelity to his wife”

Henry’s mouth sagged open “you said what Septimus? What on earth possessed you to say such a thing?”

“I do disapprove papa” said Septimus “it is not right how they he carries on a liaison with Alfred behind Flo…behind his wife’s back”

Henry looked at him shrewdly for a few seconds “and what is Mrs Drummond to you that you have suddenly developed a moral streak? I do not recall you being quite so concerned about infidelity before, not if what I have heard about your escapades is true”

Septimus went red “it just seems wrong papa that is all” and he bent his head over his papers hoping that his father would cease interrogating him

“Hmmmm” said Henry noncommittally looking as if he were returning to his work but inside his head, warning bells were sounding furiously! Could it be that he had two sons both of whom seemed to be in love with a Drummond?

Edward walked home slowly, his mind in turmoil; how could he square the unsquarable in his mind? He loved Alfred, he couldn’t imagine being without him, just the thought of it made him turn cold, but he was deceiving Florence on a daily basis. Perhaps he should confess everything to her, he mused. Perhaps if she understood the reasons behind the way he was, the reason why he couldn’t say he loved her, they could reach an understanding. He was very fond of her and wanted her to be happy and it made him profoundly sad that he could not give her what she deserved. He would not
stand in her way if she found love elsewhere, all he would ever ask is that he could see Blair as often and whenever he liked, and of course their new baby.

But what if on telling her, she hated him? Despised him? What if she exposed Alfred and him to the world? He had a sudden horrifying and unwanted image of Alfred on the gallows and he almost lost his footing, no no no he thought anything but that! He could bear anything, anything, except that Alfred be harmed. Perhaps giving him up was the right thing to do? That way he could at least be sure they could not be exposed and Alfred would be safe.

Sighing he went through the front door, the house was very quiet, unusually so. As a rule he would hear the sound of Blair laughing or having a tantrum, or Florence talking with her friends who may have called round but all he could hear was the ticking of the clocks. Perhaps Florence and Blair had gone out he thought as he went into the sitting room.

There on the sofa were Florence and Blair; Blair had fallen asleep on Florence’s lap because she was curled there, her thumb in her mouth and a weary Florence had most assuredly nodded off with her. He stood looking at them both, his heart constricting. Asleep, Blair looked so tiny and vulnerable, her downy soft skin and brown curls so like his own tumbled over her face while Florence looked tired even though she was asleep. Pregnancy did not agree with her, while some women blossomed, Florence became very sick, her back hurt and her ankles would swell. He marvelled that women would put themselves through such discomfort but then he reflected they did not have much choice; only by abstaining would there be no babies. He half thought about waking them but decided to let them sleep, he would go and read his letter from Alfred.

He went into his study, closed and locked the door, poured himself a whiskey and seated himself in the large leather chair by the fire place. He took out Alfred’s letter and raising it to his nose sniffed gently, ah! Was it his imagination or did it carry the scent of Alfred? He took up his letter opener from the table next to him and sliced it open carefully, unfolding the sheet of paper within.

“My dearest Edward

It is 2 days since we arrived and I confess Scotland is nothing without you; none of its grand mountains or pure streams move me as they would if you were here. Her Majesty and the Prince are quite entranced by Balmoral but between us I find it cold, cramped and draughty though perhaps that is because I miss you so.

And I miss you too my love whispered Edward softly

We fished today, well the Prince and his brother fished, as you may recall, I am not one for fishing, not like you my dear Edward. I was remembering how fine you looked that day at Blair Athol standing on the rocks fishing. I don’t think I had ever seen a more entrancing sight! Except perhaps at the silk weaver’s ball or at the banquet in France, in fact I tell a lie Edward; you were at your most entrancing at that devilishly cold lake in France”

Edward smiled as he read Alfred’s handwriting which dashed fluently over the page much as Alfred’s speech did in real life. He’d been very well aware of Alfred staring at him as he’d fished that day and he’d gone out of his way to stand in a manner that showed him to the best advantage even though he would have denied it at the time. But then he and Alfred had spent so many many hours looking at each other back then, looking, glancing, smiling but never touching properly until that evening in Scotland. Although their horseplay in France had indeed involved much touching, it had of a necessity been rough and playful rather than the lingering tenderness that they both had really wanted to give. They had managed to do that in Scotland and Edward shivered as he remembered their first real time together in the boathed, how they had moaned and clutched at each other, desperate after so many years of longing.
“Miss Coke came and interrupted my thoughts; do you know Edward she told me she saw us by the lake, not like that I believe my dearest but she saw us afterwards. She said to me that ‘happiness can be very fleeting and one must take it when it is presented’. I do not know if she suspects or not, but I believe if she does, she is not without sympathy for our predicament.

Edward’s heart leapt in alarm at Alfred’s words, they had been seen? No wait, he read it again, she had only seen them afterwards, not their kiss.

I would like to write for longer but alas the Queen commands us to dinner and horrors a bagpipe recital. Do you remember how we tried to learn to play them with Miss Coke? I confess Edward I still blame you entirely for my inability to play them, the sight of your lips wrapped around the blow stick quite put me off my ability to concentrate.

I hope that you are well dearest Edward and give Blair a kiss from her uncle Alfred

With love

Your Alfred”

A bagpipe recital thought Edward, well he was glad to be missing that and he coloured at Alfred’s reference to being distracted by his playing. He had noticed that Alfred seemed unable to get a tune from the instrument but he put that down to unfamiliarity; he on the other hand had been born in Scotland and had at some previous experience with them. He hadn’t thought that Alfred had been thinking that seeing lips on the blow stick made him think of his lips on other places. Memories shot into Edward’s mind of being in bed with Alfred, of feeling his hands clutched in his hair, hearing his moans and gasps of “more Edward please more”; Alfred was never slow to vocalise what he liked thought Edward shifting in his seat as the memories awakened a physical response and he began to stiffen. He listened; there was still silence and the door was locked, he had time and privacy he thought as he began to unbutton his trousers, his mind and heart full off Alfred.

“You look worried Henry” said Charlotte as they sat companionably by the fire after dinner. Septimus had sent word to say he was dining out and for once they had no other engagement.

Henry sighed and stretched his good leg out, “I am” he said raising his glass of brandy and downing it swiftly “Charlotte, what do you know of Septimus and Florence Drummond?”

“Know of them?” charlotte looked puzzled “I don’t know anything of them, why Henry is there something I should know?”

“I believe Septimus has feelings for Florence Drummond” said Henry squeezing his eyes shut and pinching the bridge of his nose

“Feelings?” charlotte sat upright “what makes you say that?”

“He took Alfred’s letter to Edward today and it would seem told him in no uncertain terms of his disapproval of his and Alfred’s relationship. Not because of their sex, no because of his infidelity to Florence”

Charlotte closed her eyes for a few moments and then opened them “he had a similar conversation with me Henry” she said “over breakfast. He asked me if I found it difficult conniving in Edward and Alfred’s lies and did I not think that we were all doing the wrong thing in supporting them”

“Did he now?” said Henry
Charlotte nodded “yes, I told him that it was far from a simple situation, that we were doing the best we could to protect all three of them but I do not feel he accepted my reasoning”

“I asked him what Florence Drummond was to him that he was so up in arms on her behalf, especially with his own history and he could not, or would not, answer me, but I fear Charlotte, I greatly fear, he has fallen in love with her”

Charlotte looked at him in fear “he would not do anything foolish would he?” she asked

“I do not believe he would knowingly expose Alfred to harm” said Henry slowly “of course he would not, but if his feelings are running high, well he does rather take after me you know” and he smiled ruefully at Charlotte

“likely to act before fully thinking of the consequences you mean’” said Charlotte with a sad laugh “oh Henry what are we to do?”

“I do not know” said Henry reaching over to take her hand “I do not yet know”
memories

Chapter Summary

Henry and Septimus have a father/son talk, Alfred and Edward both remember Scotland and Edward is put on the spot by Palmerston

Chapter Notes

First of all thank you to everyone who is still reading this <3 I love you all <3 <3

The summary of the British position vis a vis Russia circa 1848 included here is a very very broad brush summary of Palmerston's complex foreign policy. If you're a bit of a history nerd it's well worth reading about and I cant wait to see how they portray Palmerston in the upcoming series 3 (character notes say charismatic and wayward lol)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Two days later another letter arrived for Septimus from Alfred, it lay on the breakfast table next to his plate like a red warning flag.

Seeing it, Henry looked at him over the top of his newspaper.

“Do you intend to deliver it?” he asked

Septimus went red “of course” he said “I promised Alfred”

“Good” said Henry shaking and folding his newspaper “you can apologise to Edward”

“Apologise?!” said Septimus astonished “and why would I do that?”

Henry laid down his newspaper “because you spoke completely out of turn Septimus. You were asked to deliver a letter, not lecture Edward about his marriage. Do you honestly think Mr. Drummond has not asked himself a thousand times if he is right to do what he does? That it does not torment him every day”

“Well his torment could be easily stopped papa” said Septimus tightly, his back straight and tense “if he would cease seeing Alfred”

Henry sighed and rested his hands in front of him “Septimus I asked you what Mrs. Drummond was
to you that you are so concerned about this and you said that you simply felt it was wrong. I’m asking you again; why does this bother you so much? Do you have feelings for her?"

Septimus suddenly deflated “I do papa” he said “and I confess I have not even tried that hard not to. She is so beautiful, and so sweet and loving” his voice began to tremble “and yet she is married to a man who does not appreciate her”

Henry’s heart sank, so he and Charlotte had been right

“Does she reciprocate your feelings?” he asked

“I do not know” said Septimus “I believe she might in time but she is deeply in love with her thoroughly undeserving husband”

“Perhaps that is for the best” said Henry gently “I fear to become involved with her would only cause heartache for you both”

“You say that to me?” said Septimus shaking his head “you papa? Mama was married when you met, she ran away from her husband to be with you”

“That was different” said Henry sharply “her husband was also in love with someone else, it made things far less complicated”

Septimus pushed his chair back abruptly “I see then you are a hypocrite papa” he said angrily “it is no different! Drummond too is in love with someone else, my brother”

“But he cannot leave Florence to be with Alfred” said Henry impatiently “for goodness sake Septimus see reason! Find another woman and leave Mrs Drummond alone”

“I cannot papa” said Septimus rose to his feet “I cannot” and he stormed from the room

Henry sighed, the problem he reflected with his children, is that they were far too much like he and Charlotte.

“A penny for them Lord Alfred?”

Alfred started as the Queen came to stand by him as he stared out of the window at the rain sliding down the window pane. The day had been dull and chilly, the breeze rising to bite at faces and fingers as they had been out for a walk at the Prince’s insistence. Even though it was still only September, this far north, it seemed to be already early winter as the leaves fell and carpeted the ground with yellow and russet.

“Forgive me Your Majesty” he said “I was just remembering our last trip to Scotland, the weather was much pleasanter”

“We had some beautiful weather” said Victoria smiling “once of course Albert and I became unlost. I do believe Lord Alfred that my love of Scotland started in that humble crofters cottage”

Alfred smiled at her; he knew Victoria liked to play at being an ordinary wife but that playing was all it was. She would never want to not be Queen and he admired her for it; for all her wifely devotion to Albert she did not take the easy route and allow him free rein while she merely rubber stamped his decisions. It made for an interesting marriage, just when the Prince thought he had the Queen malleable and in agreement she would surprise him.
“and of course last time we were here, dear Mr Drummond was with us” said Victoria “I must confess I wish he were Foreign Secretary rather than that dreadful Palmerston, it is only Mr Drummond that makes those meetings tolerable. I do not know why Lord Palmerston sympathises with those revolutionaries on the continent and insists in encouraging so many disreputable people to come to our shores”

As always Alfred’s heart jumped at the mention of Edward’s name “he was ma’am” he said “and I am delighted his presence improves the meetings”

“frankly they could hardly be worse Lord Alfred” said Victoria “Palmerston has invited that dreadful Hungarian Kossuth to England next month, he continues to encourage revolution on the continent, ‘the right of people to self determination’ ‘she snorted, ‘I believe he wont be happy until we are overthrown and consigned to a purely ceremonial role’

“Surely not ma’am” said Alfred alarmed, why had Edward not told him how bad things had got? But then he supposed Edward had had other worries on his mind.

“Mark my words Lord Alfred” said Victoria darkly “he won’t be happy until he sees us but once a year to open Parliament”

Fortunately at that moment the Prince came to find Victoria

“I have been working on my plans for the Castle” he said “please excuse us Lord Alfred, but I would like your opinion my darling of my ideas for the plumbing”

“Of course Albert” said Victoria and they went away arm in arm, the Queen smiling at him adoringly even though Alfred would lay odds she cared not a jot how the plumbing worked as long as it did.

Alfred returned in peace to let his mind dwell on that midsummer’s evening two years ago, ‘only two years’ he thought. He couldn’t even quite remember how or when they had decided to leave the gathering in the forest or how they had made their way to the lake as if knowing that there would be no one else around. Edward had been carrying his coat, his own had been left goodness knows where, and Alfred remembered asking him for more of the whiskey that Edward had squirreled away about his person. And then Edward had flung his own coat over the statue and walked down to the lake and he’d followed him utterly transfixed at how beautiful Edward had looked in the setting rays of the sun with his hair ruffled and his collar askew from the dancing. He’d thought he would die if he didn’t have him but also that he would die if he did. His heart had hammered in his chest as he’d looked up at him and said “these midsummer evenings are so enchanting don’t you think?” ; what he’d meant of course was that Edward was so enchanting, so utterly enrapturing and perfect that he could hardly breathe. Edward had looked back at him and then all time stopped as Edward had suddenly leaned in, kissed him and in that moment changed both their lives forever.

Edward leaned back in his chair frowning at the latest dispatches from Russia. They had arrived just as he was in the middle of recalling his and Alfred’s first tryst in the boat shed in Scotland. How desperate they had been, how he’d clutched at Alfred and moaned incoherently at the first light feel of Alfred’s fingers and the taste of his skin on his lips. It was probably for the best he thought ruefully, a situation was definitely developing underneath his desk as he thought of Alfred and he was hardly in a place to deal with it.

The problems in Eastern Europe becoming increasingly more difficult, Britain was most decidedly anti Russian due to their interference in the Ottoman Empire but the Queen and Prince were very much in favour of Tsar Nicholas. Lord Palmerston’s approach to foreign policy walked a fine line
between brilliance and madness. He knew Palmerston himself was sympathetic to the revolutions on
the continent but at the same time; saw Britain’s role was to hold the balance of power between
France, Russia and the Austro Hungarian Empire, stirring up trouble between them leaving Britain
free to exploit the field left clear by their squabbles. Thus for example he encouraged the Italians to
throw off Austrian rule but steadfastly refused to recognise the claims of Hungary to independence
even though in private he sympathised with it entirely. Edward sighed, these machinations enraged
the Queen who never knew from one minute to the next what his plans would be; Palmerston was
agile, changing direction at speed and saying whatever needed to be said at that moment to get his
way, it drove the queen and prince almost apoplectic to hear they had agreed to something only for
Palmerston to do an about face a few weeks later often without telling them.

When Palmerston entered the room, Edward gave him a few moments before approaching his desk
and handing over the papers

“The latest dispatches from Russia sir” he said

Palmerston took them “have you read them?” he asked

Edward nodded

“Summarise them for me please Drummond”

“The Russians continue to aid Austria with their involvement in Hungary. I believe that in return
they will want complete freedom in settling their problems with the Ottoman Empire”

Palmerston sighed and rubbed his nose “we cannot allow that, Turkey must continue to hold the
eastern side of the Mediterranean against Russia”

Edward nodded soberly

Palmerston looked at him “you have still not given me an answer to my question Edward, as to
whether you would take a diplomatic position in Russia. Bloomfield does not seem to understand the
seriousness of the position we find ourselves in and I believe our country needs you there. I have
given you time as I appreciate I ask a lot but now I’m asking again, will you go to Russia?”

Edward’s stomach plummeted with guilt; by appealing to his patriotism, that it would be best for
Britain if he want, Palmerston had unwittingly hit on the one thing that would make Edward consider
it. He prevaricated

“My wife is with child sir, I could not ask her to travel whilst in such a condition”

“My congratulations sir” said Palmerston evenly “but I do not ask her to go, only for you to go, she
can join you later once the child is born”

Edward’s brain went into over drive as he sought a way out of his predicament. He was saved by a
knock on the door

“Enter” bellowed Palmerston impatiently

Septimus entered the room “I have a message for Mr Drummond from…”

“Yes yes” said Palmerston testily “leave it on the desk and go, we are discussing important matters”

Septimus edged towards Edward’s desk, put the letter down and then turning to Edward nodded at
him slightly before leaving. Edward could see at once it was Alfred’s writing and his heart lurched.
At least this time Septimus Paget had not been able to give vent to his feelings about his marriage thought Edward as he remembered his shock as he stood there staring at nothing until Alexi and will…..that was it! His way out of his dilemma!

“My lord” said Edward “I would be very reluctant to leave my wife at this time but perhaps I may make a suggestion. You may or may not know but I am good friends with Prince Alexi of the Russian embassy. Perhaps I may discuss matters with him to see if there is a way the Tsar can be made to see the seriousness of our concerns?”

Palmerston grunted “it would be a start I suppose”

Edward nodded eagerly warming to his, in his mind at least, quite brilliant idea “Ale….his highness is shrewd and I believe understands Britain’s position well. I am sure that he would be able to suggest a solution to the problem we have between our two countries”

Palmerston nodded grudgingly “very well” he said “talk to him but Drummond, if relations are not better once you wife has given birth, my request for you to go to Russia may well become an order”

Edward nodded, his heart hammering “I understand sir” he said, he had to find a way to thaw relations otherwise he foresaw that in 12 months time he would be in St Petersburg and far away from Alfred.

Chapter End Notes

In the next chapter, Edward and Alfred are reunited and we find out what Alexi thinks of Drums cunning plan....
"love is not love"

Chapter Summary

Alfred frets that he is getting old and wasting his life and he and Edward are reunited; Florence feels guilty

Chapter Notes

Some of the themes in this chapter were inspired by Jordan Waller's own writing on the pressure on actors to look a certain way and his worries about his own looks and weight https://www.phoenixmag.co.uk/article/why-we-need-to-talk-about-disordered-eating-in-men/

Historical notes - Harvey Nichols did exist in Victorian times though I have given them a shop 2 years early

“I’ll do what I can Edward” said Alexi frowning “but what you’re asking is difficult; I’m well aware of Palmerston’s attitude towards my Government and its ambitions for Turkey”

“I know” said Edward “and I wouldn’t ask if I were not desperate but unless I can find a way to calm the tensions from here, Palmerston will have me out in Russia and away from Alfred before you can say ‘diplomatic relations’” he tried to smile but Alexi could see how anxious he was.

“I will talk to Count Brunnov to see if there are any assurances that we could give or perhaps any opportunities for a joint venture in the East” said Alexi; he wanted to add that Edward should not get his hopes up but Edward immediately looked so relieved that he couldn’t bear to.

“Thank you Alexi” said Edward warmly “as always you are a true friend”

Alexi smiled at him, how pleased he was that they had got over their earlier difficulties around Edward’s suspicions as to his motives towards Alfred

“When does Lord Alfred return?” he asked

“Tomorrow” said Edward beaming “I have missed him so”

“I’m sure you have” said Alexi “I take it you have had no further thoughts of breaking with him?”

“No” said Edward “I fear I was perhaps reacting too emotionally to Lord Septimus’ words”

Alexi hid a smile, as if Edward would ever react emotionally without thinking first! “I am pleased” he said “you know he would be devastated, he loves you so”

“And I love him” said Edward “with all my heart”
Alfred stared out of the train window. He was glad that there was a line now between London and Scotland; it made the journey so much easier and quicker than bumping over rough ground in carriages. Soon he would be with Edward again. He had written him several letters; he had no reply but he understood that it was not always easy for Edward to answer and he trusted Septimus so he knew he would have delivered them.

He ran his finger down the condensation in the window pane. It had been a long 3 weeks and he had often felt profoundly alone. Harriet was no longer part of the Queen’s inner circle and as the Queen’s family grew, she became more and more preoccupied with her children and with Albert. Even the Duchess of Buccleuch had succumbed to the aches and pains of her increasing age and retired from court which meant only Miss Coke remained of the little band of courtiers that had encircled the Queen when he had met Edward. He tried to remember the time before Edward when he had cared about court intrigues and who was rumoured to have indiscretions with whom and whether one was wearing quite the latest fashion. Now he cared about none of those things, he only cared about Edward. What would he do he thought seized with dread, if Edward should ever tire of him? He was after all getting old he thought, next year he would be 28, not long until he was 30. Was this going to be his life he wondered; following dutifully 3 paces behind the Queen, making endless polite small talk at functions, playing cards in the evening and then retiring alone to his room.

“You look so melancholy lord Alfred” said Miss Coke breaking into his thoughts “I trust nothing is wrong”

Alfred sighed “alas I fear I am getting old” he said

Miss Coke laughed “old lord Alfred? You are barely 27”

“And I wonder if I am wasting my life”

At that Miss Coke regarded him more thoughtfully

“Why do you say that?” she asked

“I have not achieved much have I?” he said “The Queen rules over the country with the Prince by her side, my father commanded troops at the battle of waterloo, you will soon become a wife and mother” he swallowed “even my good friend Ed...Mr Drummond is an adviser to Lord Palmerston and a father. And I? What am I? A courtier who spends their days in meetings over which I have no influence and their evenings dining and gossiping and playing cards”

“It is within your power to change your life lord Alfred” said Miss Coke quietly but firmly “you are not a woman who has no independence, who goes from her families care to her husband’s care, with no money of her own. You can do whatever you put your mind too; you could marry, you could leave court, enter politics, take up your post in the army, travel; all these options are open to you. If you want a different life, it is yours for the taking but no one can do it for you”

Alfred stared at her; she had never been a beauty like Harriet Sutherland or witty like Emma Portman but she had a calm serenity about her and he understood why John Stanhope wanted to marry her

He smiled “you have become very wise Miss Coke” he said “and you are right; I should not be here feeling sorry for myself. Self pity is a most unattractive quality”

“I did not mean to be unkind” she said immediately looking worried that she had offended him but he smiled and gently patted her hand

“You were not unkind” he said “indeed you are the kindest of women and now I beg you, distract
me with plans for your wedding. It is only one month hence I believe”

Miss Coke smiled and immediately began to discuss plans for the reception and Alfred did his best to focus on them and push thoughts of his growing old and Edward tiring of him to the back of his mind.

There was so much to do thought Florence as she sat at her writing desk, so many lists to make so they could move house. She had been to their new house several times and spent a fortune on new furnishings. Edward never asked how much she spent, merely saying

“If that is what you would like my dear” or “I’m happy to leave it to you my dear”

Which in one respect was of course very agreeable; she had complete free reign but on the other hand, she wished he’d show some interest! She felt the distance between them was growing and she didn’t know how to stop it. How he wished she’d never asked him if he loved her, everything seemed to have stemmed from that.

It did not help that she was feeling extremely guilty; she had spent an afternoon with Septimus Paget and she had not told Edward. She had run into Lord Septimus whilst looking at curtain fabric for the new house whilst in Harvey Nichols.

“Mrs. Drummond” he swept off his hat

“Lord Septimus” she said curtseying

They stood there looking at each other

“What brings you?” began Septimus

“How are” began Florence

And then they laughed as they realised they were both talking at once

“Ladies first” said Septimus bowing

“I was going to enquire as to how you were” said Florence

“I am well Mrs. Drummond, very well” replied Septimus smiling at her “you look most becoming in that colour”

Florence blushed and then they both looked at the floor

“Could I invite you to take tea with me Mrs. Drummond” asked Septimus “if do not have a prior engagement. They have a tea room here on the top floor”

“I do not” she said her heart beating fast “I would like that” she was feeling somewhat tired and a cup of tea would be most refreshing

“Then if I may?” and Septimus offered her his arm; Florence slipped her arm through it feeling somewhat strange. She was sure she should not be doing this, she was a married woman but when Septimus' looked at her with those large brown eyes, she found she did not care much for respectability.
“tire of you?” Edward looked at him in astonishment when Alfred confessed his fears a few days later when they were finally able to be together “Alfred, are you mad? How could I ever tire of you?”

Alfred shrugged trying to look nonchalant although Edward wasn’t fooled for a moment “I’m getting old Edward, may hap you’ll find someone younger who will take your fancy”

Edward laughed “well I have noticed you have a few grey hairs and” but then he stopped at Alfred’s expression “Alfred I was joking” he said “surely you did not take me seriously?”

Alfred turned his head away sadly

“Alfred!” Edward put his fingers under his chin and turned his head back “look at me! How could you for one second think I would want someone else?”

Alfred regarded him mournfully and shrugged “I achieve little Edward” he said “what purpose have I in life other than to make the queen’s life easier”

“It is more than that Alfred” said Edward “you make it sound as if making the queens life easier is simple when we both know it is a complicated and thankless task”

“Nevertheless, it is hardly a life’s work is it Edward?” said Alfred despondently

“I see then you are determined to feel sorry for yourself” said Edward soberly “and so you leave me little choice” and he swept Alfred up in his arms

“Edward I am not in the mood” said Alfred struggling “put me down”

“Alas I cannot do that until you are smiling again” said Edward marching over to the bed they had recently vacated and depositing him down on it in a heap

“Edward…” protested Alfred as Edward climbed on top of him “stop it at once” but his expression had begun to lighten

“I’m afraid I cannot” said Edward pinning Alfred’s wrists above his head “this calls for serious measures” and so saying, he began to tickle Alfred.

“Edward no….nooooo!” said Alfred squirming and beginning to laugh “you know how ticklish I am”

“I do” said Edward continuing to torment Alfred with a big grin on his face “and this gives me no pleasure but it is necessary” though actually to say it gave him no pleasure was not true. To feel Alfred’s soft skin beneath his, hear his breathy giggles and feel his body twist beneath him was all extremely pleasurable indeed.

“Arghhh Edward you clod, stop it” cried Alfred trying fruitlessly to escape as Edward dragged him down the bed and further into his clutches

“Do you promise me you will smile?” said Edward mock sternly

“I’m smiling Edward, see I’m smiling” Alfred was choking with laughter underneath him “now cease with this behaviour immediately you foolish man”

“Alright” said Edward stopping and collapsing down on top of Alfred, wrapping his arms around him. Alfred’s laughter stopped and they laid there, foreheads touching gently, rubbing their noses
together. Edward brought up his hand to stroke Alfred’s face

“I will love you when we’re both old and grey Alfred” he said “when we walk with sticks, cannot see without glasses and fall asleep at 2 in the afternoon” and he began to quote softly

Love is not love
Which alters when it alteration finds,
Or bends with the remover to remove:
O no! it is an ever-fixed mark
That looks on tempests and is never shaken;
It is the star to every wandering bark,
Whose worth’s unknown, although his height be taken.

Love's not Time's fool, though rosy lips and cheeks
Within his bending sickle’s compass come:
Love alters not with his brief hours and weeks,
But bears it out even to the edge of doom.

Alfred stared up at him, blue eyes pooled with tears; how he loved this man, he thought as Edward looked back at him, brown eyes soft with love and tenderness

“I will love you too Edward” he said “forever; on this earth, in the next life wherever that is, for all eternity until the stars are extinguished in the sky”

“You look well Edward darling” said Florence when Edward returned home for dinner “are things becoming easier at work?”

Edward smiled at her, seeing Alfred had restored his mood as nothing else could “they are my dear” he said

“Good” she nodded and then winced and clutched her stomach, immediately Edward was at her side

“Are you in pain?” he asked anxiously

“Just a little” she said “Edward, this baby feels different from Blair”

“Different” said Edward frowning “in what way?”

“I cannot explain it but it does” she said “already much heavier than Blair was”

“Then you must rest” said Edward

Florence laughed “and who will organise the moving of the house then Edward?” she asked “there is so much to do! I have lists and lists and lists! I even thought of making a list of my lists” and she pulled a rueful face

Edward laughed “sometimes I think you would be the better secretary to Palmerston than me” he said

Florence tapped his arm playfully “you tease me Edward” she said nevertheless feeling pleased

“Only a little” he smiled back

“Oh” said Florence “I nearly forgot. This came for us today” and she handed Edward a stiff
envelope containing an embossed card “an invitation to Wilhelmina’s wedding. I am so glad she is marrying john Stanhope though I confess I did at one time wish her to marry Lord Alfred”

“Lord Alfred?” Edward looked at her in surprise

“Yes, you two are such friends, I thought we would make rather a good quartet” she laughed “but he is still in love with the Queen and Mr. Stanhope will make a wonderful husband. I fear lord Alfred will never marry in any case” she finished sadly

“I fear not” said Edward evenly thinking ‘I pray not’

“It is a shame” said Florence “he would make a good husband”

Edward searched for something to say that wouldn’t give his feelings away “Alfred is a lost cause” he said lightly “I fear it will be down to lord Septimus to find a bride, why Florence did you have another pain?” h added as the teacup Florence was holding dropped to the floor

“Yes another pain Edward” said Florence “perhaps you would summon Edith to clear up the mess”

“Of course my dear” said Edward looking at her curiously and leaving the room

When he’d gone Florence sat back on the sofa, lord Septimus find a bride, well of course it would be expected but Florence knew suddenly that she did not want that indeed would be jealous if he was to find a wife, very jealous indeed.
Miss Coke's wedding

Chapter Summary

Wilhelmina is getting married and the reception has dramatic discussions for Edward and Alfred and Septimus and Florence

Chapter Notes

This is the second to last chapter of part 3 and things are coming to a head in all sorts of way!!!

Historical notes - Ditton Park was one of the homes of the Duchess of Bucchleuch

Florence dressed for Miss Coke’s wedding with care; she noted with alarm that she was definitely much larger than she had been when pregnant with Blair and her corset had already been let out 3 laces even though she was only 4 months gone by her reckoning. She really did not know how much longer she could carry on without it being noticeable.

As her maid laced up her dress she looked at herself in the mirror; she was looking a little wan and she pinched her cheeks to bring colour to them. The last month had been very tiring physically and emotionally. They had (at last) moved into their new house and Florence found she was overwhelmed with how much running it took. They had 3 times as many servants as before as well as people who came in on a daily or weekly basis. It wasn’t that she wasn’t used to servants, she had grown up in a house where they were even more numerous but she hadn’t been expected to manage them all. She had a definite new found respect for her mama.

However that had been nothing compared to her increasingly complex feelings towards Edward - and to Septimus Paget. Edward’s mood had seemed much improved by her pregnancy. He had even made an effort after she had pointed out to him how absent he was in the discussions about the new house to involve himself more in the décor and arrangement of the rooms. He continued to be as kind and solicitous of her welfare as always, anxiously asking her if she was tired or needed to rest. And yet there was something that was missing. He was kind yes, he cared for her, but she could not ignore that he did not love her. To be fair to him, he had never said he did but she had thought he would grow too, especially when she had become pregnant again but it seemed not. He remained as kind, affectionate and emotionally distant from her as ever. She may as soon as try to catch the moon in her hands she thought sadly than really understand what was going on behind Edward’s calm brown eyes.

The admiration of Septimus Paget therefore was like balm to her wounded soul. She had found many more excuses to take Blair to see Henry and Charlotte Paget just in case he was there (though lately it seemed more and more he was out when she called) or to find herself in places where she knew Septimus was like to walk. She knew that she should not enjoy his conversation, his attention so much but how could she not? Like his brother he was charming but unlike Alfred she felt there was no artifice to it, his was not the smooth practised affability of the courtier, and there was real warmth...
behind his smile and his words. She also could not ignore the way he looked at her in a way Edward never did or ever had. The way Septimus looked at her brought a flush to her throat and the blood to her cheeks. She knew it was dangerous to seek him out; she was a married woman but on the days when she knew she wouldn’t see him, her life felt empty and cold, and the mere thought that she might see him made her heart beat faster as nothing else did. He would be there today at Miss Coke’s wedding and Edward would be there too of course. It was not that that made her feel so nervous though, no it was the fact that she had not yet told Septimus she was pregnant. As was usual they had told no one other than their parents but the 3 months were most definitely up and Edward made no suggestion they announced it more widely. Once that would have piqued her but now she was glad, she knew the moment she told Septimus she was with child, her little fantasy world would be shattered. However soon it would be obvious and she felt she should tell him before it was announced publicly.

Everyone was returning for the Stanhope Coke wedding observed Alfred as he looked back over the pews in the church to check all was in order before the Queen arrived. Prince Ernst Wilhelmina’s long ago object d’affection, Harriet Sutherland, the ailing Duchess of Buccleuch who true to form had been graciously lodged in the palace at the Queen’s insistence and then proceeded to complain about her rooms incessantly. And of course Edward would be there with her. Weddings were never a happy occasion for him he thought sadly. If Edward was there, he was always with Florence and it pierced Alfred to the heart to see him there with her, his wife, given the status and recognition he could never have even though he was the one Edward loved. He tried to take solace from that but it was hard especially as he had to listen to people telling him what a wonderful charming and beautiful woman Florence as and how lucky Edward was to have her. He would have liked to marry Edward, stand up with him in front of the entire world and declare his love forever but of course he could not. He sighed and gave the room one last look before leaving to join the Queen’s entourage.

In the church, Edward could not help but think of his own wedding to Florence. He had watched as the Queen, last to arrive had walked to the front of the aisle with Prince Albert and behind her Lord Alfred escorting the Duchess of Buccleuch. Alfred was in his uniform and Edward found it hard to drag his eyes from him. The last time Edward had seen him in it, it had been a somewhat more private occasion where they played one of their special games. Edward recalled how Alfred had secured him to the bed and then tormented him with his fingers and tongue, and then withheld his climax until Edward was first laughing, then raging and finally begging. The memory made him feel hot and breathless and he fanned himself with the prayer book wondering that if there was a God, whether he might strike him down for such thoughts in church.

At last the bride arrived, Wilhelmina floating up the aisle in the now obligatory white dress made fashionable by the Queen. He watched as she and John Stanhope exchanged the same vows he had with Florence though he thought sadly, they meant theirs. He looked sideways at Florence who feeling him look, turned her head to smile at him and took his hand. By the altar the rings were now being exchanged and then the Bishop was pronouncing them husband and wife. The congregation stood as the new Mr. and Mrs. Spencer Stanhope walked down the aisle followed by the Queen and the Prince, Lord Alfred and the Duchess. As he passed by, Alfred glanced imperceptibly at Edward and their eyes met fleetingly before Alfred turned his eyes firmly set ahead.

What a charming ceremony” said Florence to Edward as they departed for the reception.

Edward nodded but said nothing; he didn’t want those words to lead to a conversation about their wedding.

Florence sighed under her breath; Edward was becoming almost impossible to get through to these
“Miss Coke, I mean Mrs. Stanhope” said Lord Alfred taking her hands “you look radiant, congratulations, and to you sir” he added to John Stanhope standing beaming next to his bride.

“Lord Alfred” Wilhelmina squeezed his hands “thank you so much for looking after my aunt”

“It was a pleasure” said Alfred solemnly and then he laughed and Wilhelmina joined in

“Well I think you have more than done your duty” said John Stanhope “please go and enjoy yourself”

Alfred nodded and moved on with a smile; he was very happy for them and he suspected their marriage would indeed be a happy one. He took a glass of champagne and surveyed the guests arriving, his heart leaping suddenly as he saw Edward’s tall figure.

“Alfred”

He glanced round to see Septimus

“Enjoying yourself?” Septimus took a drink of his own champagne and looked first at Alfred and then at Edward and Florence embracing the happy couple

Alfred looked at him directly “what do you think Septimus?” he murmured

Septimus patted his shoulder “would you like me to perhaps ask Mrs. Drummond to dance so you may spend a little time with Edward?”

“Would you?” Alfred looked at him gratefully

“Of course”

Florence watched Septimus and Alfred approach her and Edward and she felt her palms begin to sweat and her breath hitch in her throat

“Mrs. Drummond” Septimus inclined his head “may I have the honour?”

Florence looked at Edward “may I Edward?” she asked

“Of course” said Edward “though be careful not to tire yourself my dear”

“it is a slow waltz Edward” said Florence a touch acidly “I am sure I can manage” and she put her hand into Septimus and let him lead her to the dance floor. He bowed to her and then put his arm about her waist, laid his hand in hers and began to lead her into the dance.

“Did you enjoy the ceremony lord Alfred?” asked Edward outwardly carefully formal as Septimus and Florence departed but his eyes burning with love for Alfred

Alfred nodded “charming” he said “I am sure they will be very happy. Have you been to Ditton Park before?” he asked

Edward shook his head
“Perhaps you would allow me to show you the library; it is most well stocked” said Alfred “I have visited previously with Miss Coke”

Edward nodded “I would very much like to see it” he said and glanced sideways at Alfred with a smile that was fully returned

Alfred led the way down the oak panelled corridors until they reached the library; the fire was lit and the curtains were drawn against the darkness.

Edward stood in the middle of the floor and regarded the books, a smile playing about his lips

“It is indeed a well stocked library” he said gravely and then he held out his arms to Alfred who was within them in 3 strides burying his face in Edward’s shoulder.

“My love” murmured Edward resting his cheek on the bright blond hair and they stood in silence for a few moments just enjoying the feel of being in each other’s arms.

Eventually Alfred pulled back “you look well Edward” he said “and considerably less dishevelled than the last time I saw you” and he grinned.

“I have still not forgiven you for that” laughed Edward “and I will have my revenge!”

“I shall look forward to it” said Alfred pertly “though I have heard these tales of revenge before!”

They stood smiling at each other again and then Edward sighed

“We should return soon” he said “your brother cannot dance with my wife all night”

“No indeed” said Alfred wishing that Septimus could do exactly that

“It would seem at least he disapproves of me less” said Edward unthinkingly

“Disapproves of you less?” said Alfred frowning “what do you mean Edward?”

“Oh it is nothing Alfred” said Edward hastily “just a feeling I had”

“You felt Septimus disapproved of you Edward?” said Alfred puzzled “but why would you think that?”

“Oh no reason” said Edward desperately

“Edward what are you not telling me?” asked Alfred suspiciously

Edward sighed, Alfred could be very tenacious when he chose and he sensed this was one of those times

“Septimus told me he disapproved of my infidelity but I’m sure he was perhaps just having a difficult day”

“He WHAT?” Alfred’s face was a mask of fury “how DARE he!”

“I am sure he meant nothing by it” said Edward trying to mollify a clearly incandescent Alfred

“Meant nothing by it? Edward one does not accidentally say something like that!”

“Well he does have a poi…” began Edward before being cut off by Alfred
“Do you know how many married women my brother has been with?” demanded Alfred

“Well I…” began Edward but it was clearly a rhetorical question as Alfred barrelled on

“I would need at least two hands to count them Edward! How dare he say that to you, it is the deepest hypocrisy and I shall tell him so”

“No Alfred please don’t say anything” said Edward alarmed and wishing he had said nothing

“What? You want me to keep silent after he has insulted you? Insulted us?”

“It will do no good Alfred” said Edward pleadingly “please forget anything was said, it will do you no good to fall out with your brother”

Alfred was silent though still clearly fuming

“Please” said Edward again “for me”

Alfred sighed heavily “for you” he said “I would do anything. Very well Edward I will say nothing”

Edward enfolded him in his arms again

“Thank you” he said and dipped his head to bring his lips to Alfred’s, kissing him hungrily and pressing him hard against his body

“Edward” Alfred wriggled in his arms “do you mean to start your revenge now?”

Edward laughed against his lips “I only wish I could but I fear we need to return to the reception my love”

Alfred groaned “must we?”

“You know we must” said Edward regretfully

Alfred puffed out his cheeks “I know we do” he said “I suppose my brother cannot be expected to keep entertaining your wife”

Edward nodded “no he cannot”

“Then let us return” said Alfred stealing one last kiss before they left the room.

“You look well Mrs. Drummond” said Septimus softly looking into her eyes as they danced

“Thank you” replied Florence “I find your uniform most becoming also”

Septimus smiled at her, it was not Edward’s big boyish grin but unlike Edward when Septimus smiled at her, his tenderness filled his eyes

Florence moistened her lips

“You should not smile at me like that” she whispered

“Why not?” asked Septimus his hold on her waist becoming tighter

“Because…” she searched for what to say “you know why not sir, I am married”
“Something that does not seem to please you” observed Septimus quietly.

“How dare you” said Florence “I love Edward” but it was a half hearted protest.

Around them other couples waltzed and Florence could feel her head spin with the heat and dizziness of the dance.

“Mrs. Drummond? Do you feel faint?” Septimus at once was all concern.

Florence nodded, Septimus looked around and then before she knew it, he swiftly whisked her into a side room and thence out onto the terrace continuing along it until the furthest corner.

Once there he let her go and she sat on the balustrade fanning herself while Septimus leant against the wall watching her.

“Is that better?” he asked “I am sorry; I did not mean to exhaust you”

“It is not that” said Florence.

“Then what is it?” asked Septimus.

Florence bit her lip, she did not know what to say although there were so many things she wanted to say. Her feelings for Septimus confused her, she should not want to kiss him but she did, she was married and to even be caught outside with him alone would bring disgrace but she did not want to go back inside. Most of all she knew she should tell him she was pregnant but she could not bring herself to shatter his world.

“Mrs. Drummond…Florence” she gave a start at the use of her Christian name and then again when Septimus took her hand “you must know of my feelings for you”

“Stop” she whispered “you must not”

Septimus stepped back at once “I would not distress you for the world” he said “please let me escort you back inside”

Florence started at him mutely; she did not want to go back inside.

“Florence…” Septimus took her hand again “you are so beautiful, if only you knew how much”

She shook her head “I am not” she said blinking away tears, why did Edward not say this to her?

“Yes, yes you are” whispered Septimus “beautiful and charming” and he raised her hand to his lips but instead of kissing it, he began to gently roll down her glove, slowly easing the material down her forearm until her wrist was visible and then he very gently kissed her wrist where her pulse danced beneath his finger tips.

Florence thought she might die from the sensation. Edward rarely kissed her and when he did it was no more than a light touch on her lips or cheek but Septimus kissed her skin reverently as if worshipping it. She closed her eyes as his lips continued to graze her skin. She had never felt like this, it was glorious, her body felt on fire and Septimus stepped closer still, bringing his face level with hers.

“Florence” he sighed and she leaned forward almost without thinking. He was close enough for her to feel his breath against her lips, so so close….

“No” Florence pulled away “you must stop Septimus please” and she stood and turned away from
him but made no move to leave.

“We have….” He came behind her and she felt him press his lips to the back of her neck “I know that you share my feelings, why do you deny it?”

She turned back to face him, her face wild

“Because I am pregnant sir” she said “I am with Edward’s child and all of this is pointless, hopeless!” and turning away she fled back into the reception leaving Septimus alone in the darkness.
Edward and Alfred share a milestone for Blair and Septimus and Florence consider their future.

Edward lay with his head on Alfred’s chest reading aloud from Wuthering Heights while Alfred idly twirled one of his curls around his finger.

“So dark” murmured Alfred as he let the soft strand slide through his fingers while Edward continued

“Catherine Earnshaw, may you not rest as long as I am living. You said I killed you--haunt me then. The murdered do haunt their murderers. I believe--I know that ghosts have wandered the earth. Be with me always--take any form--drive me mad. Only do not leave me in this abyss, where I cannot find you! Oh, God! It is unutterable! I cannot live without my life! I cannot live without my soul!”

He stopped and putting the book down, flipped over, resting his chin on Alfred’s chest, staring at him

“Alfred….” Edward moved up to kiss him “would you haunt me?”

“What?” Alfred bobbed his head away and looked at him in astonishment

“Would you haunt me if anything happened to you?”

“My goodness Edward what a melancholy question!” shuddered Alfred “nothing is going to happen to me, or to you” he added

“Hmmmmm” said Edward thoughtfully “I would haunt you, I’d never leave you, I’d watch over you always”

Alfred shook his head gently at him smiling “Edward there are times when I scarcely know what goes on in your head! If it makes you feel better I promise to haunt you too”

“I just couldn’t bear the idea that you would just be gone Alfred” said Edward “that is all, that you would be gone forever” and he looked at Alfred with sad brown eyes

Alfred gathered him up in his arms “you have such strange fancies Edward” he said gently nipping his ear “but I adore you and I will never leave you”

Edward wrapped his arms around him “and I will never leave you” he said “never”

Sometime later they dressed, Alfred had sensed that Edward needed to divert his mind and had set about doing so in a way that had Edward gasping and clutching at the bed sheets.

“I need to call on your parents” said Edward “I know that Florence left Blair with them there this morning on the understanding that I would come by later”

“I will come with you” said Alfred “I will need to return to the Palace shortly but I would like to see...
Blair first”

“And she will want to see you too” smiled Edward “she says so many words now Alfred! It is
amazing”

They made their way to Uxbridge House and rang the bell

“Why Alfred I wasn’t expecting you to come with Edward” said his mother rising to greet them

“I thought it would be a surprise mama” said Alfred kissing her cheek, relations between them had
improved significantly

“Uncle afed!” Blair was sitting on the floor but on seeing him crawled over, “afed” and she pulled
herself up using his boots to stand on chubby wavering legs clutching his trousers

“Oh!” exclaimed Edward in mock outrage “greetings for Uncle Alfred but nothing for your poor
papa”

Blair held onto Alfred’s legs and turned round

“Papa” she said holding out her arms “papa”

Edward went to swoop over to pick her up but Charlotte made him stop

“Wait Edward” she said “look!”

Blair had let go of Alfred and taken one very small shaky step forward a look of intense
concentration on her face

“Papa” she said again

Edward knelt down “papa is here” and he held out his arms

Behind her Alfred was smiling and bending down “go to your papa” he said “go on”

Blair continued to stumble hesitantly forward across the small space until she finally tottered into
Edward’s arms.

“My wonderful clever girl” he picked her up and hugged, kissing her cheek “so clever”

Blair wriggled in his arms “Papa” she said crossly “Down! Agin!”

“She wants to do it again Edward” smiled Charlotte “now she knows how, she’ll want to keep on”

Edward laughed and put her down “go to Uncle Alfred” he said

Blair wavered back and forth for a few moments and then set off determinedly towards Alfred who
held out his arms

“Come on little one” he said “come to your uncle Alfred”

Half way she staggered and fell forward, and Edward reached for her but again Charlotte held him
back

“let her be Edward” she said and indeed Blair was already getting to her feet and continuing on her
unsteady way until she reached Alfred who picked her up and swung her shrieking into the air.
“Uncle afed stop!” she giggled “I be sick”

Alfred laughed and cuddled her

“Very well” he said I don’t want you to be sick. Here, why don’t you see what’s in my pocket?”

Edward came over to him as Blair explored Alfred’s pocket, and then smiled as Blair triumphantly held aloft a sugar plum

“Just happened to have that in your pocket did you Alfred?” he asked with a grin

“I may have put it in there” said Alfred winking at him “you know for the journey over”

“The journey over, I see” said Edward

Blair meanwhile had already popped the sweet into her mouth and was sucking with happy beaming relish

Edward stroked her head and smiled at Alfred who smiled back at him

Watching them together Charlotte felt a lump in her throat, their love for each other was so clear, as was their love for Blair. How sad that they could never share the experience of being parents.

“Edward” Charlotte felt she needed to break the moment, after all you never really knew who was watching, “Blair is soon to be one, are you planning a celebration?”

“we are” said Edward “I believe Florence will send out the invitations soon”, charlotte watched out of the corner of her eye as Alfred walked away with Blair at the mention of Florence’s name and sighed inwardly. Would he never get over the hurt she wondered?

“Excellent” she said “I very much hope we shall be invited”

“But of course” he said “all her godparents will be there I hope”

Several days later, the invitations arrived

“Mr. & Mrs Edward Drummond invite you to celebrate the first birthday of their daughter Blair at 5pm next Saturday hence”

Septimus turned over the invitation in his hand. He was very much thinking of not accepting. Since Florence had broken the news of her pregnancy to him, he found he could barely eat or sleep, so sick with jealousy was he. He knew that Edward had been actively trying to impregnate Florence but he had somehow closed his mind to it, and now he no longer could. In fact, he found the whole situation to be beyond his tolerance levels. How did Alfred stand it he wondered?

He went downstairs to see Henry just returning from the House

“Septimus” he said “I missed you at the office today”

Septimus nodded “papa” he said “may I talk with you?”

“Of course” said Henry “you know that you may”

They went into the library and Septimus poured them both a whiskey, he noted with sadness that his
father limped a bit now on his false leg and his back seemed a little bent, he was getting old realised Septimus with a pang

“Papa” he said without preamble “I am thinking of returning to the army”

Henry put down his whiskey

“Are you indeed?”

Septimus nodded

“And what has brought this on?”

“Office life is not for me papa” said Septimus not meeting Henry’s eyes

Henry nodded “especially when one is in love with another man’s wife”

“Papa!” Septimus got to his feet

“Oh sit down my boy” said Henry with a wave of his hand “it is quite obvious you are in love with Florence Drummond”

Septimus subsided back into his chair “is it so obvious Papa?”

Henry laughed shortly “you have been regaling your mother and I with your thoughts on how beautiful she is, how charming, and how badly she is treated by her husband for quite some time”

Septimus sighed heavily “she is all of those things papa, all of them and more but” he hesitated “she is also pregnant with Edward’s child”

“Ahhhhh” it was a long drawn out sound

“I can’t stand it papa, seeing her grow bigger knowing it’s his child inside her. Knowing that he doesn’t love her, that the only reason he wants her to be pregnant is so he can stay here with Alfred”

“Edward is a good father” said Henry gently, pained at how much Septimus was hurting “he may not love Florence as you think he should but he dotes on Blair, and he does care for his wife and is kind to her”

“Care, kindness” spat Septimus “she deserves so much more papa”

“You are not in a position to give it to her Septimus” said Henry “does she know of your feelings for her?”

“She does” said Septimus sadly “but she told me it was hopeless” and his head dropped “that is why I must leave”

“Perhaps you should speak to her before you make your final decision” said Henry “you know the obstacles your mother and I faced but we loved each other so much that we would let nothing stand in our way. Speak to Florence, find out how she truly feels and then decide”

Septimus sat in silence considering for a few moments and then nodded

“I will papa”

He got up to leave
“Septimus” said Henry “does Alfred know of your feelings towards Florence Drummond?”

Septimus shook his head

“I have said nothing to him”

“I would prepare yourself for the fact that when, *if*, he finds out, he will not be happy”

Septimus frowned “but why papa? Surely he would be glad to find that she no longer cares for Edward, *if* that is the case”

“I think it is less about that and more that she would care for you” said Henry “she has, in his eyes, already taken that which he cares about most and he has to put up with as he sees it, her intrusion into our family, now you may tell him that his own brother, the one he is closest to, has fallen in love with her too? Septimus think! How would you feel?”

Septimus sighed “I had not thought of it that way, I thought that if Florence cared for me enough to consider leaving her husband, he would be glad”

Henry shrugged “and he may be Septimus, I could be wrong but you must prepare yourself that he may feel differently. In any case, do nothing until you have spoken to Florence”

Septimus nodded “I understand papa, I will do as you suggest”

Florence’s heart leapt as she read the brief note from Septimus asking her to meet him at Uxbridge House the following day

“Mama and papa will be out and I have something of great importance to discuss with you. I will wait for you at 7pm. Please burn this note after you have read it”

Florence’s hand shook as she dropped the note into the fire

“*Something of great importance*”

The next day at 7pm a trembling Florence called at Uxbridge house. She had had to tell Edward she was going to the opera with Gwendolyn and hence was wearing evening clothes; a pale lavender gown cut low across her shoulders and wearing the pendant that Edward had brought her after they were married which seemed such a long time ago now.

A maid showed her into the library where Septimus was waiting standing upright by the fire place, the flames casting red gold shadows on his clothes.

For some moments they stood looking at each other and then Septimus approached her

“Florence” he said holding out his hands, there was no pretence at “Mrs. Drummond” now

Florence stayed where she was

“Why do you wish to see me?” she asked “I told you it was hopeless did I not?”

Septimus looked at her directly “you did, and yet Florence I cannot help but feel that it is not”

She lifted her chin “and why do you say that?”
“You are here are you not?” said Septimus quietly “if it were hopeless you would not be”

Florence looked down, he was right, of course he was. She wanted nothing more than to go to him and let him hold her but she was married, she was pregnant, this could not happen.

“I came to tell you that this must stop” she said wishing her voice was not shaking so much “that you must cease your attentions to me”

“And that is your final say on the matter?” asked Septimus his heart dying inside him

“It is” said Florence defiantly

He nodded “then I will say a final goodbye to you and trespass on your time no longer” and he lifted his hand to ring the bell to call the maid

“Wait Septimus, say a final goodbye?” said Florence “what do you mean by that?”

“I cannot stay here Florence” he said “I cannot see you with him, see his child grow inside you, knowing he doesn’t love you” he held up his hand as she went to speak “I know he does not Florence, knowing that my love for you is in vain. I have decided I will rejoin the army” he smiled humourlessly “I hear they need good soldiers in India”

“India??!! But…Septimus! You cannot!” she crossed the floor to stand next to him “you can’t”

He looked down at her, she was tall for a woman but he was taller still, he could see her bottom lip was trembling and her eyes were bright with tears

“Florence” he choked on her name “what would you have me do? Stay here yearning for you, knowing it can never be? I cannot, it is too much to ask of me, better for both of us if I leave” and he raised his arm again to tug on the bell cord.

“Septimus” Florence seized his arm to stop him “please”, her breath was coming rapidly and her throat was flushed

“Florence…” he turned her arm gently away and staring down at her, reached out a hand and gently traced his fingers along her right shoulder hearing her gasp as he touched her.

“Florence” he whispered again, his other hand stroking gently across her left shoulder and then he moved up to cup her neck in both his hands

Florence thought she might faint from the intensity of his gaze, Edward had never, had never, looked at her like that, no one had, and she did not think her legs would hold her up. His hands were touching her softly but she felt like they would burn her skin.

“This is pretty” murmured Septimus “your pendant” and his fingers ran down the chain to where it stopped just above her breasts

“Edward brought it for me” she gasped

Septimus looked at her and then bringing his hands around the back of her neck, he unclasped the necklace and pulled it off her, holding out his hand and letting it drop to the floor, leaving her throat bare.

He bent down and began to trace gentle kisses along her neck

Florence’s whole body was alive with sensations she had never felt, this was what people talked
about she thought, *this!* Edward had never made her feel this way, reeling with a desire that raced around her body; she felt that any second she would collapse to the floor

“Septimus” she moaned “please…..I do not think I can stand up”

“Very well” he said and he picked her up, carrying her to the sofa and setting her down gently. She leant back against the cushions as Septimus resumed his gentle nuzzling of her neck and then his lips moved upwards

“Florence” he murmured stroking her face and then his lips were on hers as she arched against him, wrapping her arms around him as they kissed.

She felt almost drunk as he pressed against her, at times hot and insistent, at others gentle and tender. She didn’t know it was possible to kiss like this. Edward’s lips merely grazed hers but Septimus with his hands now on her face holding her in place, sought out every inch of her mouth.

“Oh god” she moaned between kisses “Septimus please don’t leave me, please please don’t go”
Blair's birthday

Chapter Summary

It's Blair's first birthday and everyone has gathered to celebrate with Edward and Florence including the Marques, Alfred and Septimus but the happy occasion is overshadowed by some difficult conversations.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Florence looked in the mirror wondering if being an adulteress would show on her face. Well perhaps not quite an adulteress she thought, after all she and Septimus had only kissed….and kissed and kissed but they had not gone further than that although she knew with a hot wave of shame and desire that had Septimus asked it of her in the library she would have.

She did not know what she should do. She had begged and begged Septimus to stay and in the end he had agreed that he would not return to the army but she knew in the cold light of day that the situation could not continue as it was forever. Since the kiss they had met twice more each time more desperate than before; she knew if she were being sensible that she should not see Septimus again, but how could she not? Even just the thought of him, his smile, his face, his hands on her face, and his lips on hers made her feel faint with longing. How could she return to living what she now recognised was a half life with Edward, never feeling alive again? As for Edward, she did not know how to feel about him. She was torn between anger that he had deprived her of the physical affection she now knew she needed and pity that he must clearly have never known it himself. If he had known such feelings she mused, surely he would not have been happy with those closed mouthed little kisses, those fumbling touches? Should she try and inspire the same passion in him that Septimus had in her she wondered, was that not what a wife should do? But the reality was that while once she would have killed to have Edward touch her as Septimus did, now she no longer cared, in fact she would actively rather he did not touch her or kiss her in that way at all. What was she to do? She was his wife, the mother of his children; the scandal if she left him would be enormous! Her father would simply not countenance her embroiling the family in a scandalous divorce to become involved with a member of the Paget family.

And on top of all this, she now had to host a birthday party for Blair where all their closest friends and family would be in attendance, where she would have to be smiling and happy and play the part of Edward’s dutiful contented wife. She sighed; this would take all her powers of dissembling.

At the bottom of the stairs Edward waited for Florence holding a fidgeting Blair’s hand. She had been bouncing with excitement all day at the prospect of her party. She had asked half a dozen times already if there would be presents

“For Blair papa?”

“Yes my darling” said Edward fondly

Blair was wearing a white dress tied with a huge burgundy bow at the back and her hair was in
ringlets also tied with burgundy bows. Edward thought his heart might explode with love for her. He wondered how she would react to her new brother or sister when they arrived. Poor Florence was clearly having a difficult time with her pregnancy; she was either distracted or weepy and Edward’s attempts at comfort were met with irritation or a denial that there was anything wrong. He really was at his wits end to know what to do.

He heard footsteps and looked up; Florence was descending the staircase dressed in a pale blue dress trimmed with grey.

“Mama”

Blair tottered forward as Florence reached the foot of the stairs

“Don’t you look beautiful my darling girl?” said Florence bending down to kiss her

Blair nodded proudly “yes” she said and Edward and Florence laughed

“You look lovely too my dear” said Edward thinking he ought to compliment Florence

“Thank you Edward” replied Florence distractedly wondering how she was going to get through the party with Septimus present.

Edward sighed; she was clearly still not herself.

“Not coming?” Alfred looked at Septimus in astonishment “but why?”

“It’s a children’s party Alfred” Septimus walked away so he could not see his face “I’m sure Blair will not even notice”

“That is hardly the point” said Alfred “mama and papa will be there as will all our nephews and nieces, and” he paused “and I would like you to be there, you know how hard it is for me to see Edward with her”

Septimus kept his back to Alfred so he could not see his face contort with anger at the tone of Alfred’s voice when he spoke about Florence though he knew now, none better, how Alfred felt, his jealousy of Florence was exactly his jealousy of Edward.

“Alfred, how do you stand it?” he asked quietly “how do you keep on?”

“What?” Alfred couldn’t quite hear properly

“How do you stand it?” Septimus turned to face him “how do you stand seeing the person you love married to someone else?”

Alfred looked past him staring at the wall for a few moments, then he spoke “I have no choice Septimus” he said bleakly “I was the one who persuaded Edward to marry her, I overhead the Marques making plans to sue him if the marriage didn’t go ahead. Edward would have been ruined; I couldn’t allow that to happen” he laughed bitterly “I thought that it could not be that bad, knowing that he loved me and not her, that it would not be too hard. That changed the moment the ring went onto her finger”

He walked over to the brandy and poured himself a glass

“Do you know what it’s like Septimus, to think of the person you love in bed with someone else? To
have indisputable proof that they have had relations with another because they have a child?”

“But you love Blair” interrupted Septimus

“She is half Edwards’ replied Alfred “how could I not? That does not mean that it doesn’t hurt. You know I had to tell him he needed to resume relations with her? She had become so suspicious at his lack of attentions that she went to mama. How do you think that felt? Sometimes I feel the pictures in my head of them together will drive me insane. Does he touch her? Hold her? Does she weep and cry out his name in the darkness?” his voice cracked “sometimes I wonder why I endure it, wonder if it would be easier to leave him but even the thought of it kills me” and he downed the brandy in a swift gulp

Septimus stayed silent as Alfred collected himself, being honest he did not know what to say. Alfred's words stabbed at his heart, with pity for his brother and for himself too and Alfred’s words about Florence in bed with Edward filled his mind with thoughts that he really did not want to have. Was this what he was destined for? Hopeless endless pining for someone who could never be truly his? He supposed he was in a better position than Alfred in that at least there was a chance that he and Florence could marry and be together if she left Edward. There was no possibility Alfred and Edward could ever do the same. But what were the chances Florence would leave Edward? Every time he had raised it, she had waved it aside as an impossibility.

Alfred sighed and put down the brandy glass

“There is no point in being upset” he said almost to himself “it is what it is”

Septimus gave him a sympathetic half smile “no use fighting what cannot be changed?”

Alfred nodded “something like that” and then said “come with me Septimus, please. I promise we will not stay long”

Septimus bit his lip and then nodded “just for a little while” he said

Alfred came over to him and patted his arm “just for a little while I promise”

“she is a very spoiled little girl” Edward could hear the Marques holding forth to Henry and Charlotte as he came into the room “really she does not need quite so many presents”

Charlotte smiled at him though it was not the warm smile that Edward knew she bestowed on those she liked “alas with so many uncles and aunts it was to be expected” she said

“So many uncles and aunts?” said the Marques “my dear madam, your children are not Blair’s aunts and uncles!”

“No but they think of themselves as such and dear Florence is an only child herself whereas…” charlotte left the words hanging, she did not have to point just how many children she had

“And Blair will not be an only child” said Edward coming into the room “soon there will be an heir to the Lothian estate which I know will fill you with happiness papa in law”

“Hmmm” said the marquees “if of course my daughter can produce a boy this time”

“Mayhap there will be change in the law” said Henry with a sly wink at Edward “now we have a Queen, I was considering introducing a bill to make the eldest child inherit, notwithstanding whether
it’s a boy or girl”

The Marques choked on his wine “what?? My dear Anglesey you cannot be serious!”

“Why not?” said Henry “after all the Queen is doing a splendid job is she not? Or are you not a supporter of Her Majesty?” he finished casually

“Indeed” said Edward grinning inwardly whilst retaining an outwardly serious face, “and I’m sure you would agree Her Majesty has been doing a splendid job whilst also producing heirs for the nation would you not sir?”

“Well I…I” began a flustered Marques furious at being wrong footed in such a way. Fortunately he was saved by the arrival of Alfred and Septimus

“Alfred…Septimus…im so delighted you could come” said Edward gravely shaking their hands “please come with me, Blair is still opening her presents”

They followed him through the hallway so they were safely out of earshot and then Edward burst into laughter

“You father was suggesting to my papa in law that he would bring a Bill forward so that girls can inherit titles and land the same as boys. He was teasing of course but I thought the Marques would choke he turned so purple”

He beamed happily at both of them and Septimus wanted to turn away. How could this man, who he was sure in another life he would have been friends with, be married to the woman he loved and prefer his own brother? He watched Alfred’s face soften and glow as he looked at Edward and felt that, as always, he was intruding

“If you will excuse me Drummond” he said “I think I will pay my respects to the lady of the house”

Edward smiled “I am never sure if that is my wife or my daughter these days. Blair grows more determined everyday! By all means sir, they are both in the drawing room”

Septimus nodded and thanked him but Edward had already turned back to Alfred, his face alight with happiness.

Alfred waited for Septimus to leave and then laughed

“I hope papa was not too naughty” he said

“Oh he was but you know my father in law Alfred, he deserves it!”

“And how are you Edward?” asked Alfred searching his face “you look a little tired”

“Work continues apace Alfred” said Edward “I shall be glad when this year is done. Such turmoil I don’t think Europe has seen the like since 1789 and Blair seems to have the energy of 100 children! She is wearing us both out” he didn’t add that Florence’s behaviour was also adding to his tiredness, he never discussed her with Alfred if he could help it

“You must rest more” said Alfred tenderly “and look after yourself”

“As must you” said Edward “I know how exhausting the endless functions and court rituals can be, and now as we come into Christmas they will double!”

Alfred nodded “we will be at Windsor this year” he said sadly “I shall not see you unless you are
invited to the Boxing Day ball"

Edward grimaced “and you know how much I love balls Alfred”

“I remember you quite enjoyed the silk weaver’s ball” said Alfred with a grin

“You looked so splendid that night Alfred” Edward said softly “truly I thought an angel had come down”

Alfred blushed and whispered “if only we were alone so I could kiss you”

“Soon” whispered Edward “very soon”

“Edward my boy” a loud voice belonging to Edward’s father interrupted them “how are you?”

“Papa” Edward smiled genuinely, despite the awkwardness and misunderstandings; he still loved his father even if at times he was not sure how much he liked him “I am very well. You remember Lord Alfred?”

“Of course” Charles reached out and shook Alfred’s hand “are you well?”

“I am” said Alfred at once slipping into court mode “and you are looking very well too, I was just saying to Edward how lucky he is to come from such a handsome family”

Charles laughed “you are clearly your father’s son”

Alfred laughed in return “I can only hope so”

“and yet still not married” continued Charles “you must hurry up my boy, get yourself a pretty girl and father some children, it’s gods purpose for us after all, am I not right Edward” he added clapping Edward on the back

Edward winced internally “marriage and fatherhood isn’t for everyone papa” he said

“Nonsense!” said his father robustly “what’s a man to leave behind if not children eh?”

“If you’ll excuse me” said Alfred smoothly “speaking of children, I should pay my birthday wishes to Miss Drummond. Good to see you again sir, Drummond no doubt we shall speak soon” and he left.

Edwards father shook his head after him “he’s a good looking young man Edward, really he should be married. Can you not help him to find a suitable wife?”

“I would not dream of interfering in Alfred’s life so” said Edward tightly “and now if you will excuse me papa I must go and say hello to mama” and he left before he said something regrettable.

“Mrs. Drummond” Septimus bowed elegantly over Florence’s hand “how charming you look and why Miss Blair what a pile of presents you have”

Blair giggled and held out her hand to be kissed too “like mama” she said insistently and Septimus laughed and complied

“I see you will be breaking young men’s hearts when you are older” said Septimus gravely, glancing at Florence as he spoke
Florence looked away “I am sure if she does it will not be on purpose. Did you come with Lord Alfred?”

Septimus nodded “I did”

There was a charged silence fortunately broken by Blair who tugged at Septimus’ hand

“I walk” she said proudly “look” and she set off unsteadily across the room, Florence watched her, her eyes shining with love

“I never knew I could feel such love” she said to Septimus “when I see her, I can scarcely believe I made such a beautiful thing”

“Mama!” shouted Blair who had seen her gaze turn to Septimus “watch me!”

Florence laughed “sorry my darling, I am watching”

At that moment Edward came into the room

“Papa!” shouted Blair “watch”

“Yes” said Blair “watch” and she toddled across the room to him and flung her arms around his knees

Edward bent down and picked her up inhaling her clean baby scent which never failed to make him feel better

“Is the C A K E ready?” he asked Florence carrying Blair over to her

Florence nodded with a smile

“Then perhaps we should ask everyone to come to the drawing room…Millie” Edward beckoned one of the housemaids “could you ask our guests to gather please? And ask cook to be ready with the cake”

She bobbed a curtsey and sped off and soon various people came crowding into the drawing room.

Edward rapped on the table with his free hand; the other was holding Blair on his arm. As the murmur of conversation died down he cleared his throat

“Ladies and gentleman, thank you for coming to Blair’s first birthday party. Becoming a father has been the making of me and every day I do my best in the hope that Blair will be proud of me” he paused as people clapped while Blair smiled broadly knowing she was the subject of conversation “of course I would not have such a wonderful daughter without a wonderful wife. Can I ask you to raise your glasses to my wife Florence who has given me the best present a man could ever have”

“To Florence” cried the assembled company

Edward waited for them to finish the toast “and now we have a surprise” and in came cook wheeling an enormous birthday cake, decorated with elaborate icing and with a sugar doll on the top holding a candle.

“Oh!” Blair clapped her hands and slipped from Edwards arms “look! Mama. Papa! Look!”
“Happy birthday my darling girl” said Edward

Blair was round eyed with excitement as the candle was lit

“Now blow it out” said Florence slipping her arm through Edward’s “after three”

“One…two” everyone began to count but an excited Blair puffed out her cheeks and blew enthusiastically before they could get to three

Edward laughed “she has no patience I’m afraid, much like her father”

Watching from the doorway outside the circle of people Alfred felt weary and heartsick. These occasions, watching Edward play the part, watching him play it so damn well were agony. He cast his eyes around the smiling faces and then stopped as they alighted on Septimus, he was standing to the side and he was not as everyone else was focused on Edward, but looking at Florence and the look on his face……Alfred knew that look and he clenched his fists, nails digging into his palms to stop himself making a noise. Please god in heaven surely his own brother could not, could not have feelings for Florence Drummond?

The Marques also watched with a faint scowl on his face and as soon as it was over, he decided to take a turn outside for some air. So much fuss over one small child he thought and a girl at that. He couldn’t remember making that much fuss over Florence but then it seemed almost a lifetime ago that she had been a small girl. Since then his troubles had grown and grown, his marriage had not brought him happiness or the heir he wanted. His political career had never really taken off and the Lothian estate he’d inherited was in terrible debt. He had been hugely relieved when Edward Drummond had asked for Florence’s hand, the Drummond fortune had enabled him to keep the estate afloat but perversely he resented them for it. Trade he thought to himself sneeringly.

“Bring me my coat” he snapped at the nearest maid

“yes sir” she scurried off, hurrying back with a black coat and helping him to put it on

Once outside, the Marques reached into the pocket for a cheroot and frowned when his fingers encountered nothing, he scrabbled in the other pocket but nothing was there either other than some pieces of paper. He pulled them out squinting at them

“My dear Edward”

it began, a letter to Edward, that idiot girl had given him the wrong coat!

Oh well, he continued to read it idly expecting it to be from Palmerston or some other work connection but as he read on, his eyes widened, his mouth dropped open and he began to tremble with shock.

It was a letter from Alfred Paget

A very intimate letter……..

End of part 3
So here we are! the end of part 3

will Alfred tackle Septimus about Florence?
Will the Marques confront Edward about the letter?
Will Florence and Septimus take their affair further?
Can Edward and Alfred stay together with so many threats to their happiness?

will I ever shut up? nah! part 4 soon
Part 4 - Billiards

Chapter Summary

It's Christmas and Edward and Florence are hosting the Marques and Lady Lothian, meanwhile Alfred is at Windsor.

After dinner the Marques confronts Edward about the letter

Chapter Notes

Heads up, this is not an easy chapter to read with very period typical homophobic views and language used - sorry about that

I'll understand if you want to claw through the screen to hug Edward

St Petersburg 1849

“Sir Edward?” there was a deferential knock at the door

“Yes?” barked Edward as the servant inserted themselves timidly through the door

“Your wife asked me to tell you that the ball begins in 30 minutes and you have still not visited the nursery to say goodnight to the children”

“Tell her ladyship I shall be along directly” replied Edward

The servant bowed and retreated and Edward berated himself for his tone, it was not the servant’s fault he was in Russia, freezing in temperatures that fell more than 20 degrees below zero though he reflected bleakly, the weather matched the iciness in his heart since his separation from Alfred.

How he had punished himself a thousand times over the need to carry Alfred’s letter with him instead of safely locking it away or even burning it.

How different things would have been.

Christmas 1848

Lansdowne House (the Drummond home)

“It is a great thing to host your first Christmas” smiled Lady Lothian to Florence “and you have done it marvellously”

“Thank you mama” said Florence pleased for once to be receiving some praise “Blair’s first Christmas had to be a special one”
“Of course” said her mother “and I think it was”

Blair herself had finally been carried off to bed by her new nursemaid after protesting that she wasn’t tired before falling asleep on Edward’s lap still clutching her new doll.

In reality, although of course Florence had wanted Blair’s first Christmas to be memorable, she had thrown herself into it as a distraction as the unhappiness with her situation grew. The moments she could snatch with Septimus were few and far between and when she did, she found her response to his kissing deeply shocking never had her body felt like this. However, it was unthinkable to take things any further, firstly she was pregnant and feared to harm the baby and secondly she was married. She agonised continually that Septimus might leave and find another whilst also knowing deep down that as she was married, it was inevitable one day that he would. And of course she could not confide her feelings to anyone, there was no one she trusted enough except Charlotte Paget and in the circumstances, she felt she really could not tell her this. She was just grateful that Edward continued his kind affectionate but remote behaviour towards her. A more uxorious husband would probably have noticed something was amiss but then she reflected if Edward had been more devoted she probably would not have looked at Septimus.

One the other side of the table, Edward smiled at her delighted that for once her parents were being nice to her; they were so quick to be critical!

“Shall we withdraw mama?” said Florence “leave the men to their port?”

Caroline nodded “yes my dear, let us go to the drawing room”

The rose, curtseyed to the Marques and Edward and left the men to themselves.

As they left, the Marques congratulated himself at his calmness; how he had managed to get through the day without striking Edward he did not know. It was only the thought of what he had planned that kept him going. Time now to put that into action

“Could I suggest a game of billiards?” he said to Edward “I feel I need to stretch my legs after such a fine dinner”

“A splendid idea sir” smiled Edward inwardly relieved at the idea of having something else to do rather than just make conversation with his father in law. It was a source of frustration to him that he had mismanaged his relationship with his father in law so badly. He should have realised that trying twice to postpone the wedding would not have endeared him to the Marques. It had soured their relationship and he knew that the more the Marques came to depend on the Drummond money to keep the Lothian estate solvent, the angrier he became. He understood that, in his situation he would have his pride too, but the comments about “trade” and “nouveau riche” were becoming ever more tedious. Frankly Edward would have liked to have nothing more to do with him but he was Florence’s father which made that impossible. Still only another few hours to go….

The Marques rose and followed Edward to the billiard room. It was utterly splendid like the entire house although the Marques felt that having the walls lined with books rather than shooting trophies made it seem more like a library; in fact as the house also had a library he didn’t understand it at all but he supposed it was just further examples of Edward’s deviant mind. After the shock of reading the letter in Edward’s pocket, he had left the party immediately pleading sickness, almost snatching Caroline and running from the door. He could see Caroline was extremely surprised but she knew better than to question him. Since then he had spent time researching people like Edward even though it had nearly made him sick reading about their filthy abhorrent acts. He and that Paget boy together, the very thought disgusted him though it was a bonus that it was Alfred Paget, not only could he control Edward, he now had leverage over Anglesey as well. Since reading the letter he had
laid his plans very carefully; Edward would be his creature and do as he was told and Anglesey would be sorry for every veiled insult that he had sent his way.

They played in silence for a few minutes and then the Marques said casually

“I must congratulate Edward on your deception”

Edward who was bent down to cue his shot looked up at him puzzled “I beg your pardon sir”

“Your deception” the Marques smiled thinly “the one of being a man of high moral standards and unimpeachable honesty when you are in fact a depraved liar”

Edward felt as if he’d been kicked in the stomach, the Marques knew, he knew about he and Alfred, how? How? He thought wildly, nevertheless he tried to brazen it out

“A liar sir?” his voice didn’t sound confident even to him “I must ask you to take that insult back”

The Marques laughed shortly “I do not think so sir. You are a liar, a cheat and a sodomite. Do not even think to deny it”

Edward took another breath, his mind spinning in panic but even before he could think of speaking the Marques came towards him

“You are filth, the lowest of the low. I would strike you but I do not think I could even bring myself to touch you”

“This is slander…” Edward’s voice could barely squeeze the words through his dried up throat

The Marques waved a letter at him “slander is it? Well perhaps then I should publish this letter to you from Alfred Paget in The Times describing your sordid acts in detail and all the while with Her Majesty as well”

Edward closed his eyes, Alfred’s letter to him; the one where he talked about their memories of Scotland. He had thought he had just mislaid it in his secret drawer and with Blair’s birthday, work and then Christmas he had completely forgotten. How could he have been so stupid? So careless?

“Please…” he moistened his lips “I beg you sir…do not publish it”

The Marques smiled cruelly “and why should I not? You have played my daughter false with your filthy activities. Another woman I may have understood, after all men have needs but a man! You should be locked up, you and that Paget boy, locked up, no hung for what you have done”

Edward looked at him in horror “you would not” he whispered “you wouldn’t…not Alfred…..”

The Marques paused counting to ten; he could not in fact expose Edward, that would lead to a scandalous divorce but far far worse, he would lose access to the Drummond money. No Edward had to stay married but Edward did not need to know that in fact he would never publish the letter; he had to think he would.

“Worried about your little paramour” he sneered at Edward “it would be a terrible shame if anything happened to him would it not?

Edward stared at him “please…” he croaked out “don’t hurt him”

“Not to mention of course” went on the Marques relentlessly “how Florence would react. I doubt she’d want an abomination such as you near her daughter. You would not see Blair again or the
child she carries within her now”

Edward felt the tears flood his eyes, not see his daughter? His beautiful girl, not see his new child? Both to be taken from him? It was too much to bear.

He slumped backwards, his legs giving way, subsiding into a chair

“What do you want of me?” he whispered

“You will break off relations with Paget and never see him again”

Edward put his face in his hands

“And if I do not?”

“Then you will not see your daughter again”

Edward knew that he would say that but it didn’t stop the feeling of having his heart ripped out. Chose between Alfred and Blair? How could he? How could he not? Unbidden a picture of Alfred, bright eyed, laughing face swam into his mind, looking up at him through those long long lashes with those eyes that Edward could happily drown in. Give up Alfred, never see him again? How could he bear that? How would Alfred bear it? But Blair, his darling girl all pink cheeks, brown eyes and dark curls, flinging herself into his arms with a smile for him calling “papa, papa”, she was so little, so young, she needed him. There really was no choice to be made.

“Give me a day” he whispered to the Marques “I need to see Alfred”

The Marques nodded “you do though you may find he is not as well as he could be”

Edward sprang up “what??” he choked “what have you done?”

Windsor

It had been a long day of festivities and Alfred was desperate for some escape. He was good with children but even he had woreied of playing a horse for the royal princes and princesses or carrying them round on his shoulders. The Windsor uniform he was wearing was he knew most becoming but frankly wasted with Edward not being there. He badly needed to smoke but he knew the queen did not approve of men smoking around her.

Finally the queen withdrew freeing the company to do as they chose; what Alfred chose was to don a coat and go out into the gardens. He lit a cheroot breathing in deeply, enjoying the silence of the frosted night. He missed Edward profoundly at times like this. Christmas as Prince Albert was so fond of pointing out was a time for family though as Alfred thought wryly to himself, it never occurred to the Prince that the people who served them no matter what their rank were expected to spend Christmas with him and the queen and not their own families. Though with how things were with Septimus, not being with his family could be an advantage.

Septimus had denied to him that there was anything between him and Florence Drummond, claiming that Alfred was becoming paranoid. Alfred wanted to believe him and he almost did but something stopped him from being completely convinced. He just couldn’t shake a nagging feeling that something was going on; he sighed, if only he and Edward could just run away together he thought. How often had he entertained the fantasy of the two of them, just living peacefully in a remote village far away from court and parliament and wives and families, how happy they could have been. He brought the cheroot to his lips again, the embers of it standing out in the almost complete darkness.
Suddenly he heard a sound, the crush of a footprint in the powdery snow and then he was hit hard across the back of the legs collapsing to his knees and then across the chest before a final blow to his face knocked him to the ground. He could feel the warmth of blood as his head swam and he closed his eyes.

*Lansdowne house*

“I couldn’t be certain what you would chose” said the Marques inspecting his fingers “so I thought I would incentivise you”

“You…you...” Edward acme towards him, his fist raised

“Careful sir” spat the Marques “strike me now and I will tell Florence”

“What have you done to him?” demanded Edward “tell me” he grabbed the Marques by the collar “TELL ME”

“did you not hear me?” said the Marques trying not to sound as nervous as he felt, Edward was much bigger than he was; he was calculating Edward’s brain would over ride his emotions but judging by the look on Edward's face, he wasn’t sure

Edward let go of his collar but did not move away “tell me” he said again “tell me you have not… that he’s not…” he couldn’t say the word flowing in his mind ‘dead’

“Providing those fools I employ have done their job properly, he will not be badly harmed…yet” said the Marques “just very bruised and shaken”

Edward let out a low cry of distress at that, his beloved Alfred beaten and in pain and all the while having no idea it was Edwards fault

“I just wanted you to know that if I need to I can get to him where ever he is, even Windsor”

Edward turned away feeling overwhelmed with horror, shook and sadness

‘What had he done?’ he thought ‘what had he done to them?’

“you will go to Windsor at the earliest opportunity as I don’t think Paget will be fit to travel for a little while” said the Marques “you will tell him you will not see him again, and you will sign this” and he took a piece of paper from his inside pocket and pushed it towards Edward

“it’s a contract that gives me guardianship of Blair and access to your money in the event that you and Paget do not break off your relationship” he said “now sign it!” he held out a stylus to Edward “sign it now”
Chapter Summary

At windsor castle

The next few chapters will go between 1848/9 and 1850 until the timelines align to show what happened

In 1850 St Petersburg Edward reflects on his relationship with Florence and what led up to this point

Back in 1848 Edward break's the news to Alfred that the Marques of Lothian has read the letter

Chapter Notes

There really was a Jordan stair case at the Winter Palace Im not making it up :D

Ive no idea if the Catherine garden in St Petersburg really had ice statues but lets imagine it did

Bastard began to be used in the modern way in around 1830

26th December Windsor 1848

Alfred swam slowly up to consciousness, goodness his head and he opened his eyes groggily

“Thank goodness Lord Alfred” exclaimed the Queen “we were deeply worried you were badly hurt”

“Your…Majesty” Alfred croaked out “wha…?”

“You were attacked Lord Alfred” it was the Prince’s voice “in the grounds of the Palace, another maniac after the Queen no doubt” and he looked at Alfred balefully “my wife is in danger again”

“Nonsense Albert” said Victoria “there was absolutely no sign of anyone trying to get into the Castle, the footsteps went up to where Lord Alfred was found and away again out of the grounds”

“Why on earth would anyone attack Lord Alfred Victoria?” said Albert impatiently “it is obvious these miscreants were trying to get into the Castle”

“The Prince is right” said Alfred through dry lips “no one would attack me Your Majesty” and he tried to sit up and then groaned

“No you must keep still” said the Queen leaning over him as Alfred, suddenly acutely aware he had no shirt on over the bandage on his chest, tried to drag the bed clothes up to cover himself.

“Victoria” said Albert “I think Lord Alfred needs to rest”
“Yes Albert you are right” said the Queen “rest and quiet. We plan to return to Buckingham Palace tomorrow Lord Alfred but you must stay and recover”

Alfred still feeling far too light headed to say much, nodded and managed a feeble “thank you Your Majesty” as the royal couple left.

Alfred lay back on his pillows, his head pounding, trying to recall what had happened. He remembered lighting a cheroot before being struck hard from behind but why? Why would anyone attack him in the grounds of the castle? It was all a complete mystery.

St Petersburg 1850

“Papa!” Blair hurled herself against him “where have you been? It’s time for my story”

“Story?” Edward pulled a puzzled face at her “I don’t think I agreed to a story”

Blair’s face fell “but you always read me a story at bedtimepapa” she said “always”

Edward laughed “papa was only teasing” he said ruffling her hair “find your book while I say goodnight to Charlie and Harry”

Blair nodded and slipped off while Edward went through to the alcove to the other part of the nursery where Florence was with the twins.

“Edward” she said politely as he entered “try not to wake them”

“Of course” he said equally politely though in reality he yearned to just pick one up in each arm and squeeze them.

Charlie and Harry were asleep in one bed, (Edward and Florence had long since given up trying to get them into two separate ones) facing each other, each with one arm extended so their hands touched. They had slept facing each other from the moment they had been born and any attempt at separate cots and bed had been met with wailing and once they were mobile, climbing into each other’s beds. It was easier to just let them be thought Edward; he assumed they’d grow out of it one day. Unlike Blair, they had inherited Florence’s colouring and were blonde haired and blue eyed. Edward adored them utterly as did Blair who spent a huge amount of time herding them about; playing with them, talking to them and, Edward was certain, encouraging misbehaviour!

He kissed each downy cheek gently and the twins yawned in concert and tightened the grip of their fingers on each other. Watching him, Florence gave thanks that whatever else had happened between them, Edward was a good and loving father, far more involved with his children then either of their fathers ever had been. It was a great talking point among the diplomatic wives how Sir Edward was such a dear with his children. Florence knew all the other wives deeply envied her Edward but then of course they didn’t know how things really were.

Edward straightened up

“Are you ready?” he asked Florence

She nodded and came towards him, the silk of her pale lavender gown rustling

“You look most becoming” he told her
“Thank you Edward” she said distantly as she took his arm “what is it this evening?”

“A reception to welcome the ambassador from the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies” replied Edward

“I expect he will find St Petersburg somewhat chillier than Naples” observed Florence

“I expect so” said Edward as they paced along the corridors of the Winter Palace towards the Jordan staircase where the diplomatic corps would gather to await their Imperial Majesties. As they walked in silence, he glanced sideways at Florence. He knew she was considered beautiful, and he knew empirically she was, but to him she resembled the ice statues in the Catherine Garden; physically perfect but remote and icy. He also knew that he was to blame for her coldness and distance from him. After the birth of the twins he had never returned to her bed and she, unlike after Blair’s birth, had never once approached him to do so. Instead she had become more and more withdrawn, and he caught up in his own misery had no heart within him to try and stop her. So now they lived like strangers, inhabiting the same apartments, together at diplomatic functions, sharing their role as parents but emotionally and physically completely separate from each other. He wondered if it had always been inevitable, if loving Alfred as he did, that he would always, in time, have found his marriage too much of a strain to keep up the façade. The guilt and anger he felt about this, that Florence was another casualty of his father in law; her own father, lay around heavy around his heart. He wished he could confide in her but he could not. If only they could return to England but Alfred had told him as they kissed through salt tears that he had to stay there until it was safe so stay he did. It was the least he could do after his actions had brought such trouble on them all.

December 28th Windsor Castle 1848

“Mr. Drummond is here to see you sir” the footman came into Alfred’s bedroom where he was sat dozing by the fire in just his shirt and breeches. He was recovering but he was still aching and stiff.

“Edw…Mr. Drummond?” said Alfred eagerly “show him up”

The footman withdrew and moments later, Edward was in the room. For a few seconds they looked at each other and then Edward was across the room and kneeling at Alfred’s feet, his arms tight around him and his head buried against him not hearing Alfred’s slight gasp of pain.

“Edward” Alfred bent down and kissed the top of his head wincing at the tenderness in his ribs as he did so “Edward are you quite alright?”

Edward shook his head, his face muffled against him and Alfred could feel his shoulders shaking

“Edward…” Alfred was alarmed “please my love what is it?” but for a long while Edward could do nothing but weep against him while Alfred in great distress stroked his hair.

Eventually Edward gathered himself enough to pull back and look up at Alfred, his face streaked with tears

“Edward you are scaring me greatly” said Alfred his voice full of anxiety “tell me what is wrong”

Edward reached up and stroked his face “my love” he began and then he choked with sobs again

“Edward I must insist that you pull yourself together” said Alfred “please! I am imagining all kinds of horrors have happened”

“They have” whispered Edward bleakly “oh my love…”

“Edward shut the door” said Alfred gently interrupting him “I feel whatever you have to tell me, we
Edward rose and shut the door and then came back to kneel opposite Alfred; he touched his face where it was bruised, wincing as Alfred flinched where his fingers brushed the skin.

“What has happened?” asked Alfred a feeling of dread lodged in his stomach at the look on Edward’s face, his cheekbones standing out starkly beneath his skin.

“L….L...Lothian” Edward choked out “he knows”

“Knows?” Alfred took a few moments “Good God Edward you don’t mean about us?”

Edward nodded, the tears beginning to fall again

“But how??” cried Alfred “how Edward?”

“He found one of your letters” said Edward his voice thick with tears

“Found? Found how?” asked Alfred his head still reeling

“It was in my coat pocket” Edward’s voice was a whisper

Alfred closed his eyes scarcely able to believe his ears “Edward in God’s name why were you carrying my letter in your coat? What were you thinking?”

“I miss you Alfred” said Edward his voice hoarse “all the time, and your letter, it helped me to read your words, even to feel the same paper your hands had touched and so I had it with me….the maid mixed up the coats and when Lothian went outside to smoke, he found it”

Alfred took a deep breath “I take it from your demeanour that he was not understanding”

Edward shook his head “he was not” he said making a super human effort not to cry again “Alfred, he says I must never see you again and that if I do he will expose us or worse….Alfred he said he would hurt you, badly, perhaps even….Edward couldn’t say the words

Alfred shook his head defiantly “I am not afraid of him”

“There is more; he made me sign a paper saying he could take Blair if that happened. My daughter Alfred! He would take my darling girl from me, I cannot allow that to happen Alfred, I just cannot”

“Oh Edward”

Alfred hid his face in his hands almost unable to process the enormity of what had happened. As he did so his shirt slipped open and Edward saw the black and yellow bruises mottling his chest

“Alfred” he swallowed “take off your shirt”

“What? Edward I do not think…”

“take it off” said Edward his voice low and hard

Alfred looked at him closely and then tried to pull it up but the pain from his cracked ribs was too great and he grunted with the pain

“I can’t” he said laying back in the chair “some maniac attacked me in the castle grounds, gave me bruised ribs for my trouble”
Edward nodded “I know” he said

“You know?” said Alfred in surprise though as he thought of it, it did at least explain why Edward seemed not surprised he had a black eye

“Lothian did it, at least he arranged it”

“Lothian? But why?” but even as he asked the question he knew the answer

“As a warning, to show me he can get at you wherever you are, that when he said he could have you hurt, he really meant it” said Edward quietly

There was silence with only the crackle of the flames sounding in the room and then with a start Edward reached up and ripped Alfred’s shirt open; he needed to see exactly what Lothian had done. He sat back on his heels staring silently at the marks and grazes on Alfred’s chest, noting each one as if they were on his own skin.

“I want to kill him” he whispered eventually “look at what he’s done to you”

Alfred smiled at him sadly “they’ll heal Edward, the question is more what has he done to us?”

Edward’s face crumpled again “there is no us Alfred” he said his voice breaking “not anymore! How can there be? I will not risk any further harm coming to you and I can’t allow Lothian to take Blair from me. It is over for us Alfred, we cannot defeat this, defeat him, we have to part my love, we have to”

“Edward” Alfred reached out his hand “do you love me?”

Edward nodded through his tears “you know that I do”

“Then trust me, I will not allow him to do this to us”

“But what can you do?” wept Edward

“I do not know” said Alfred “but I will find a way to stop him. I have given up so many things for us Edward, as have you, I will not allow that…that….bastard to come between us now. Do you hear me Edward? I will not allow it”
Uxbridge House

Chapter Summary

Alfred starts to make plans and Edward calls on Henry to tell him the news about Alfred; Septimus and Henry argue

Chapter Notes

Oh dear Septimus is not a happy bunny.....

Windsor December 1848

After he had finally prevailed on Edward to leave, Alfred lay in the large canopied bed thoughts of the afternoon churning through his mind. Edward had not wanted to go, fearing that it would be the last time they ever saw each other. He’d tenderly kissed every bruise and mark on Alfred’s body before clinging to him refusing repeatedly to leave. In the end Alfred had managed to persuade him that this would not be their last goodbye, and also to extract a promise that Edward would call on his parents and let them know what had happened. He knew Edward had been doubtful and afraid as he’d gone, fearful that they would not see each other again and although he had managed to reassure him, now Edward was gone, Alfred too had his doubts. Lothian seemed to have Edward and himself over the proverbial barrel; evidence of their relationship which he would make public unless they agreed to separate and the added weaponry of taking Blair from Edward if Florence ever found out.

However, there was something that didn’t make sense to Alfred as he lay there, if Lothian hated Edward and what he was so much, why not just expose him anyway? He was right to say to Edward that no court would allow him near Blair if they knew he was a sodomite (he shuddered angrily at the label). Florence could divorce him and remarry, he could ruin Edward’s life and there were no consequences for him, why not do it? It made no sense at all. There had to be a reason and it bothered him that he could not think of it as he needed to plan for all eventualities

In the meantime, as part of his plan, he had a letter to write. Wincing he sat up and groped for his dressing gown and then made his way carefully across the room to his writing desk. Dipping the stylus in the ink, he pulled a piece of paper towards him

“Dear Alexi”

He began

“I find myself indisposed and left alone at Windsor. I wonder if I could prevail on you to visit and perhaps bring William Peel with you as I find him most amusing company”

After the trouble caused by one of his letters being found, he was careful to be circumspect

“Do please come at your earliest convenience, perhaps tomorrow?”
Septimus stared dolefully into his glass as he sat alone in the library, he wished Alfred were here. For the first time that he could remember he had not enjoyed Christmas at all. As was usual the entire vast Paget clan had gathered and ordinarily he would have enjoyed seeing all his siblings, nephews and nieces but this year for the first time, he was suddenly aware of his unmarried status. Watching his brothers and sisters with their husbands and wives and children, he felt lonely. When he’d been abroad in the army as he had for the last 3 years, he had thought longingly of a proper family Christmas but now he was in the midst of it, he wasn’t enjoying it at all. Alfred would have made it bearable; he knew what it was to spend Christmas on your own away from the person you loved, but Alfred was at Windsor with the Queen. Even more he missed Florence; she should be here with him, they should be holding their children up to touch the decorations on the tree or holding a hand in each of theirs swinging them as they walked alone. Instead she was with that husband of hers who didn’t love her or even appreciate her while her belly grew bigger with his child every time he saw her. To see literal evidence of her relations with Edward in front of his very eyes made him grind his teeth with rage and jealousy. There were times he didn’t think he hated anyone as much as he did Edward Drummond.

Suddenly he heard a commotion in the drawing room; well more commotion would have been strictly accurate; Bedlam was the default state of the Paget family when they were all gathered together. He went to stand up but before he could, his father entered the room followed by the last person Septimus felt like seeing, Edward Drummond!

“Lord Septimus” Edward came forward with his hand outstretched “a merry Christmas to you, I wish I were bringing better news”

Septimus allowed his hand to be limply shaken and looked questioningly at his father and at Edward “What has happened?” he asked

His father sat down heavily “Alfred has been attacked” he said “Attacked?!” said Septimus in shock “how? Why? Was it another attempt on the Queen?”

Edward shook his head “I am afraid that it is my doing” he said

“YOU?!” Septimus advanced on Edward who backed away in alarm “what have you done to Alfred? How dare you lay a finger on him? I tell you sir I will...”

“Don’t be ridiculous Septimus” snapped his father “sit down. Of course Edward didn’t attack Alfred”

“Then what happened?” demanded Septimus

“Edward is about to furnish us with the details” said Henry “please sit Edward and tell us what happened”
Edward nodded and sat down, twisting his gloves in his hands, unable to meet their eyes.

“My father in law knows about Alfred and me” he said in a low voice.

Henry and Septimus exchanged a quick horrified glance before Henry burst out.

“How Edward? How does he know? What did I say to you about keeping this secret? About how no one must ever know? You have put my boy in danger! Edward how *could* you?”

Edward quailed before Henry’s fury but responded in the same low voice.

“My father in law was given my coat by accident whilst with us at Christmas, in the pocket was a letter from Alfred; he read it. I’m afraid its contents left no doubt as to what we are to each other”

“I knew those letters would bring nothing but trouble” said Septimus furiously “I *knew* it”

“What does Lothian’s discovery have to do with Alfred being attacked?” interjected Henry “was it his doing?”

Edward nodded bleakly “he threatened to publish the letter unless I agreed never to see Alfred again and to prove his seriousness he had Alfred attacked” and he dropped his head into his hands.

Henry and Septimus stared at each other and then at Edward.

“You are a blight on my brothers life” said Septimus harshly ignoring Henry’s gesture to hush.

“Is that all?” asked Henry “or is there more?”

Edward nodded his head helplessly and his sobs were evident.

“What else Edward? What else did he say?” asked Henry gently moved by Edward’s evident distress.

Edward raised his tear stained face.

“He threatened to tell Florence and have Blair taken from me”

And he buried his head in his hands again.

Septimus opened his mouth but a look from Henry made him shut it again.

“Septimus, can you leave us please” said Henry firmly “I wish to talk with Edward alone”

Septimus nodded with bad grace and left; clearly his father knew he was desperate to give Edward a piece of his mind.

Once Septimus had gone, Henry sat and waited for Edward to regain his composure.

“So Edward” said Henry when he was quiet “what do you intend to do? Will you do as Lothian insisted and leave Alfred?”

“Alfred says that he will not allow it” said Edward pride edging his voice in spite of the situation, his wonderful Alfred so determined to defeat the Marques “he says he will think of a way to stop Lothian”

Henry smiled ruefully “he is like me, in his situation I would not want to acquiesce to Lothian’s bullying either but Edward what do *you* think? You have a great deal to lose here”
“I do not know” said Edward after a long silence “I am being asked to choose between my love and my daughter. When I’m with Alfred I wonder how I could even live without him but my daughter! My baby girl, my lord what can I do? I cannot lose her”

Henry closed his eyes and pinched the bridge of his nose “let me speak to Alfred” he said “hear what his plans are, see if I can help”

Edward slumped back wearily “thank you sir” he said

“Edward” said Henry and the tone of his voice made Edward look up “I once said to you that if your circumstances become such that it was impossible for you to continue your liaison that you told him and did not let him cling to false hope and waste his life. If that is the case here, I hold you to that promise. Ill not have him risk everything for you if it is indeed hopeless”

Edward nodded “I will my lord. I love Alfred; I will not be able to live with myself if further harm befalls him”

After Edward left, Henry sat in his chair, his shoulders drooping. He was getting old he thought, he felt it every day, his joints stiffening, his energy waning. He wished, oh how he wished, this had not happened but it seemed he had one last battle to fight. He knew Alfred and how often people under estimated him because he’d inherited the delicate angelic looks of his mother rather than taking after his own dark imposing features. However people did not do it more than once; Alfred might look fragile but he was robust, stubborn and brave to the point of foolhardiness at times. He would never give up Edward without a fight, the only way he ever would, would be if Edward told him to go; Henry hoped it would never come to that but it might.

He heard a noise and looked up; Septimus had come into the room

“He has gone then?” he asked unnecessarily

“He has” said Henry “so you may now vent all those thoughts you wanted to say earlier”

“I’m amazed you can be so calm papa” said Septimus heatedly “he has brought nothing but misfortune to Alfred from the day he met him! He’s unhappy, he’s jealous, he’s lonely; ideally of course they should be allowed to live together as a couple if that is what they want but the world is not ideal! Edward’s selfishness in wanting it all – a wife AND Alfred - means that innocent people are dragged into their mess and made to suffer too. It is not fair papa and it is not right”

He took a deep breath and walked over and poured more wine

“You’re not going to help him are you papa?” he said lifting the glass

Henry sat back; eyebrows raised “you think I shouldn’t?”

Septimus downed his glass in one gulp

“No, he has brought this on himself” he said “he doesn’t deserve your help, look at what has happened to Alfred already”

Hendy scratched his head “you’ll forgive me if I say that I believe you are driven more by your own jealous thoughts over Florence rather than reason”

Septimus said nothing and Henry persisted
“I know about your feelings for Florence Drummond Septimus. The fact you have not rejoined the army tells me that they are reciprocated by her, that there may be hope for you yet should you choose the route your mother and I did, do you not think given those circumstances it would be in Florence’s interests not to have her husband bullied by her father? How do you think Lothian would react if he knew about you and her?”

“He might be thankful” snapped Septimus “glad of a son in law who doesn’t lie and deceive”

“Or he might think that the very last person his daughter needs is the brother of the man her husband is in love with! He might even think it is a trick; you pretend to have feelings for Florence in order to separate her from Edward and then when he is free, drop her like a stone”

“It’s not a trick” began Septimus “I would nev…”

“I know that Septimus” interrupted Henry “I am merely trying to get you to consider how others might see it”

Septimus glowered into his empty glass and said nothing, he could see his father had a point.

“I will talk to Alfred Septimus, find out his plan and then I will decide what I will do. But Septimus, do not forget that Alfred is my son as much as he is your brother. I do not wish him to come to harm any more than you but” he held up his hand as Septimus began to speak “whatever decision I make I expect you to abide by it and if you will not help, at least not actively hinder”

Septimus scowled and then nodded mutinously “as you wish papa” he said

“good” said Henry “I will visit Alfred tomorrow and talk to him then”
Plotting

Chapter Summary

Alfred, William, Alexi and Henry put their heads together to come up with a plan - but will Edward agree?

Chapter Notes

This is a short chapter and I promise the boys will be together in the next one

In this chapter is a reference to a scandal involving a younger Henry setting fire to a house which is 100% true! in his early 20s and whilst still unmarried, Henry had an affair with an older widowed duchess. It was arranged that he would spend the night at her house and in order to have an excuse to go to her room, he set fire to some gunpowder which cause a larger explosion than expected. They had to evacuate the house and Henry carried the Duchess in as it is described "her unadorned loveliness" to a hayloft where Henry took care to "prevent the possibility of her taking cold by surrounding her with his own clothes" and they were discovered later in a situation both "laughable and loving"

Henry was forbidden from marrying the Duchess by his father but he continued to see her for another 3 years; she never married again

I stan Henry Paget so hard I cant tell you

“Goodness lord Alfred when you said you were indisposed I expected a cold or some such not this!” said a horrified Alexi “what on earth has happened?”

Alfred smiled wanly at him “it probably looks worse than it feels” he said

“I doubt that” said William noting how Alfred winced as he moved

“Please sit” said Alfred gesturing at the chairs he’d had set by his own next to the fire “and help yourself to the brandy”; he’d had a decanter and glasses set on a low table in between them.

“So Alfred” said Alexi as he poured brandy for all of them “not that I doubt your genuine wish for our company” and he smiled “but I assume that there may be more to this summons than just a wish for a drink and to catch up on the latest goings on?”

Alfred nodded sombrely “there is” he said “alas something terrible has happened. Edward’s father in law has discovered mine and Edward’s relationship”

Alexi put the decanter down with a loud exclamation “my god Alfred, how?”

Alfred smiled wryly “it seems Edward was carrying one of my letters around with him in his coat pocket”
Alexi and William looked at each other in disbelief

“But that’s so dangerous” said William shocked “what was he thinking?”

Alfred held up his hand “I know William, I know; apparently it helps when he misses me” and in spite of himself he smiled softly

“Unfortunately the maid mixed up the coats and gave Edward’s coat to his father in law where he found the letter in its pockets and read it. It was not a letter that left much to the imagination in terms of our relationship”

William and Alexi gasped

“I cannot imagine he was pleased” said Alexi grimly

“He was not” said Alfred “this” he indicated his bruises “is partly the result of him finding out but certainly not the worst of it. He is blackmailing Edward; either he and I part or he will publish the letter in The Times and Edward and I will be exposed, at worst well you know the penalty for sodomy gentleman. Edward would also of course lose Blair; Florence would divorce him and no court in the land would allow him to go near her or the child Florence carries at the moment”

“Oh no Alfred” said William in horror “that is appalling. What will you do? How will you be without Edward? My dear friend, what can I say?”

Alfred looked at him “you think I would give into this blackmail? William you underestimate me!”

“But it is not you who is being blackmailed is it Alfred” said Alexi shrewedly “it’s Edward; oh yes I mean you are part of it, but Edward is the real target here. What does he think?”

Alfred sighed “Edward is terrified of losing me and even more so of losing Blair. He sees no way out but I have convinced him I can find a way to outwit the Marques”

“And have you?” asked William eagerly “found a way”

Alfred laughed bitterly “of course not, I have no idea how! Which is one of the reasons I asked you both here. We need to put our heads together”

Alexi nodded “and of course we will help wont we Will? But it will not be easy, and Alfred I have a suggestion which I think you will not like but which I think will help in the long term”

“Go on” said Alfred “any help or advice is gladly received”

“Very well” said Alexi “I think Edward should go to Russia, no hear me out” he said as Alfred started forward already shaking his head vehemently “think Alfred! While Edward is here, Lothian can get to him easily. He will have him spied on, followed, he will know every move he makes, be breathing down his neck every second. There will be no opportunity for Edward to ever see you or do anything Lothian doesn’t know about. In Russia he would be safe; Lothian’s reach does not extend that far. He would be safe in Russia and while he is there, we can deal with Lothian”

Alfred sat back staring; he knew Alexi was right. It was a very sensible plan; send Edward away where he would be safe leaving him free to exact revenge on Lothian without having to worry about Lothian placing more pressure on Edward. But on the other hand, to send Edward away! After all they’d been through; he laughed mirthlessly

“You know that the only reason Edward impregnated her again was so that he wouldn’t have to go
to Russia. It is the supreme irony that now I will be the one to tell him to go”

“So you do believe the idea has merit then” said Alexi

“Oh yes” said Alfred sadly “I do. It is an excellent idea but forgive me Alexi if I find it hard to
rejoice in the idea of Edward being taken away from me. Whether by blackmail or by this idea, I still
lose him”

“But not forever Alfred” said William kindly “only until we can be sure Lothian cannot blackmail
him or you for that matter”

Just then there was a knock on the door and a footman entered

“The Marques of Anglesey is here my lord” he announced

“Papa” smiled Alfred “show him in, no stay” he added as William and Alexi stood up to leave “you
are all concerned in this”

Henry entered and went straight over to Alfred, motioning him to sit as he struggled to stand up

“No no my boy, stay there, let me see the damage”

“Edward has been to see you I take it” said Alfred

“He has” said Henry “he spoke to myself and Septimus and then afterwards I broke the news to your
mother. I was all I could do to stop her haring down her to sweep you up and take you home to nurse
you herself”

Henry bent down and peered at Alfred’s face still bearing the marks of the attack and lifted up his
shirt gently his face hardening at the bruising

He cursed under his breath “scoundrel I will have him for this”

Alfred grinned at him “going to challenge him to a duel papa?”

“Do not tempt me Alfred” said his father grimly “but no, I fear that will not in fact solve the
problem”

“We were just discussing Alexi’s idea to solve the problem when you arrived papa” said Alfred

“Alexi, why don’t you tell my father your thoughts?”

Alexi quickly outlined his view and Henry nodded rapidly

“I think that is an excellent idea” he said “Alfred, I know that it will be very hard for you but Edward
will be safer this way and we must play the long game here I think”

Alfred sighed heavily, defeated “I know, he must take the position in the embassy that Palmerston
offered him. It is the only way”

“I hesitate to throw up any obstacles” said William “more than already exist that is but what if
Edward refuses to go? It is asking a lot of him; to leave his home, to go to another country, to leave
you Alfred and we must also remember that his wife is enceinte and it may be dangerous for her to
travel with him which means Blair would need to stay here as well”

Alfred rubbed his face “all you say is true, I know Edward, he will be stubborn. I will need to speak
to him”
“He cannot come here” said Alexi firmly “or to your house Lord Anglesey, I am sure if Lothian is not yet having him followed, he soon will be”

“Then we will need to find a safe place where you can meet” said Henry “somewhere Lothian wont suspect”

“William I wonder if?” said Alexi

“Oh but of course!” said William excitedly “the cottage on our estate. It would be perfectly reasonable to invite Edward there as part of a house party or at least that is what we would say”

“And I would bruit about that Alfred has gone to Plas Newydd to recover” said Henry excitedly “ah this plotting reminds me of my youth”

“papa did the most scandalous things” said Alfred smiling “do you know he once set fire to a house purely to have his way, with who was it papa? The duchess of R….”

“Now now Alfred” said Henry laughing and holding up his hand “that was many years ago”

Alexi and William laughed “it seems we have someone with experience on our side”

Alfred laughed too but it was short-lived; he was tired and aching and now it seemed despite everything, he was to lose Edward after all albeit he hoped only for a short time

Henry noticing Alfred’s sudden weariness motioned to William and Alexi “perhaps you would leave me alone with my son now gentlemen” he said “I fear Alfred is tired and I would like to speak to him alone”

“Of course” said Alexi; he had noted how Alfred had grown paler “come William, Alfred we will call on you soon” and they left

After they had gone, Henry sat down close to Alfred

Alfred smiled tiredly at him “how was Edward when he came to you papa?”

Henry puffed out his cheeks “he was not well Alfred. He feels deeply guilty to have brought this on you both. I told him I would do what I can to help though I confess that as yet I don’t know what we can do once we have got Edward out of the way, if he even agrees to go”

“I know” said Alfred “I told Edward I would not be bullied and I will not but I too am at a loss at the moment to think of what to do to stop Lothian from holding this over our heads forever”

He shifted uncomfortably in his chair and Henry frowned

“Come home Alfred” he said “come back to London, let your mother look after you as she is dying to do. You will feel better and we can talk”

Alfred was on the point of refusing and then he thought, ‘why not?’ Windsor was gloomy and lifeless without the royal family in residence, his own house would remind him too much of Edward but at Uxbridge house he would feel safe and he could rest.

He nodded “thank you papa” he said “I will”
Edward sat brooding in his study, twisting a glass of whiskey in his hands. He was finding it almost intolerable to have no contact with Alfred. He stayed at work as much as he could; fortunately there was much to occupy him at the Foreign Office with the war in India and he had plenty to do but he could not stay there 24 hours a day. Florence was clearly having a difficult pregnancy and was increasingly withdrawn, spending much of her time when she was not with Blair in her sitting room resting. Ironically, he would have welcomed her company and comfort but he was terrified of dragging her in further into the whole sorry mess than she already was albeit that she did not know it. He couldn’t imagine what he could say to her; she must not know about his and Alfred’s secret or of her father’s threats so he could not talk to her honestly. The only relief he had was when he was with Blair who was currently very concerned about what was growing inside mama. He and Florence had sat down and explained to her that soon she would have a baby brother or sister but she had not been terribly impressed

“Another baby papa?”

“Yes” said Edward “you will have someone to play with”

She frowned

“What if don’t like them?”

“Of course you will like them” said Florence “they will be your brother or sister”

She wrinkled her nose

“But what if I don’t?”

“You will” said Florence firmly

Blair sat on the chair kicking her legs thoughtfully and then said

“If I don’t like them, Millie can take them away! when papa doesn’t like the soup that gets taken away”

Edward and Florence looked at each other and Edward bit his lip to stop from smiling while Florence stifled a laugh with her handkerchief.
Every time he was with her, Edward knew he could not contemplate being without her and so he was trapped. He hoped to god Alfred really did have a plan because at the moment, he could see no way out.

It was good to be home thought Alfred, well not quite home as he wasn’t installed in his house in Grosvenor Square but he was at Uxbridge House being fussed over by his mother which in the past may have annoyed him but which he now felt strangely glad of.

He had expected her to make comments about how it would be better if he and Edward gave up their relationship but she did not. Even Henry was surprised by her lack of comment but when he tackled her about it she shrugged

“The last time I interfered, it caused a rift between Alfred and I, which is even now not completely healed. I will not make the same mistake again. He loves Edward, Edward loves him; they are grown men and can make their own decisions”

However his mothers’ care and his father’s continued attempts to gee him up could not fill the ache in his heart about Edward. As he was recovering (irritatingly the cracked ribs would take another several weeks to heal) he had more time to let what had happened and the consequences sink in. The first and most immediate was his inability to see Edward or even to have contact with him. He was terrified to commit too much to paper given what had happened with his letter and as Edward could not come to Uxbridge house, he could not go to Edward and he was not yet fit enough to travel further, seeing him was impossible. He was also concerned that the longer they waited to suggest the plan to Edward about accepting the role in Russia, the more difficult it would be to persuade him.

As he lay there musing on what to do, Septimus arrived

“Septimus” Alfred smiled at him “thank goodness you are here to drag me from my melancholy”

Septimus laughed and pulled up a chair “I consider it my first duty”

“Tell me the latest gossip, I wish to know it all” said Alfred “anything to distract me”

“Well, Mrs Spencer Stanhope is with child” said Septimus

“Oh how wonderful” exclaimed Alfred “I am so happy for Wilhelmina! Thank goodness she escaped her dreadful aunt. You know I am sure she wanted to marry her off to me but thankfully I dodged that bullet”

“But your attack is of course the talk of the town Alfred” said Septimus “People feel they are not safe in their beds if someone such as you can be attacked in the grounds of Windsor castle”

Alfred laughed bitterly “well unless they have had a falling out with the Marques of Lothian, they will be quite safe!”

“What are you going to do Alfred?” asked Septimus “do you still intend to defy him?”

“Of course” said Alfred “Septimus, we are Paget’s! I will not be cowed by that man and his ruffians no matter what they do! Besides we have the beginnings of a plan”

“We? Who is we?” asked Septimus

“Myself, papa, Prince Alexi and William peel” said Alfred
Septimus sat back “and you do not want my help?”; he felt absurdly hurt. Despite what he had said to his father, when all was said and done Alfred was his brother and an enemy of one Paget was an enemy of all.

Alfred cocked his head to one side “I was not sure you would want to give it” he said “I am not blind to your feelings about Edward and me”

“I make no secret of my disapproval Alfred” said Septimus “but you ARE my brother and Lothian is the most appalling bounder” and he grinned suddenly “and a Tory to boot. I will do whatever I can to help”

Alfred smiled “then I am most grateful for it. Our plan such as it is so far, is that Edward will take the job in Russia that Palmerston has long been pressuring him to take and...”

“Russia” interrupted Septimus “but Alfred, was that not what Mrs. Drummond’s pregnancy was meant to prevent?”

Alfred pulled a face “indeed it was Septimus and it galls me greatly that Edward had to go through that for nothing”

Septimus clamped his mouth shut to stop himself speaking out of turn as he heard Alfred describe his dearest wish, to lay with Florence Drummond as having “to go through that”

“But Alfred, Mrs Drummond cannot travel to Russia in her condition” said Septimus “to Russia in the winter? It would be far too dangerous”

“No she would need to stay here” said Alfred “and Blair too, which will make Edward very unhappy. You know how he loves her but we have no choice. As long as Edward is here, Lothian can blackmail him easily; away in Russia he and we at least have some breathing space”

Septimus stared at the wall for a few seconds processing what he had just heard: If Edward went to Russia, Florence would be left in London alone and he would be able to spend far more time with her.

“I think it is an excellent plan Alfred” he said warmly at last “excellent, and I will do all I can to help”

“Thank you” said Alfred “a drink to celebrate? There is some brandy over there” and he gestured to the cabinet in the corner of the room

Septimus got up and walked to the other side of the room just as there was a knock at the door

“Enter” called Alfred and then coughed but he’d scarcely got the word out before the door banged open

“Uncle Alfred” Blair ran across the room, jumped onto the bed and Alfred tried to suppress a groan as she bumped into him

“Blair! Where are your manners” said Florence as she entered the room more slowly “Uncle Alfred is not well. Now what do we do when we meet people?”

Blair immediately looked contrite, slid off the bed and curtseyed “how do you do Uncle Alfred” she said gravely

Alfred smiled at her and bowed his head wincing as he did so
“I am somewhat indisposed Miss Drummond” he said equally gravely

“That is better” said Florence smiling at Blair “Lord Alfred I am sorry to see you still so under the weather”

On the other side of the room as yet unseen by Florence, Septimus gripped the brandy decanter hard. Of all the times for Florence to bring Blair to see Alfred he thought; he took a deep breath and turned round

“How nice of you to pay a visit Mrs. Drummond” he said quietly

Florence stared at him

“L...Lord Septimus” she stuttered, shock written all over her face

“Is that a doll you have there?” Septimus asked Blair hoping that Florence could gain control of herself with the distraction

“Yes” nodded Blair “it is for Uncle Alfred, to help him get better”

“For me?” said Alfred who fortunately had been entirely distracted by Blair and not noticed the shock on Florence’s face

“thank you little kitten” he said as she gave him the doll

She frowned at him as if he were foolish “I am NOT a kitten Uncle Alfred, I am Blair”

He laughed “of course. And does she have a name?”

“She’s called The Queen” said Blair “look she has a crown”

“So she does” said Alfred

“I’ve told her to order you to get better” said Blair “Papa is sad that he does not see you you know”

Alfred was saved from replying by Septimus who dropped the decanter on the floor with a crash

“Goodness what a clumsy fool I am” he said as he rang the bell for the maid

“Good lord Septimus” said Alfred “you gave us all a fright did he not Blair?” he added

She nodded

“And Mrs. Drummond” asked Alfred feeling that he ought to at least address some words to her “are you quite alright? You look rather pale, please sit, you do not have to stand on ceremony with me”

Septimus came over as the maid appeared to clean up the brandy

“Here” he said “allow me Mrs. Drummond” and he ushered her into a chair

Once Florence and Blair had left, Septimus excused himself from Alfred’s company also. He had never spent a more awkward hour! Thank goodness for young Blair who had chattered happily, showed Alfred how to undress and redress the Queen Doll, played peek a boo with the bed curtains and generally consumed a lot of attention. Without her, he would never have got through it but then
without Blair, there would have been no reason for Florence to come.

Alfred had not seemed to pick up on the atmosphere but mused Septimus, you could never tell with Alfred! All those years at court hiding his true feelings meant you never really know what he was thinking. As for Florence, she had rallied herself conversing about Wilhelmina’s pregnancy and the rumours about the Duchess of Monmouth, now the Queen’s mistress of the robes. Septimus knew her husband a little; extremely arrogant and unattractive individual but very very rich.

He decided he would go to his club and dine there. He really needed to be alone for a while to collect his thoughts, he was quite exhausted.

“Blair and I went to visit Lord Alfred today” said Florence at dinner that evening “so appalling what happened to him. Gwendolyn was quite distraught”

Edward stared at her, trying to chew and swallow food down a throat that suddenly felt constricted

“You visited Al…Lord Alfred?” he said trying not to panic; would that count as flouting the Marques’s’ ban he wondered

“yes, Blair wanted to give him a doll to help him get better” she smiled “I wish you could have seen her Edward, I know I am her mother and biased, but really she is the most adorable child”

Edward smiled “that she is” he said softly “and…”he hesitated trying not to sound too eager “how was Lord Alfred? I have not been able to see him for some time, work you know” and he waved his hand vaguely wondering how the thumping of his heart could not be heard in the room

“Still in some pain” she said “his ribs apparently will not heal for a few weeks yet” she took a deep breath and then said causally “Lord Septimus was there also”

“Ah” said Edward wrinkling his nose “you know Florence, I do not think Lord Septimus cares for me” and he shook his head “I cannot imagine what I have done to offend him so”

Florence felt herself flush “I am sure you are imagining it Edward” she said “he’s always been quite charming to me”

Edward laughed “well of course my dear! He is a Paget after all; I believe Lord Melbourne once said the whole family is immensely charming, they take after their parents. You are an attractive women and I am sure Lord Septimus has noticed that” he laughed again “let us hope he does not have a fondness for married women like his father as well”

Florence felt her heart drop “I am sure he does not” she murmured and then “please excuse me Edward, I am feeling rather unwell, the baby” and she gestured at her stomach

Edward rose immediately “of course my dear go and rest”

Florence nodded “thank you Edward I will” and she fled the room before she had to have any further difficult conversations.
In Alexi's apartment

Chapter Summary

Edward finds out about Alfred's plans

Chapter Notes

yes the boys are together again :)

historical notes - Lord Palmerston was referred to as Pam by the British press and members of the court

The more Alfred thought of it, the more he knew that he must have his conversation with Edward sooner rather than later. Knowing him as he did and loving him as he did, he knew that Edward was apt to be fatalistic; the longer a situation went on, the more likely Edward was to accept it. However the fact remained he could not go to Edward and Edward could not come to him so how on earth were they to meet? Unless…..

He scribbled a quick note and rang the bell for the footman; he had an idea which should work.

“You seem distracted Drummond” said Lord Palmerston “thinking about that lovely wife of yours?” and he winked

Edward sighed, the longer he worked for him, the more vulgar Palmerston was becoming. It seemed that power was most definitely going to his head. Still if Palmerston thought thoughts of Florence were distracting him, it was far better than him knowing the reality, that it was thoughts of Alfred.

“Just wondering whether she carries a boy or a girl sir” he said

Palmerston shook his head at him “you modern husbands” he said “just like the Prince, always thinking about children, almost like you’re women”

“I think a man should care about his children” said Edward stiffly, nettled; what kind of man doesn’t give a fig for his children he thought, not one he wanted to be!

He was saved from further conversation by the arrival of a messenger with a note for him

“Dear Drummond

I wondered of you could stop by the embassy for supper tomorrow? I have a situation I need to discuss with you

Yours with warmest regards
Alexi

PS please reply by return

Edward took the note and scribbled a quick yes on it before resealing and handing to the messenger

Palmerston looked at him quizzically “anything interesting?” he asked causally but with sharp eyes

“Prince Alexi has asked me to have supper with him” said Edward “I expect there is news from Russia”

Palmerston nodded thoughtfully “I expect so” he said

The next day found Edward at the door of the Russian Embassy

He was glad Alexi had asked him to supper. He had gone home but Florence was still out of sorts, distracted and tired. He remembered the conversation he’d had with Alfred on the balcony after the Queen had given birth to the Prince of Wales about the Queen being out of sorts and he wondered if the same thing was affecting Florence just before the birth instead of after. He’d read Blair a story and then left to come to the Embassy; at least with Alexi he could be himself. He rang the bell and then went in, handing his hat and coat to the footman who opened the door.

“Drummond” Alexi appeared at the top of the stairs hurrying down “how good of you to come, please we are dining up here”

“Your Highness” said Edward scruplessly correct as always in company “so kind of you to invite me” and then shook hands

“I thought an informal supper a deux” said Alexi as they climbed the stairs together “more relaxing to talk I think”

“Indeed” said Edward “these are your private apartments?” he added as they arrived at the top of the staircase

“They are” replied Alexi “not very grand but a pleasing retreat from the world” and he smiled, opening the door “please, after you”

Edward walked in and stopped with a cry of astonishment, there on the sofa was Alfred

“Alfred!” he gasped, a smile bursting across his face “but?” he turned to Alexi who was grinning back at him

“I find I have a rather urgent appointment Drummond” he said “I hope you don’t mind if I leave you with Lord Alfred”

Edward shook his head, not daring to speak in case he overflowed with emotion

“I will leave you to it then” said Alexi departing with a smile which turned to a more worried expression as he closed the door behind him, what if Edward would not accept their plan?

As soon as the door shut, Edward was across the room flinging himself on Alfred

“Ouch Edward I am still not completely healed” said Alfred laughing
“Apologies” said Edward doing nothing to relinquish his hold on Alfred “god Alfred I have missed you so” he said stroking Alfred’s hair back from his forehead and kissing his lips gently

“And I have missed you” said Alfred returning the kiss “and been very worried about your state of mind. Tell me Edward, how have you been?”

Edward resettled himself on the sofa putting his arm around Alfred and pulling him close

“I have been very fraught Alfred” he said “I have not spoken further with my father in law but I know it will not be long before he wants something of me. Florence is not herself either…”

“You know she brought Blair to see me?” said Alfred “that was…that was….kind of her” he said scare able to believe he was saying the word

“Blair loves you” said Edward with a smile “Florence knows that but Alfred how am I to hide from her the kind of man her father is?”

Alfred sighed “I suggest we eat Edward and after we do, I have a plan to put before you”

“Can you not tell me now?” asked Edward in surprise

“No” said Alfred “let us enjoy our food in peace and talk of other things first and not have your father in law dictate all our conversation”

After they had eaten, Edward poured coffee for them both and they returned to the sofa

“So Alfred” said Edward “what is your plan?” and he looked eagerly at Alfred

Alfred looked back at him, how dear Edward’s open honest handsome face was to him, how much he loved him! But he was about to ask something of him he knew he would hate. His stomach felt as queasy as it had that dreadful night in Ciros

“Edward” he took his hands “you know I love you dearly and beyond compare”

Edward nodded “I do” already feeling his heart sinking; whatever this plan was, he sensed it was not something he was going to wholeheartedly embrace

“The most important thing for me Edward is that firstly that you are safe, you understand that?”

Edward nodded again more slowly

Alfred took a deep breath “I would like you to accept Palmerston's offer of a job in Russia”

“What?” Edward snatched his hands away “Alfred have you lost your senses? I am not going to go to Russia! Leave you? Blair? My god that is exactly what my father in law wants to do, part me from you!”

“Edward listen” said Alfred as Edward sat hands on his knees breathing heavily “please listen. You’ll be safe in Russia, Lothian cannot get to you and while you’re there, we, that is my father, Septimus, Alexi, will and I can deal with Lothian”

“My god you are all in on this absurd idea?” said Edward angrily, his jaw set rigid

“It’s not absurd” said Alfred trying not to sound impatient “Lothian may even take it as a sign that
you have given me up, travelling so far away”

“To go that far away I may as well” said Edward “how can I go so far away from you and my daughter?”

“Edward listen” pleased Alfred “It’s true I can’t go to Russia with you but of course Blair and your wife will go”

“Florence cannot travel in her condition” snapped Edward rising to his feet

“No she would remain her until the birth and then travel on with Blair” said Alfred quietly

“I see you have it all worked out” said Edward “by heaven Alfred” a terrible thought struck him “Alfred, this plan, it is not because you just wish to be rid of me is it?”

“Edward!” Alfred jumped up and then groaned “damn ribs! Edward you adorable foolish man, don’t you see I am trying to save us?!?!? While you are here, while your wife and Blair are here, you are not safe! You really think I wish to be parted from you? Edward!” he stopped and took a huge breath “I would rather die than be without you and it is because of that that I ask you to go, for me, for us!” he came close to him “please Edward, we cannot live like this, hiding even more than before, unable to meet. Edward there is no other way”

Edward looked away and Alfred could see he was softening

“my love” he said taking his hand “believe me if I could find another way to get us out of this mess I would but I cannot, there is no other way my dearest, no other way” he repeated for emphasis and he squeezed Edward’s fingers

Edward bowed his head and put his arms around Alfred “I know” he said muffling his face in his neck “I just wish it was not so”

“So do I” said Alfred

They remained locked together like that for several minutes before straightening up

“What happens now?” asked Edward “I assume I must speak with Palmerston?”

“You must” said Alfred “but we need to think, I do not want Lothian scuppering the appointment. In fact!” he grinned “I think it should be announced publicly in such a way that whatever Lothian says, its cannot be undone”

“How so?” asked Edward

“I will ask the Queen to announce it” said Alfred “in fact given how much she dislikes ‘Pam’ I may even tell her he’s against sending you. Nothing would be more likely to make her do it if that was the case”

Edward laughed ruefully “you have a devious mind behind that angel face Alfred Paget” he said

“My mother said the same” said Alfred smiling “so you will do this then?” he was almost certain but he wanted to hear Edward say it

“I will” said Edward “though” and he looked at Alfred biting his lip “I do not know how I will bear it, being parted from you”

“It will not be for long” said Alfred patting his arm “you’ll be back before you know it! Mayhap
even before Florence gives birth”

Edward brightened up “do you think it is possible?” he said

“Certainly” said Alfred unable to tell Edward what he really thought, that it would be some lengthy
time before they saw each other. It would not help the situation and they had to do what was
necessary no matter how painful it was.

Edward smiled a little sadly; he suspected Alfred was telling him what he wanted to hear rather than
the truth to make it easier.

The clock in the corner struck 9pm

“Do you need to return home?” asked Alfred

Edward shook his head “not yet” he said “we have some time” and he drew Alfred gently down
onto the sofa “which means…” and he leaned forward and began to softly kiss Alfred’s neck

“Careful Edward” gasped Alfred already squirming under Edward’s lips, how much he adored it
when he did this! “I am still a little delicate”

“do not worry” said Edward untying Alfred’s cravat and sliding it off, his fingers seeking the mother
of pearl buttons at the throat of his shirt “I will be very very gentle” and he pressed his lips to the soft
skin he’d exposed “very gentle indeed”
by royal appointment

Chapter Summary

In St Petersbg Edward learns he is not alone and in flashback we see how edward found out he was to be sent to Russia and Florence's reaction

Chapter Notes

another chapter which switches from 1850 to flashback to 1849 - i hope it isn’t confusing x please let me know if it is

historical notes - there was a dukedom of the two sicilies but the Conte and Contessa are fictional

Diplomatic bags were never searched so Alexi could write to his sister safe in the knowledge they would not be seen by anyone else

St Petersbg 1850 - Reception for the ambassador from the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies

“Your Excellency” Edward bowed to the ambassador as they were introduced, “I trust you had a pleasant journey”

Conte Ferdinand returned the bow “Sir Edward, I am delighted to make your acquaintance. The journey was long as I’m sure you understand but we stopped en route, in fact your Queen was kind enough to invite me to dine with her”

Edward’s face kept its expression of pleasant interest but inside his heart had begun to pound. If the Conte had been at court he would have seen Alfred. He wanted to grab him by the lapels and shout in his face for news of Alfred but of course he could not

“Indeed” he said instead “how kind of Her Majesty”

The Conte nodded “may I present my wife Maria?”

A tall slender woman whose features seemed somehow familiar to Edward extended her hand “Contessa” said Edward saluting her hand a la russe

“Sir Edward” she replied “I believe I have the advantage of you”

“Madam?” said Edward

“I understand you know my brother, Prince Alexi” she said smiling “he has written about you often”

Edward stared at her “Prince Alexi is your brother?” he said hardly able to believe his ears

She laughed “my full name is Maria Leonova, Alexi is my youngest brother. It was delightful to be
“I must call on you soon; I hear you have twins! And an older daughter”

“We do” said Florence “yes please do call on me and I shall tell you all the palace gossip so you are well prepared” and they both laughed

“The Contessa is Prince Alexi’s sister” said Edward “from the Embassy in London”

“Well!” said Florence “what a coincidence”

“Perhaps not so much” said the Conte “the Leonov family have long been diplomats, as have my own. I first met Maria when she was 13 and I was 12 when our families were both in Paris, I swore then that I would marry her though I did not think she believed me”

Maria laughed fondly at him “indeed I did not”

“Fortunately though I did and now, well here I am” he said “a lucky man, a very lucky man indeed”

And he kissed his wife’s hand smiling at her while Edward and Florence studiously avoided looking at each other

Just then a waltz struck up

“Lady Florence may I have the pleasure” said the Conte offering his arm to Florence “I hear you are a most accomplished dancer”

“I would be delighted” said Florence with a smile and they left for the dance floor arm in arm

Maria smiled at Edward “your wife is very charming Sir Edward and very beautiful” she said

“She is” said Edward feeling as always melancholy that he could not appreciate her more

Maria came a little closer to him

“Alexi has told me of your…situation” she said quietly “I will of course call on your wife but should you wish to call on me at say 3 o clock this coming Thursday you will find that the Conte is busy with other engagements. Perhaps we could have a discussion”

Edward’s eyes darted sideways at her, her expression was pleasant and neutral, and anyone watching would assume they were indulging in the usual diplomatic pleasantry

“Perhaps we could” he said with a nod

Buckingham Palace January 1849

“ma’am” lord Alfred bowed
“Lord Alfred” smiled the Queen “how pleased we are to see you recovered. We have missed you at the palace”

“And I have missed being here” said Alfred with a smile “I confess I am the most tedious invalid”

The Queen laughed “as am I, well you know that”

“And now that I am back ma’am” continued Alfred “I confess I must ask a favour of you”

“Surely you cannot have any more brothers who need commissions in the army lord Alfred” said the Queen with a grin that suddenly made her look 18 again

“No ma’am, even I have no more brothers requiring help” said Alfred “no it is my dear friend Mr Drummond”

“Mr Drummond?” said Victoria “such a delightful young man even with his odd ideas about churching, what is this favour lord Alfred?”

Alfred bit his lip with a smile; Her Majesty was never going to quite forgive Edward for that

“Well as you know ma’am he is Lord Palmerston’s secretary and he is finding it increasingly….challenging”

The Queen shuddered “I can understand that, odious man”

“Edward would very much like a diplomatic post and he has a particular expertise in Russian affairs. There is an opening at the embassy in St. Petersburg but Lord Palmerston refuses to appoint him”

“Does he indeed?” said the Queen

“He does and Edward is most frustrated. I thought perhaps ma’am given how important our relationship with Russia is that perhaps you might appoint him directly”

The Queen looked thoughtful; she would not normally concern herself with anyone below the rank of ambassador

“I believe it would vex lord Palmerton terribly if you were to do so and that of course would be such a shame” said Alfred his eyes twinkling as he smiled conspiratorially at her

A smile spread across the Queen’s face “it would indeed be a shame” she said gravely “oh and of course if Mr. Drummond is to represent us abroad I think plain mister will no longer do, I think Sir Edward is necessary”

“Oh” Alfred had not expected this and he was overwhelmed with pride and delight for Edward “why ma’am that is most gracious of you, most gracious indeed”

“Perhaps you would communicate the honour to Mr. Drummond lord Alfred” said the Queen “I am sure he would appreciate it more coming from you as his friend”

Alfred thought rapidly, he could not see Edward because of the Marques and he certainly could not explain that to the Queen

“I believe ma’am that an official letter from the palace would bring great pleasure to Mrs. Drummond. She is with child and I believe finding it rather dull”

“Poor woman” said the Queen with feeling “children are of course a blessing Lord Alfred but the
process of having them is not. I shall write to Lord Palmerston and Mrs Drummond right away”

“It is much appreciated ma’am” said Alfred as the Queen departed to her desk. Once she had left Alfred brought out his hands from behind his back where they had remained folded the whole time. In them was the old boot spur he’d used at Edward’s wedding which he had been squeezing to distract him from what he was doing. Edward was going to receive the news with no warning and Alfred ached for him. He would like to have told him first but he could not risk it. No Edward would be caught unawares; he hoped he was not too shocked. Edward was about to find out he was going away, perhaps for years, and he Alfred was the one ensuring it would happen. He was literally breaking his own heart.

“A message from the Queen my Lord”

Palmerston took the letter with raised eyebrows “I wonder what Her Majesty dictates today” he said Edward frowned at his tone. In Foreign affairs, Palmerston was of the opinion that Great Britain was entitled to express its views as it saw fit which Edward had sympathy with, it was at least honest. However as time went on Great Britain being entitled to express its views, seemed to equate to Palmerston being entitled to express his views as he saw fit.

He tore open the envelope and laughed

“Well well Drummond, it seems that you are off to Russia after all” he said “despite your objections”

“I beg your pardon sir” said Edward taken aback

Palmerston tossed over the letter

“See for yourself” he said

*Dear Lord Palmerston*

*We are minded to appoint your principal secretary Edward Drummond to a position in St Petersburg. He has shown that he is a most able, trustworthy, loyal and discrete servant to the crown. We are writing to him separately but wish to make it quite clear that we will brook no obstacles to his appointment*

*Victoria R*

Edward read it through again, his heart sinking. He knew he had agreed to Alfred’s plan but he hadn’t expected to see it come to fruition so soon.

“I wonder why the Queen thinks I would block your appointment” mused Palmerston, his eyes bright “I have been the one trying to get you to go”

Edward shook his head “I do not know” he said baffled

Palmerston cocked his head on one side “and you were adamant you would not leave your wife but she can hardly travel in her condition”

“No” Edward shook his head “no it would be far too dangerous”

“It seems you are experiencing Her Majesty’s determination first hand said Palmerston not unkindly because damn the boy looked wretched, “you know I wish you to go but if you want to decline I will
defend your right to do so. You are a servant of the crown Drummond not a slave to it”

Edward closed his eyes and drew n a deep breath “if Her Majesty commands” he said “I must obey”

“Edward, EDWARD” Florence rarely raised her voice but as soon as he was home, she appeared at the door of the drawing room “when were you going to tell me?”

“Tell you my dear?” said Edward

Florence waved the letter she held in her hand; Edward could see it bore the royal crest “for goodness sake Edward about the appointment to Russia! And the knighthood!”

“Knighthood?” Edward’s mouth dropped open “what knighthood?”

“You mean…”Florence thrust the letter at him “you did not know?”

Edward shook his head scanning the letter “about the knighthood? No” he said “and I only heard about the appointment today”

Florence rang the bell and the maid appeared “tea” she ordered “and whiskey for Mr. Drummond. Come Edward I think we need to talk rather urgently”

Edward nodded, his mind still spinning; he wondered how Florence felt about this turn of events. He had not long to wait

“well” said Florence once the maid had brought the drinks and departed “sir Edward” she smiled broadly at him “I can think of no one who deserves it better”

Edward laughed embarrassed “and Lady Drummond” he said raising his glass to her “I believe it suits you very well”

He smiled at her, his face lighting up and Florence felt a surge of regret at how things had turned out. If only he had loved her, if only she could have found a way to please him but such thoughts were pointless. Things were what they were and in Septimus Paget she had found a man who truly loved her and she loved him in return. A horrible realisation suddenly struck her, if Edward were going away then she would go to which meant leaving Septimus behind.

“So” she asked nervously “we are to go to Russia? All of us?”

“Yes” said Edward “but” he hesitated, he was sure Florence was not going to be happy to be left behind at least for the time being “I do not think it is wise for you to travel in your condition my dear. I thought if you could bear it that you should stay here until the baby is born and then you and Blair can join me later”

“Oh” Florence looked down to hide her look of relief, she wouldn’t have to leave Septimus straight away after all “but won’t you be dreadfully lonely Edward?” she asked

Edward took a gulp of whiskey to avoid answering with his immediate response ‘yes’ he wanted to cry, ‘more lonely than I know how to bear because Alfred will not be with me and I shall not see his dear face in I don’t know how long’

“Your health and that of the baby is more important” he said gently “and you will join me later”

Florence went over to him and knelt down awkwardly next to him, for a man promoted and about to
be knighted he did not seem happy; she took his hand in hers

“You are a good man Edward” she said “I am proud of you”

Edward looked at her; she was a good wife to him, a good mother to Blair even though she knew she did not have his love

“Thank you my dear” he said squeezing her hand “I try to be”

“We shall have to think of what to say to Blair” she said “she will miss you very much”

“Yes” Edward nodded and a lump rose in his throat “I shall miss her too” he said “unbearably”

“I know” said Florence and she rested her head against his leg suddenly weary; Edward stroked her hair, leant his head back against the chair and sipped his whiskey. He was tired, so very very tired.
An investiture

Chapter Summary

It's time for Edward to be knighted :D

Chapter Notes

this was fun to write - lots of significant conversations:)

Historical notes - the order of St Michael and St George was created by the Prince regent to honour civil servants and diplomats

February 1849

Charles Drummond gazed around the ornate ballroom at Buckingham Palace scarcely able to believe his eyes. Everywhere was red damask, crystal chandeliers, gold leaf; candle light gleamed off silk and jewels and a low hum of conversation filled the room. All of these people here to see his son get a knighthood he thought. He had not been to the Palace before and he glowed as he remembered how Edward had led him through the corridors with complete familiarity. His boy completely at ease in the highest Palaces of the land.

He could see Edward over in the corner now, Florence on his arm, talking to the Duchess of Sutherland and Lord Alfred…no not Lord Alfred; it must be one of his brothers. Florence was looking rather flushed, the heat was probably rather trying for her in her condition. Really she should not even be here, pregnant women should not be out and about he thought, but with the Queen continuing her duties almost until the day she gave birth, more women were starting to show themselves in public whilst visibly pregnant. He wondered if the Marques of Lothian were here, by all rights he should be; Florence was about to become Lady Drummond but he sensed that all was not right between his son and daughter in law and her father. The dinner that Florence had put on to celebrate the announcement of Edward’s promotion had been a strained and awkward affair.

Just then he felt a hand on his back and he turned to see Lord Palmerston smiling roguishly at him

“Mr Drummond?” he said holding out his hand “I must congratulate you on having a most accomplished son”

Charles beamed with pride as he shook it “I always knew he was destined for great things”

“Indeed” said Palmerston “he is a very able young man and his wife is quite charming. This is the first time I have had the pleasure of meeting her”

“Florence is the best of daughter in laws” said Charles expansively, in reality he didn’t give her that much thought beyond whether she would have a son but she was good company and seemed happy enough with Edward
“I have not seen her father here though” said Palmerston, eyes curious “I am surprised, I would have thought he would wish to see his son in law honoured”

Charles shrugged “perhaps he is busy”

“Perhaps he is” said Palmerston

The reality was that Lord Palmerston was not that surprised to see Lothian not here judging by his reaction when Palmerston had told him of Edward’s promotion. He had seen him in the Peers dining room the evening of the day the Queen’s message was delivered, and had gone over to congratulate him. Lothian had choked on his wine and almost turned purple at Palmerston’s words

“What did you say?” he snapped

“Your son in law is to be promoted my Lord; does that not make you happy?” said Palmerston somewhat puzzled

Lothian had put down his glass sharply and taken a deep breath

“To Russia you say? When?”

Palmerston shrugged “I do not know but soon”

“Why did I not know of this?” spat the Marques

“Drummond only found out today, and has gone home to his wife to tell her, really sir are you sure you are quite well?” said Palmerston, the look of the Marques’ face was enough to curdle milk!

“I am quite well” said Lothian; he stood up “excuse me” he threw his napkin down and stomped out of the room. That had been 3 weeks ago and since then he had turned over the Marques reaction in his mind, something was clearly amiss between him and Edward. His first instinct had been to question Edward but he thought perhaps not, instead he would wait to see what else transpired.

“How many more months to go my dear?” asked Harriet sympathetically as Florence shifted and winced slightly?

“I believe three” said Florence wearily

Edward frowned; surely ladies should not be discussing such delicate female matters in front of gentleman?

Harriet saw his look and laughed

“I believe I am embarrassing the gentleman” she said “come let us go and sit and you can tell me all”

Florence threw Harriet a grateful look and they went off leaving Edward and Septimus together. It was strange thought Edward looking at Septimus how like Alfred he was and yet how he could never imagine being in love with him in a million years.

Septimus cleared his throat

“Are you looking forward to your posting Mr Drummond?” he asked politely aware of the company around them

“Are you looking forward to your posting Mr Drummond?” he asked politely aware of the company around them
“It will be…interesting” said Edward slowly, he was never at ease with Septimus after the tirade he had endured when he had brought him the letter from Alfred. Yes he had received a muttered apology some weeks later but it had not been made with grace.

“You have to leave much you love behind though” said Septimus quietly

Edward flashed him a look but Septimus seemed sincere

“I do” he said “but the Queen commands and so I must go”

“We are all Her Majesty’s servants” began Septimus but he was interrupted by a loud trumpet flourish followed by a declamation

“Her Majesty the Queen, His Royal Highness Prince Albert, their Graces the Duke and Duchess of Monmouth, the Lady Portman, Lord Alfred Paget”

The company fell back into two lines as Her Majesty appeared at the top of the passage with the Prince and the Duke and Duchess, Lady Portman and Lord Alfred behind her. They paused and then progressed solemnly down the hall, the Queen and Prince nodding regally to acknowledge the bows and curtseys that followed in their wake.

Edward’s heart filled up at the sight of Alfred resplendent in his uniform (though not the Windsor uniform thought Edward with a flush) walking gracefully, head high, spine straight, as perfect as an angel. When he saw him like this, in the midst of all the court splendour, he felt clumsy and unworthy, as if Alfred was had come down from heaven and should not be touched by human hands. Although of course he knew Alfred very much liked to be touched by his hands and he smiled quietly to himself.

Just then there was a loud crash, the Queen looked up sharply as did all the court to see the Marques of Lothian stalk in, banging into one of the suits of armour by the door; there was a glacial silence as all eyes turned to him.

“Lord Lothian” said the Queen icily “your lateness is noted by us”

Lothian looked as if he was going to retort but suddenly another figure was next to him

“My apologies ma’am” said Henry “I fear I must take the blame for keeping his lordship late at the House”

“Well” the Queen looked slightly mollified, she had a huge soft spot for Alfred’s father and his dashing exploits “let it not happen again”

“Of course not ma’am” Henry bowed and the Queen passed on

Lothian eyed Henry coldly “you did not keep me at the House” he said under his breath

“I know” said Henry “but I did not want Drummond’s day ruined but the embarrassment of having his father in law asked to leave”

Lothian googled at him “how dare you” he began

Henry turned to him “I know what you are up to Lothian” he said quietly “I won’t allow it you know. You could stop now and we will say no more about it”

“Are you threatening me Anglesey?” said the Marques his eyes narrowing
“Warning you” said Henry equitably “leave my son and Edward alone before it is too late”

“You know?” said the Marques “you know what he is? What they are? How could you sir they are unnatural…..” and then he quailed before Henry who had taken a step forward

“Do not say that again sir” he said quietly “I am proud of my son, you should be proud of Edward”

“Proud?” Lothian wanted to spit

“Yes very proud, still so young but trusted by the Queen herself to go to Russia, I understand she took a personal hand in the matter”

“did she?” said Lothian a cold anger settling on him, he knew exactly who had encouraged the Queen to interfere, Edward’s paramour and friend to the Queen, Alfred Paget

“Indeed she did. Young Drummond has many friends in high places you know. You should remember that”

Lothian shot Henry a venomous look but Henry was gazing serenely forward as the Queen arrived on the dais

Well thought Lothian, Anglesey could wait

Edward waited his heart beating fast; next to him Florence who had joined him, squeezed his arm reassuringly and he smiled at her.

On the dais, Prince Albert had handed the Queen her sword; Alfred steeped forward and said in a loud clear voice

“Mr. Edward Drummond”

Edward took a deep breath and approaching the Queen bowed and then knelt on the investiture stool.

The Queen tapped him on the shoulders, right, left and right again

“Rise Sir Edward” she said and he looked up to see Alfred beaming radiantly at him and he blushed

He rose to his feet and the Queen pinned the order of St Michael and St George to his coat

“Congratulations Sir Edward” she said holding out her hand

“Thank you ma’am” said Edward as he took it

“We are sure you will represent us abroad most excellently” she said

“I will endeavour to do all I can for you and the British people ma’am” said Edward

“And your wife is here I believe?” said the Queen “Lord Alfred find Lady Florence for me please”

“Of course ma’am” said Alfred with another look up at Edward through his eye lashes

Alfred approached Florence who was standing with her father, some considerable distance between them
“Lady Florence, your Lordship!” Alfred bowed “the Queen requests your presence” he acknowledged the Marques briefly and held out his arm for Florence to take, trying not to flinch as she touched him.

“You must be very proud” said Alfred neutrally to Florence as they walked, the Marques trailing sullenly unacknowledged behind them.

“I am” said Florence “I am delighted for him, I just wish” she hesitated wondering whether to go on but this was Lord Alfred, Edward’s dearest friend “he does not seem happy Lord Alfred. The appointment is an honour as is the knighthood and yet Edward seems” she shrugged “melancholy about it all”

Alfred was saved from answering by their arrival to where the Queen and Prince were talking with Edward.

“Ah Lady Florence” said the Queen as Florence curtseyed somewhat clumsily “we are so pleased you could be here too”

“Edward was unsure whether I could be seen in public like this ma’am” said Florence “but I was determined. Such an honour for us Your Majesty, I would not miss it for the world”

“I would not have allowed her to come” put in the Marques “women should not be out at such times”

“Is that so your lordship?” said the Queen fire flashing in her eyes; Alfred and Edward exchanged a look, they knew that expression

“I am an old fashioned man Your Majesty” said the Marques firmly

“Indeed” said the Queen dismissively “and how will you travel to St Petersburg Sir Edward?” she said turning her attention back to Edward “the weather must be quite dreadful at this time of year”

“Mostly by ship ma’am” said Edward “though at this time of year, the sea may well be frozen in which case we will take to sleds I believe”

“Goodness it sounds rather dangerous!” said the Queen

“Indeed it is ma’am” the Marques butted in with a cruel smile at Edward “the sea voyage is rather perilous but on land one must confront dark forests replete with bears and wolves as well as bands of brigands as well as the weather and the terrain”

Florence gave a little scream “Papa! Do not say that!”

“Oh but it is true! I would not wish to take my chances on such a journey without an armed escort” said the Marques relentlessly

“well then that is what sir Edward shall have” said the Queen thoroughly tired of the Marques and his behaviour “Lord Alfred I am sure you would not mind escorting sir Edward to St Petersburg? You could call on the Grand Duke Alexander, I believe he met with your favour last time he were here” and she twinkled at him

“ma’am” Alfred could not restrain a grin creeping across his face “if that is your command”

“It is” said the Queen “Sir Edward must arrive safely in one piece and I am sure we can spare you to accompany him along with a few of the household guards. If o course that meets with your approval
Edward had his hands clasped behind his back, fists squeezing together to keep his emotions in check.

“Your majesty is most gracious to give me such consideration” he said politely ignoring the thunderous look on the Marques’ face.

“Surely ma’am lord Alfred is needed here” said the Marques.

The Queen looked at him coldly “you have our permission to withdraw Marques”.

Florence looked down full of shame for her father at the Queen’s tone.

The Marques look about to argue but feeling eyes burning into his back from the courtiers managed to remember to bow and back away from the Queen before tuning on his heel and leaving.

“I am sure your father would wish to great you sir Edward” said Alfred into the silence that followed “and lady Florence also”.

“Yes indeed” said Edward grateful for Alfred’s diplomatic intervention.

“Edward if you do not mind I would like to sit for a moment” said Florence; her father’s behaviour had left her feeling sick and embarrassed.

“Of course” said Edward “lean on me my dear” and he took Florence’s arm and escorted her over to a small plush sofa followed by Alfred.

“Wait here” he said “I shall be back”.

“Of course Edward” said Florence taking out her fan.

Alfred and Edward bowed to her and out of the corner of his eye; Alfred could see Septimus start to make his way over to her.

“Sir Edward” whispered Alfred as they slowly traversed the room “oh how I love the sound of that”.

Edward looked at him “I believe I love hearing it more on your lips than on anyone’s”.

Alfred smiled at him “and it seems you need to be escorted to Russia Edward, well you know my sword is always at your disposal” and he winked.

Edward’s cheeks tinged red at the meaning behind Alfred’s words “you are incorrigible” he murmured “but knowing we have extra time together makes me the happiest man on earth”.

Alfred smiled at him “me also” he said.

They shared a look and then Edward frowned “Alfred what did the Queen mean about the Grand Duke?”

Alfred grinned at him “another time Edward” he said.

“but…” began Edward his mind beginning to whir “Alfred? Did you?”

Alfred smiled at him “here is your father Sir Edward” he said as Charles came towards them.
“but….but” Edward was already thinking *things*

Alfred whispered to him “Russians are *very* handsome you know but I prefer those of Scottish stock” and he smiled
Edward explains to Blair that he is leaving, Alfred and Edward start their journey to Russia and Edward and Florence talk and so off they go to Russia.....le sigh, this was sad to write "snows" are a traditional full rigged manoeuvrable ship used mostly for trade

Edward leaned over the railing of the ship and stared thoughtfully into the sea; he had to admit if it wasn’t for the fact he missed Blair so much, he was having one of the happiest times of his life.

Saying goodbye to her had been heartbreaking. They had decided to tell her in advance of his going but that had possibly been a mistake, if not for her then definitely for him. He had sat with her on his lap in the nursery and got out a map “Papa has to go away for a little while” he said “to Russia! Look at where it is”, and he had pointed to it “and look where we are”

Blair peered closely at the page and jabbed at it with her finger “Wussia” she repeated “Yes, and here is England where we live” and he pushed her finger gently over “see how far it is” “further than uncle Alfred’s?” asked Blair

Edward bit his lip at the twinge in his heart “much further” he said quietly “further even than Grandpapa Lothain’s house in Scotland. You remember Scotland where Mama and Papa come from?” and he pointed on the map “see it is much closer to here than Russia is?”

“will you be back in time to read me story papa?” asked Blair still peering at the map. “no” choked Edward “it is too far away”

“Oh” Blair frowned, she loved to hear Papa reading to her, and then her face cleared, and she smiled “then I come too” she said “you read to me”

Edward buried his face in her hair to hide the tears pooling in his eyes, how he hated Lothian for doing this to him, parting him from his darling girl “you have to say here and look after mama” he said making a super human effort to pull himself
“together “otherwise she will be all alone”

“but who look after papa?” she asked “I know, you take Charlotte”

she climbed down off his knee and toddled over to where her dolls were, picking out Charlotte who she’d named after Alfred’s mother

“Charlotte look after you”

Edward closed his eyes fruitlessly to try and stop the tears; he picked up Blair and held her against him and she slid her arms around his neck

“don’t worry papa” she said “Blair is here”

Since then she had followed him around whenever he was at home asking questions about “wussia”, helping him pack and gravely telling Florence that Charlotte needed a new warm coat because it was very cold in wussia.

The ship he and Alfred were travelling on, a traditional rigged “snow” had a small crew, and he and Alfred, and the handful of soldiers travelling with them were left very much to their own devices. Accommodation was not exactly luxurious, and he and Alfred shared a cabin of the same standard as the Captain. They ate with their meals with the Captain and the Officers but other than that they were free to do as they pleased. They had never been able to spend so much time together, more or less alone and it was like a dream come true.

Edward had brought a large number of briefing documents and reports with him kindly supplied by Alexi and during the day, he busied himself with those. Strangely because he knew he and Alfred had time to be together, he found he could enjoy sitting peacefully with him as he worked. Alfred would read or draw, while he made notes sometimes asking Alfred for his view on a particular piece of information. Later they would take a turn about the deck, talking of this and that; people they knew, Alfred’s family, Edward’s parents, matters on the continent, Blair, anything except the separation they knew was coming. After dinner, they would stay talking or playing cards with the officers for a little while before retiring to their cabin for the night.

Ah the nights; thinking of them brought heat to Edward’s body. Their cabin was very small and the beds even smaller, but they made the best of it, pressed up together. One thing was that surrounded by so many people, they were forced to be very quiet, something which Alfred found very difficult and Edward had to admit that he may have deliberately done those things to him which he knew induced a lot of noise in Alfred. He had a sudden flash of Alfred’s blue eyes suffused with lust and pleading as Edward had touched him in a particular way, biting his lip fiercely to keep his moans in while Edward grinned devilishly at him.

“penny for them Edward?” said Alfred coming to stand beside him

Edward turned and smiled at him

“how are the men?” he asked

Alfred shrugged, “as well as can be expected given the cramped conditions and boredom. At least it’s not too long a voyage and so far, the weather has been kind”

Edward nodded fervently, hoping it stayed kind. It had taken a few days to get his sea legs and the first 24 hours had been miserable in the extreme as he had been repeatedly sick, apologising to
Alfred as he vomited. Alfred had stroked his hair, emptied bowls and brought him water, eventually tucking him up into bed.

“you would make a wonderful wife Alfred” he’d croaked trying to joke, shamefaced at the state Alfred was seeing him in

Alfred laughed “well I must confess this wasn’t quite how I imagined our first night on board, I am just glad I am here to take care of you”

Edward fumbled for his hand and grasped it “so am I” he said

Alfred held it tightly, absurdly wanting all of a sudden to say to Edward that they should get married but what a foolish notion! Edward was already married and anyway two men could not marry, it was simply his mind unhelpfully going to places that it shouldn’t.

However, despite the initial sea sickness if it were up to Edward, the voyage would go on and on. Being on the ship, he felt suspended in time, safe from the outside world, the only thing lacking was Blair.

He shivered, although the sea was calm, it was getting chiller the further north they sailed, he really should wear the muffler Florence had made for him. Their parting had been unexpectedly gentle; he sensed they were making extra efforts to be kind to each other which went beyond the knowledge that to the world at least they were a devoted couple soon to be parted.

He had had lunch with Alfred’s parents, Alexi and Alfred the day before he left. Charlotte and Henry had promised they would keep watch over Florence and Blair

“Do not worry Edward” said Henry “they will be fine even if we have to move them in here with us to be sure”

Charlotte laughed “I am sure it will not come to that” and patted Edward’s hand “do not worry dear Edward, they will be quite safe”

Alexi had been wistful talking of his homeland

“I miss it” he said “the people, the space, even the snow which reminds me Edward I have something for you” and he reached into his pocket pulling out a small silver flask “make sure you fill this with vodka and carry it with you” he said “it will keep out the cold like nothing else”

“vodka?” said Edward taking the flask and sniffing it cautiously before taking a sip “good lord” he said coughing “it brings warmth to your veins”

“it does” said Alexi and he paused “it was Grigori’s” he said softly “but I would like you to have it”

Edward clasped his hand “I shall take good care of it” he said

That night, he and Florence had had dinner together and sat up late talking.

“I am sorry I have to leave you” said Edward and he meant it, he really did not want Florence, Blair and his unborn child here without his protection.

“you have no choice Edward” said Florence quietly “I understand that. If it were not for the baby,
we could come too but as it is….” and she spread her hands expansively over her stomach “this little
one grows apace, and we will all join you as soon as we can”

Edward smiled softly at her and rising, came to sit next to her

“may I?” he asked

Florence smiled at him feeling sad that he felt he needed to ask

“of course, you may Edward” she said, and Edward rested his hand gently on her stomach and then
lent down to listen

“it is hiccupping again” and he laughed happily “it is so delightful to hear it”

Florence laughed “and I prefer the hiccupping to the kicks, I swear this one moves around far more
than Blair even did, I seem to fill little feet pressing everywhere”

Edward resumed his normal position

“Henry and Charlotte will keep an eye on you” he said

“I do not need keeping ‘an eye on’ Edward” she said shaking her head at him with a smile “I am
hardly likely to do anything more dangerous than a drive in the park”

“humour me my dear” said Edward “it puts my mind at ease to know they are here”

“I know” said Florence and then she hesitated “tomorrow Edward, Blair…. I think it best if you say
goodbye quickly and go, if not for her sake than for yours”

Edward nodded his eyes filling with tears

“she does not understand” he said thickly “not really”

“no” said Florence

“and I am sorry that you will be the one to have to deal with it” said Edward taking her hand and
squeezing it “I know it will not be easy”

“it is what it is” said Florence squeezing his hand in return “I am more worried about you and how
you will miss her”

Edward heaved a sigh “more than I can say” he said, “I never realised I would feel like this about her
Florence, that she would mean everything, tell me, do all fathers feel like this?”

Florence’s eyes shadowed “I do not believe so Edward” she said, and he realised at once she was
thinking of her own father

“Your father” he began but Florence held up her hand

“please Edward, do not continue”, she said; she did not want to start bawling in front of Edward
wondering why the father who had seemed to love her so much once had become a man she barely
knew.

Edward rather clumsily put his arm around her, and she leant her head on his shoulder. Once upon a
time she would have given anything to have Edward to hold her to him like this; her heart had raced
at the very thought of it but now she could enjoy the warmth and security of his body without in
anyway desiring it anymore. It was so much easier this way though she wondered when she woke at night, where did Edward find his solace? With another woman? Maybe but she instinctively doubted it now, she’d never seen Edward so much as look at another woman; with alcohol? She’d never seen him drunk; perhaps she mused his work gave him all he needed, his work, his friends and fatherhood. However, she could not quite believe that either. What was it that gave Edward that calmness? she wondered, that sense of serenity? even in the midst of the deepest crisis, there was always a part of him veiled from her where he retreated and seemed to draw strength to face the world. She wondered if perhaps one day she would find out what it was.
**An unexpected change of plan**

Chapter Summary

Bad weather means Alfred and Edward are forced to divert to Tallinn and travel in a rather different way

Chapter Notes

Chapter 80!!! Thank you so much to everyone who has stuck with me and continued to read my ever more feverish imaginings!

The Gulf of Finland is often impassable by ice even as late in the year as March. A Vozok is a covered sled drawn by horses and was the main mode of transport in the winter for the upper classes - this is a rather ornate ceremonial one but you get the idea https://armoury-chamber.kreml.ru/?cmd=00500000000000000110000000000000000000&cmdex=419000AF63BA70000000

horses were traditionally brought by ship with soldiers but the mortality rate for them was very high and they often arrived sick and weak

in 1849 Estonia was part of Russia and so Tallinn had a Consulate rather than an embassy - embassy's are generally only in capital cities. George McCartney was a real diplomatic figure though he lived later and was not based in Tallinn but Kashgar https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/George_Macartney_(British_consul)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“frozen?” Edward looked askance at the captain “frozen solid?”

The captain nodded “aye it’s not unknown at this time of the year sir, though I had hoped we might be lucky”

Edward shivered and pulled his coat more closely around him to cut out the biting wind

“what does that mean?” asked Alfred

“we’ll have to put in at Tallinn my lord” said the Captain “and you can go overland from there. It will take approximately a week depending on the conditions. I’m so sorry that this will add extra time to your journey”

Edward and Alfred did their best to look disgruntled, but a quick shared glance showed that inside they were delighted.

“thank you, Captain,” said Edward “Lord Alfred and I need to discuss arrangements”

The captain nodded “aye, I will leave you to it then” and he departed
“I think the cabin Drummond, don’t you?” said Alfred aware of listening crew ears “out of this
damnably cold wind”

Edward nodded “I agree lord Alfred” and they departed solemnly below decks

Once in the cabin, Edward carefully locked the door and then beaming, wrapped his arms around
Alfred

“extra time to the journey” he mimicked with a grin “Alfred how will we cope?”

Alfred laughed “I can’t imagine” and then he raised his face for a kiss

“more kisses?” said Edward pulling out of reach “surely you cannot need more?”

“always” said Alfred craning forward “do not deny me Edward….”

“Well as you ask so nicely” replied Edward dipping his head down, trying to shut out thoughts of
how he was supposed to live without him.

Alfred’s hands began to wander below Edward’s waist and laughing Edward broke the kiss

“I believe we need to plan first my love” he said

“surely that can wait” said Alfred as his hands began to drift down again

“You are incorrigible” said Edward with an affectionate smile grabbing hold of Alfred’s hands and
moving them firmly away “really Alfred we need to make plans, this throws everything into a
confusion”

Alfred sighed “very well Edward, I know you wont settle until everything is organised in your head”

Edward grinned “you know me too well”

And giving Alfred one last kiss, he moved away to the tiny table in the cabin and sat down, pulling a
sheet of paper towards him

Alfred sat on the bed and watched fondly as Edward began to methodically write a list muttering
under his breath

“write to the ambassador first…tell them of delay…oh but we will need a place to stay…..is there a
consulate in Tallinn…….carriage? sled?”

“you know I adore you, don’t you?” said Alfred suddenly as Edward contented to scribble

Edward looked up and smiled softly at him “I do know” he said

“good” said Alfred feeling he was possibly being slightly ridiculous but sitting there watching
Edward writing, thinking of all the small intimacies they had been able to share over the voyage;
watching each other shave, groping in the dark to light candles, being able to say goodnight AND
good morning every day, his heart stung with pain at the thought that it must come to an end and not
only that, he would not see Edward for months, maybe even years. How would he bear it?

When the ship put into Port, Alfred and Edward made their way through the snow to the British
consulate, leaving the men behind to secure all the baggage under the watchful eye of the captain.
“Sir Edward Drummond, Lord Alfred Paget” said Edward to the young clerk at the desk in the vestibule “I need to speak with the Consul at once”

“Sir Edward!” said the clerk “we wondered if you would need to stop here being as the Gulf is impassable. I will find him for you” he rang the bell and a maid appeared; the clerk spoke to her in Russian and she bobbed a curtsey “please go into the sitting room, Irina will bring you tea”

Edward and Alfred went into a spacious room with a large fire

“thank heavens for this” said Edward going over to it “and I thought Scotland could be chilly! Alfred how am I going to get used to this cold?”

“I believe Alexi said Vodka was the answer” laughed Alfred

“that is as may be” said Edward “but I can hardly sip Vodka all day, I will be good for nothing by luncheon, let alone later”

“you will get used to it Edward” said Alfred gently

Edward looked down and took a breath; this would be his new life he thought, and he would have to get used to it

“Did you understand what the clerk said?” asked Alfred to change the subject at the woebegone look on Edward’s face

“most of it” replied Edward “thank goodness for Alexi’s lessons”

Alfred smiled “once again he proves he is the truest of friends”

“truest and most patient” replied Edward “I do not believe I am a natural scholar of languages”

“Russian is very challenging Edward and besides, French is the language of the court and that you do speak”

“alas not with your fluency Alfred” said Edward with a sigh as he thought of Alfred’s lilting melodic pronunciation of the language

“nonsense” said Alfred robustly “your French is more than adequate but if you are still concerned, I am happy to give you more practice. My oral skills have been highly praised” and he smirked at Edward

It was on the tip of Edward’s tongue to reply when the door opened, and the Consul appeared

“Sir Edward?” he came over to shake his hand “Lord Alfred, I am George McCartney Her Majesty’s consul in Tallinn. What bad luck the Gulf is still frozen. Still do not worry sir, we will arrange transport to St Petersburg and in the meantime, you must stay here”

“that is most kind” said Edward “and our men? We have brought a handful of soldiers with us for protection enroute”

“a wise move sir I must say” said Mr McCartney “the road to St Petersburg is rather treacherous passing through miles of forest and well, the people are very poor. Do not worry we will find quarters for the men too”

“and horses” said Alfred “we need horses”
Usually horses were shipped over but Alfred abhorred this practice. The poor beasts often died enroute and if they didn’t were traumatised and weak, no good to anyone. Far better to purchase horses on arrival.

Mr McCartney nodded “we will do all that is required, and now Sir Edward, Lord Alfred I will bid you good day as I have much to arrange. Perhaps you would like to write to Baron Bloomfield and advise him of the situation and change of plans”

“I will do so” said Edward

“there are writing materials in the desk sir” Mr McCartney gestured to the bureau in the corner of the room and left the room

At Dinner 2 days later

“It is roughly 230 miles to St Petersburg” said Mr McCartney, “it is a well-used road, well as ‘well used’ as roads are here”

Seeing their questioning looks he continued

“Russia does not have the density of population that England does, people are scattered over a very wide area and of course serfs cannot travel freely beyond their masters land. At this time of year, traffic will be minimal. Fortunately, the road has been beaten down somewhat and the snow on it should be relatively shallow, provided there are not further heavy falls, the journey should take a week but if there are more blizzards, well gentleman I have made sure plenty of food and additional warm clothing has been packed into the baggage sled”

“My main concern is the safety of Sir Edward” said Alfred “tell me, how dangerous is the road?

Sir George took a sip of wine

“it is the forest areas mainly but” he gave a half smile “most of it IS forest. Stick to the road, keep the torches lit and move as fast as you can. With luck the only thing you have to worry about it will be wolves and not brigands”

After port and cigars, they retired upstairs; Edward waited until he was sure everyone was asleep before creeping across the landing to Alfred’s room.

He hated that they had to sleep separately again. He had become so used to sharing a bed with Alfred; curling around him in the night, his face the first thing he saw in the morning. Being forced back into how things used to be hurt deeply and only foreshadowed what was to come.

Alfred was sitting up waiting for him, neither of them were in their night clothes. If they were taken unawares it had to look as if they were discussing the matters of the day not tumbling into bed with each other

“Alfred” Edward immediately seized him in his arms and pressed kisses to his lips

Alfred gave a little sigh and wriggled closer into him trying as if he could imprint the feel of Edward’s arms around him into his mind to use when they would no longer be there.

“I miss you” mumbled Edward between kisses
“I am right here my love” said Alfred

“you know what I mean Alfred, I miss the freedom we had on the ship, now we are back to being stifled and hiding and soon, soon, you’ll be gone, and I’ll be here alone”

Alfred sighed inwardly; he had expected that the closer they came to the journey’s end; the more Edward would start to be overcome by the situation. He must try to soothe him and above all not let Edward see his true feelings, that he too was devastated at the turn of events. It would do no good for them both to crumple with emotion

“I am still here and we are still together my love and will be for many days yet”

“days” Edward waved his hands “I face weeks Alfred! Months! Alone! What will I do?”

“you will bear them Edward, as will I” said Alfred “for Blair’s sake and for mine you will bear them”

Edward closed his eyes and burying his face in Alfred’s shoulder held him close again

“I know” he said “I will bear them, but I wish I did not have to”

“so, do I my love” said Alfred pulling him in tighter “so do I”

The next day

“we are to travel in this?” Edward eyed the conveyance in astonishment

“it’s called a vozok” said Mr McCartney “it is the standard transport of the aristocracy against the winter elements sir”

“I think it looks rather splendid sir Edward” said Alfred with a smile “I had a sled as a child but nothing like this!”

“they are the best thing for travelling Sir Edward” said Mr McCartney “at this time of year with all the snow, a carriage is no good and with all your baggage, you cannot travel solely on horseback”

Alfred walked around it “looks very snug” he said, “you’ll be as warm as toast Sir Edward see?” and he opened the door “try it out”

Edward climbed in “why it is very comfortable” he said

“indeed, it is” said Mr McCartney “now if you’ll excuse me, I need to speak with the driver” and he indicated a stocky middle-aged man dressed in a heavy coat standing over in the corner of the yard, hat in hand.

“we shall be as warm as toast you mean Alfred” said Edward with a smile

Alfred looked at him in surprise “no Edward, I shall not be travelling inside with you”

“but…” Edwards mouth dropped open “of course you will Alfred”

“my job here is to keep you safe, I cannot do that from inside there”

and he turned and swung himself up onto the horse Mr McCartney had procured for him as the
soldiers that were to complete the escort trotted up

"I insist you get inside Lord Alfred" said Edward, aware of the presence of the soldiers; really, he thought as if he would sit cosily inside the sled whilst Alfred was outside in the snow

“I am here to see you get safely to St Petersburg sir Edward, I cannot do that from inside a sled” responded Alfred with a glance at the soldiers

"then I am getting out" said Edward firmly

"Sir Edward I must insist you stay inside” said Alfred

Edward began to climb out and Alfred leant down from his horse whispering "stay inside you ridiculous gorgeous man, how can I keep you safe when I’m half worried you will fall from your horse and half that you will freeze?"

Edward looked at him rebelliously “I can ride too” he said

“I mean it” said Alfred softly “do not make me lock you in there. You are too precious to me to risk any hurt, so please just do as I ask”

They locked gazes and then Edward sat back with a sigh “very well” he muttered “but you will come inside here and warm up when we stop”

“I promise too” said Alfred with a grin “believe me, I am not especially keen to be out here in the cold but I don’t trust anyone but myself to keep you from harm”

Edward nodded grudgingly “very well” he said

“good” said Alfred and then he called to the men

“you there, in front, you two behind the baggage sled, you two behind sir Edward’s sled, you ride to the left, I shall be on the right”

The driver took up his position and shook the reigns, the horse trotted obediently forward and the Vozok began to move, slowly at first and then the hiss of the runners gathered speed as they moved forward.

Chapter End Notes

Next chapter - meanwhile back in England...
Dinner a deux

Chapter Summary

Blair reacts to Edward's absence and Florence and Septimus have dinner and discuss their relationship

Chapter Notes

This is a short entirely Flotimus chapter with some bonus Blair cuteness, apologies if you're already going "bah im here for the drumfred" but it sets up some plot lines and we're back to the boys in the next chapter :)

Florence sighed as she came into the nursery; Blair was once again sat on the floor with her dolls whilst wearing Edward’s spare top hat which was far too big for her and consequently slid down to hide the whole of her face. Underneath it she was talking animatedly to her “papa” doll which Florence had given her in an attempt to console her after Edward’s departure. As they had both thought, she hadn’t really understood where Edward had gone, or even that he was gone and would not be back for a long time, and so for the first week after he had left, she sat looking out of her window or running downstairs every time, the door bell sounded thinking it was him. Florence had spent an enormous amount of time drying Blair’s tears when she realised it wasn’t her papa, and then sitting with her with the map and explaining again where he was. Three weeks on and she had stopped sitting by the window or running to the door; instead she spent her time wearing Edward’s hat and talking to her papa doll, telling it what she was doing and trying to feed it. Florence had tried in vain to get her to take the hat off, but she refused except at mealtimes and bedtimes where she insisted it be kept next to the bed. Charlotte had told her not to worry

“really my dear, children get these strange fancies! I remember Septimus had a time where he refused to wear any clothes at all except his shoes and Alfred would spend hours pretending to be a horse, we even had to put his bed in the stables for a while. She is just missing her papa a lot”

‘yes’ thought Florence ‘yes she is, unlike me’ she thought guilty

Florence’s feelings on the matter of Edward’s absence were very complicated. She tried hard not to blame him for leaving; it wasn’t as if he had a choice and she had supported him, and in reality, as she well knew, it was the effect on Blair that made her angry. Blair was much too young to understand, and she missed Edward so much, it had almost broken Florence’s heart to see her eager face running to the door thinking it was Edward, only to turn away disappointed time and again. She however, found his absence an unexpected relief; the atmosphere that lay on the house, of little lies and hidden secrets was gone. She no longer had to pretend that all was well, and she was a dutiful wife. It wasn’t that she didn’t miss him at all; now he was gone she found she felt the loss of his eager boyish smile, his soothing voice and the rooms were emptier without his large frame filling them, but she felt more at peace than she could remember feeling for a long time.
And of course, she was now free to see Septimus, well as free as any married woman could be to see a man unchaperoned.

Septimus could not really call at the house without prior arrangement and although she could go to Uxbridge House more freely, she would usually take Blair and would be under the watchful eye of Henry and Charlotte. However, occasionally an opportunity, just like today, would present itself. Charlotte had sent a note asking if they might take Blair to London Zoo to cheer her up and then have her spend the night at Uxbridge House. She had asked Florence to accompany them but Florence feeling rather guilty had pleaded fatigue and then sent a note to Septimus asking if he might call. He had replied saying that he could, and she had then gone through the elaborate charade of telling the servants to expect guests as Sir and Lady Stanhope would be dining with them along with Septimus Paget. She would then of course at the last minute say the Stanhope’s were not coming leaving she and Septimus alone. She set her plan in motion and Septimus duly arrived for dinner at 7pm.

“Lady Drummond how charming you look” he said bowing over her hand

“why thank you Lord Septimus. I am afraid that Sir and Lady Stanhope have sent last minute apologies”

“oh, what a terrible shame, I heard he’d acquired some Etruscan antiques I wanted to discuss with him”

“I only hope you will not find me too dull company”

“of course, I will not”

And on they went making small talk until the servants brought coffee and withdrew

As soon as he was sure they were alone, Septimus clasped Florence’s hand; they were dining a deux and she’d had the table set so that Septimus was at the head of the table and she was on his right.

“I have missed you” he said, and he raised her hand to his lips kissing each of her fingers in turn looking at her over the top of them, his brown eyes wide and soft

“and I you” she said smiling at him

They both sighed and stared at each other for a few moments before Septimus moved closer, reaching out his hand to stroke her face

“I feel I need to imprint your face on my mind” he said “every time I see you, it’s as if I have never seen you before”

“never seen me before?” said Florence taken aback

“no…damn I lose my way with words when I am with you Florence, it is as if I am seeing you for the first time every time” and he smiled “your beauty happens to me anew every time”

Florence blushed and looked down, she still could not get used to comments like this. The most Edward ever said to her was that she looked charming, he never complimented her on her looks. She shifted uneasily as she thought of Edward and then winced as a combination of shifting baby and ever straining corset jabbed at her stomach
“Florence, are you well?” asked Septimus concerned, as he continued to hold her hand

“just the baby” she said “letting me know they are there”

Septimus smiled “wanting their mama’s attention”

“yes” she rubbed her neck “this week it has wanted a lot of attention” she said, and her head drooped.

“you seem fatigued Florence” said Septimus “perhaps I should leave so you can rest”

“No please do not go” said Florence “we have so little time, it is not so much fatigue as aching. I feel every part of me is tight as a bowstring”

“ah” said Septimus “then perhaps I can offer some help?”

He rose and standing behind her gently placed his hands on her shoulders. He began to press down lightly on her skin and rub his thumbs in a circular motion.

“mmmmmmm” Florence bit her lip, the soft pressure felt amazing as Septimus softly but firmly worked his way across her neck and shoulders

“How does that feel?” he murmured

“wonderful” she said breathlessly partly from the tightness of her corset and partly because Septimus was now starting to pepper kisses along her shoulders following where his hands had been. She leant her head back against him and closed her eyes as he continued to massage her shoulders and her neck.

“I wish you could stay” she said

“I wish that too” said Septimus dropping a kiss on the top of her head “I do not like to think of you alone here”

“I am hardly alone” said Florence with a smile as he leant down and wrapped his arms around her “I feel I have a whole army of people living here”

“you know what I mean” said Septimus “without a husband or father to protect you”

Florence laughed shortly “I think I can manage quite well without either of them thank you”

“come now” said Septimus hardly believing he was about to defend Edward “I hardly feel your husband and your father are on the same level. Mr Drummond is at heart a good man, just trying to do his best under difficult circumstances whereas your father” he stopped realising he had already said far too much as Florence stiffened and moved out of the circle of his arms to stand up

“What difficult circumstances?” she said, “and what do you mean about my father and Edward not being on the same level?”

Septimus flailed wildly in his head for something to say “I just meant it is difficult for Edward having to go away” he said “knowing he is leaving you and Blair behind, but that he cannot disobey the Queen”

“hmmmm” said Florence not looking terribly convinced and feeling that she really really did not want to discuss Edward with Septimus “and my father?”
“I spoke without thinking Florence” said Septimus “really, pay it no mind”

Florence looked at him, her eyes narrow

“is there something you are not telling me Septimus?”

“no, no, not at all” he said “I know nothing in your fathers’ affairs that gives me cause for concern” which wasn’t he said to himself technically a lie, they didn’t yet know what secrets Lothian had hidden but they were going to find out.

Florence sighed and shook her head “I am sorry” she said “I am just out of sorts worrying about Blair and of course what will happen when the baby is born” she paused and then she blurted out “Septimus I do not want to go to Russia, I do not want to leave you or your parents and uproot Blair from all she has known. It is not fair, Edward has been appointed not I and yet my life must be turned upside down as well”

There she had said it! expressed the thoughts she had been supressing ever since she had first read the letter from Queen, and she felt the tears come into her eyes

“I do not want you to go to Russia” he said thickly “Florence…….” and he held out his arms and she came to him, enfolding herself in his arms

“why must everything be so difficult” she wept “why did I not meet you first? Before Edward”

“ah you might not have liked me then” said Septimus stroking her hair away from her damp cheeks “I was young and rather foolish” and he kissed her

She laughed through her tears “we all were Septimus. I wish things were different, I wish this was your child I carried”

“I wish that to” said Septimus “Florence…” he took a deep breath “have you considered ever divorce?”

Florence buried her face in his shoulder laughing wildly “divorce? Are you insane Septimus? Edward would have to divorce me for I have no grounds to divorce him! He treats me well, provides for Blair and me, I have carte blanche to do what I like at home, to socialise with whom I chose, he is the perfect husband”

“he does not love you though” said Septimus “not like I love you”

“oh love” Florence shook her head “as if love matters in a modern marriage”

“how can you say that Florence?” asked Septimus “when you have been with my parents and seen the Queen and the Prince, it most assuredly does matter and you should not have to be without it”

“It is not grounds for divorce Septimus” she said tiredly

“what if he were to know about you and me?” asked Septimus quietly “that would be grounds”

“Don’t you dare Septimus Paget” said Florence sprung back “don’t you DARE let Edward know about us”

“I was not going too” began Septimus feebly in the face of her anger

“And so, you will not! I am not your mother, I do not have her strength to face down the world” she collapsed suddenly into a chair “I do not have it” she whispered
“Florence” Septimus knelt at her side and took her hands “you have my promise I will say nothing to Edward of what is between us, nothing, I swear it. Now please do not upset yourself so it is bad for the baby”

She nodded wearily “I know” she said “please forgive me”

He nodded and took her in his arms again “we will find a way” he said holding her tightly “I promise, we will find a way”
Maria's drawing room

Chapter Summary

Edward meets Maria, receives news of Alfred and recalls their journey to St Petersburg

Chapter Notes

thank you to everyone for all the kudos and comments, I cant believe so many of you are still reading my endless ramblings!

I assume everyone has done the lemon juice thing right? but if not, try it :D

special curls reference for the saltmine :D

Alfred, Lord Tennyson published In Memorium for his friend Arthur Henry Hallam in 1850 though he wrote it when Hallam died suddenly in 1833

St Petersburg 1850

Edward was in an agony of impatience for Thursday to come so he could call on Alexi’s sister the Contessa. One of the greatest difficulties of being separated from Alfred and at a foreign court was that he could not talk about him. He could of course mention his name in passing but he could not do what he wanted to do, seize people by the coat and shout at them about Alfred’s manifold perfections. Occasionally there would be a visitor from London who had been at court who might mention Alfred as having been present at such and such an occasion, and at those times Edward would fall on them like a starving man desperate to hear even the tiniest thing about his beloved. there were many many times when he thought of confessing all to Florence purely for the relief of telling someone he knew that would be cruel for she had done nothing, and whatever else he was, he thought, he was not a cruel man. Thursday then represented to him the prospect of a small window opening to let light into the dark place in which he lived.

The clock had never crept forward so slowly as it did that Thursday but eventually it was 2.45 and he could leave to go the Contessa’s apartments. When he arrived, he was shown into the drawing room and Maria rose to meet him

“sir Edward” she said extending her hand

“Contessa” Edward bowed and kissed it

“please sit” she said

Edward arranged himself bolt upright on the sofa, his heart pounding

“tea?” she asked

Edward shook his head; waiting for a servant to bring it would only cut into the time he had to hear
about Alfred

Maria smiled softly at him “I sense you would prefer to talk straight away” she said

Edward nodded, feeling suddenly tearful; at last after all these months he would have proper news of Alfred. Oh, he had had letters but after what had happened with the Marques and even allowing for the diplomatic bag, they were circumspect in what they said and though he poured over them reading between the lines, they gave little hint as to what was really going on. Now at last he would have real news.

“h... how is he?” he croaked out “lord Alfred I mean”

“I know who you meant sir Edward” said Maria gently “and I must ask you first do you want honesty from me or to feel better? They may not always be the same thing”

A cold feeling of dread curled in Edward’s stomach, ‘what did she mean?’

“honesty” he whispered

“he is not well sir Edward”

Edward looked at her with fear in his eyes

“how so?” he asked

Maria sighed “you must understand that I did not know him before but Alexi tells me he was” she paused “charming, kind, merry, a good friend to all but now he is morose, withdrawn, brooding although he is” and she laughed sounding a trifle embarrassed “the most beautiful man I have ever seen”

Edward smiled despite himself “I have always thought so to” he said

“you two must be quite the sight together” said Maria and Edward blushed as Maria gazed into the distance for a few moments and then gathered herself

“tell me what has happened to him” said Edward

Maria nodded “Alexi had written often about lord Alfred and how he was and especially of his kindness to him when he first arrived. You do not know sir Edward how Alexi was after Grigori, really, I feared for him to the point he might take his own life. He was in such need of care. As they became stronger friends, he wrote of the fun you all had together, how lord Alfred’s humour would improve any occasion, of his witticisms, his support of those the court may consider dull like lady Stanhope, of how he loved to dance and his fondness for riding. I confess I came expecting to see a born courtier but the man I met was not the man Alexi had described to me”

“go on” Edward licked his lips which were suddenly dry

“the man I met was” she searched for words “like a glass statue sir Edward. He looked beautiful but he was cold and remote, his distain for what he termed to me “court frivolities” barley hidden. He held himself aloof from everyone and I felt as if he might shatter at any moment if forced to say or do more than he was. It was as if the effort of just standing upright and conversing took all the strength he had”

Edward bent forward his breath coming in gulps, ‘oh Alfred, Alfred my poor poor darling, what have I done to you’ he thought
“I managed to convey to him the need to talk to him alone and he agreed though with ill grace, at least at first. I explained to him that we were on the way to St Petersburg and that if he wished I would convey a message to you” she stopped again “I have never seen a man breakdown so hard excepting Alexi. After he had composed himself, he said he would write a letter” she paused “I have it here” and taking up her fan to Edward’s astonishment she untwisted the base that held it together and pulled out two of the spokes. Tapping them gently on the end, she reached in and pulled out a slender rolled up piece of paper from each one and handed them over

“here” she said

Edward looked at them and at her, his hand shaking as he reached out

“do you wish for privacy?” she asked

Edward nodded, unable to speak

“of course,” she said, and she retired to the far end of the room, to gaze out of the window

Edward unrolled the papers, the first was covered with Alfred’s familiar dashing handwriting, the second was blank and he frowned momentarily before diving eagerly back to the letter

“my dearest adored Edward

How I miss you! I swore I would not start like that but now I find I can write without censuring myself it is the first thing I want you to know; I miss you, I miss you, I miss you. Life without you is almost unbearable my darling. Court remains eternally frivolous, how am I expected to care about such pointless things as the latest fashion in cravats or Pam’s attest conquest when you are not here? You do not know how many times I have wanted to come to you my love, to simply stow away in the night, find a ship and come to you but I will hold strong because I know that you too must suffer as I do. Pray god that we do not have to live like this much longer and it is possible, just possible there is hope my angel.

We may have uncovered something that will allow the Matter to be resolved and for you to return. Wish us all the luck my dearest love

I know that you cannot write back freely but know that my heart holds you closely every second of every minute of every hour of every day. Kiss Blair and the twins for me for I miss them too.

Lord Tennyson has completed a most beautiful new poem and I commend it to you most especially these lines

I hold it true, whate’er befall;
I feel it, when I sorrow most;
’Tis better to have loved and lost
Than never to have loved at all

Though we have not yet lost
With all the truest love of this world and the next

Alfred

PS I imagine you looking most perplexedly at the blank paper Edward, warm it over a flame my dearest

Edward finished reading the letter, tears streaming down his face. He heard a gentle cough and a lace handkerchief was brushed against his fingers

“here” said Maria “I had a thought you might need this”

Edward took is gratefully scrubbing at his eyes

“I am sorry to be so unmanned” he choked as Maria brought him over some brandy

“it is to be expected” she said “I hope the letter has brought you some comfort though”

Edward nodded “it has” he said though his heart was almost boiling over it was so full

“tell me more of him” said Maria “I imagine you are not able to talk much of him here. I understand he accompanied you here, how was that journey?”

“longer and more complicated than expected” Edward smiled as the memories bubbled up in his mind

The road to St Petersburg 1849

Alfred dismounted and rapped on the door of the vozok

“we cannot go on sir Edward, we have to stop”

“please come inside lord Alfred while we discuss what to do”

Edward gravely opened the door and Alfred clambered inside

Edward seized him immediately and pressed kisses to his lips

“Edward” protested Alfred as best he could in between kisses “we really do need to decide what to do and….” He was silenced again by another insistent kiss and then Edward sat back with a grin

“my apologies lord Alfred, do tell me of the difficulties we face”

“well the snow” began Alfred and then he stopped as Edward’s hand began to move across his thigh, and he was pulled in for another kiss

“really Edward” said Alfred as he struggled to free his mouth “what has come over you?”

Edward raised his eyebrow, a curl already tumbling lose and began to pepper kisses along Alfred’s neck

“can’t you guess?” he breathed
“well no Edward, I’ve been in the saddle for several hours and…oh…” he trailed off “the uniform Edward?”

“the uniform Alfred” said Edward pushing him back down on the seat “you know how it affects me” and he slid on top of him and began to gently nibble his ear

“that is as maybe Edward” said Alfred fighting to control himself and trying to wriggle out from underneath him “but we need to be sensible…Edward…Edward”

Just then there was a loud rap on the door

Edward cursed and sat up, trying to smooth his curls back into place while Alfred hastily buttoned up the top of his tunic where Edward had already succeeded in undoing 2 buttons

“yes, what is it?” he called making a face at Edward who poked his tongue out at him

“the snow is getting thicker sir” it was lance corporal black “what are we to do? Press on to Narva or make for the nearest village?”

Alfred sighed and opened the door of the sled; the snow was indeed falling faster, and each flake seemed to be at least the size of a penny piece. He pulled his coat around which had become somewhat dislodged by Edward and stepped out. The sled tracks were rapidly disappearing, and the light was dimming

“How far to Narva?” he asked the driver

“at least 6 hours” he replied in heavily accented English

Alfred sighed, it was too far

“lance corporal” Alfred called over lance corporal black “take one of the men and find the nearest village, you others, clear the tracks of snow”

He heard a crunch of footsteps next to him, Edward had come to stand beside him

“it is much worse than I had thought lord Alfred” he said “I did not mean to detain you so long with our discussion “and he mutely conveyed an apology with his eyes

Alfred smiled at him “we will have time to finish it later no doubt”

Edward beamed at him

“no doubt” he said

Maria’s drawing room, St Petersburg 1850

“the road to St Petersburg is very difficult” said Maria

“it was but Alfred and I had each other and we did not mind the extra time it took” especially when once they had found sheltered in the nearest village, he had removed Alfred’s uniform slowly piece by piece and then pinned him to the bed teasing him with biting kisses and gentle caresses until Alfred was clutching at Edward moaning his name as they climbed higher and higher into bliss

Maria watched the secret smile creep into Edward’s eyes
“you have good memories” she said “and that must help”

Edward nodded “so many good memories” he said, “but there at times I fear” he bit his lip and looked at her fearfully and then he burst in a rush “I worry I will forget what he looks like”. After what had happened with the letter the Marques had found, Edward had gathered up all the letters and drawings he had and given them to Alfred for safe keeping. Alfred, he knew had then taken them to Plas Newydd and hidden them there in the old camp he had played in with his brothers as a child, there was no chance they would be found there.

Maria smiled “have you looked at the second piece of paper?” she asked

Edward shook his head, absorbed in his own memories he had forgotten

“Alfred said I needed to warm it” he said “I do not understand”

“perhaps you should try it and see what happens” she said her eyes twinkling, clearly sir Edward, dear as he was, was not yet versed in the subtler arts of diplomacy

Edward went over to the fire, held it over the flames, and then started as lines began to appear on the previously blank page. The lines and curves began to form themselves into a picture and there as if by magic was a likeness of his beloved Alfred

He looked askance at Maria who laughed

“lemon juice sir Edward” she said “it appears invisible but when you warm it” she gestured “voila, and now you have a likeness until you can see him again”

“you drew this?” said Edward

She nodded “yes, it is as you say a long journey, lord Alfred kindly allowed me to sketch him quickly so I could do it and then on the boat here I worked on this”

“but how did you know...???” Edward trailed off, how did she know that seeing this picture was balm to his soul that ached for Alfred?

“when Grigori was killed, I drew a likeness of him for Alexi, he carries it with him still I believe”

Edward shook his head “I did not know” he said quietly “I have not seen it”

Maria shook her head “no as far as I know, he shows it to no one”

In the corner of the room, the clock struck 4pm and they both glanced at it

“I think that perhaps you may need to go now sir Edward” said Maria “the salon with the Tsarina will soon finish and your wife will return”

Edward nodded “how can I ever thank you Contessa?” he asked “for bringing me this letter, this likeness, showing such kindness for someone you had never even met”

Maria shrugged smiling “I have seen a lot of cruelty in my life sir Edward” she said “I have been lucky to marry a man that loves me, and I love him, but many people are not that lucky. I believe love is the greatest thing we can encourage in each other, with more love in the world sir Edward there would be a lot less war”

Edward smiled back “you are a wise woman Contessa” he said “I believe that you are right”
“then perhaps you may suggest it to more people” she said as she tugged the rope to summon the maid to show Edward out

“goodbye sir Edward” she said loudly as the maid entered the room “do give my compliments to your wife, I shall certainly call on her as soon as I can”

Edward nodded, bowed and left the room, the letter and picture safely in his inside pocket, resting against his heart.
The longer the journey to St Petersburg went on, and the closer they got to the end of it, the more Edward became increasingly erratic and emotional. He just about maintained his façade in front of the men but when he was alone with Alfred he swung between self-pity, sadness and belligerence interspersed with frantic love making.

“Edward can I ask that you be a little gentler?” Alfred said softly as he sat up in bed pushing his hair out of his eyes; Edward had been rather vigorous to say the least.

Edward lay face down on the pillow for a few moments and then rolled onto his back breathing heavily.

“I am sorry” he said, “it’s just…Alfred” and his voice began to crack.

Alfred closed his eyes briefly and then moved over to him.

“I know my love I know” he said as Edward scrubbed at his eyes fighting back the tears.

It was ironic thought Alfred as he put his arms around Edward and held him tightly that this journey both on board ship and now were the closest, he and Edward were ever likely to get to living together as husband and well husband he supposed. The places they stayed even in the towns were rudimentary, and there was no question of a room of one’s own or often even a bed of one’s own. He and Edward always shared and the men, if they were lucky, had 2 or 3 rooms to share amongst them, and if they were unlucky, a single room or sometimes even in the stables with the horses. And so, every night just as on-board ship, they bedded down together, and it was wonderful.

Edward snuggled into him and they stayed locked together until Edward kissed him and moved out of the circle his arms to sit on the edge of the bed.

“I do not know what to do Alfred” he said bleakly.

“there is nothing to do my dearest” said Alfred gently “things are what they are Edward, you know that”.

Edward’s head dropped and Alfred knelt up behind him encircling his waist and dropping kisses on his neck.
“I miss Blair” said Edward sadly “Alfred what if she forgets about me?”

“she won’t forget her papa Edward” said Alfred “you know she will not! I mean as if” he swallowed “Florence would allow it”

“do you think so Alfred? Do you think she’ll remember me?” said Edward leaning his head back to rub his face gently against Alfred’s

“I know so” said Alfred “besides you will be back before you know it Edward and if you are not, Blair and your wife will join you here”

Edward sighed heavily and Alfred squeezed him tightly

“come along” he said “back into the bed Edward, we have another long day tomorrow”

“How much further to St Petersburg?” Alfred asked the vozok driver out of Edward’s earshot.

“about a day my lord” said the driver

“a day?” said Alfred dread creeping into his stomach, he would have to break the news to Edward that tonight in all probability would be their last night together, or Alfred paused for thought, should he? Would it perhaps be kinder to Edward not to let him know? To enjoy one last night together before they reached St Petersburg and court life closed back around them.

He was deeply worried about how Edward would cope alone especially in the first few months. It would of course be horribly difficult for him too, but he at least would be in London with his family and friends around him, people who knew the situation and sympathised but Edward? Edward would be at a foreign court with no one to turn to. Just the thought of it made his heart shred with pity and pain. He must find a way to neutralise the Marques and get Edward back home where he belonged as quickly as possible.

“lord Alfred”

Edward was leaning out of the window of the vozok

“how much further?”

Alfred made his decision quickly and went over to the door

“a while yet Sir Edward” he said quietly

“good” said Edward equally quietly beaming at him, they didn’t have to part just yet then.

Edward busied himself with papers, his heart feeling lighter. Being honest he had rather lost track of time; travelling in the vozok gave a dreamlike quality to the day. One sped over the snow to the peaceful shhhuushhh sound of the runners, they paused occasionally to eat and to rest the horses before stopping for the night. it had been a relief to let Alfred take charge; It was he who talked to the driver and discussed arrangements, keeping Edward informed of what he needed to know.

Riding alongside the vozok, Alfred tried to supress the idea that he should have been honest with Edward but, how could he? Edward seemed very close to breaking down, he deserved one last night of peace, they deserved one last night together.
“Bolshaya Izhora my lord” corporal black galloped back to Alfred “tomorrow we will…”

“thank you corporal” Alfred cut him off so Edward couldn’t hear the corporal say that tomorrow they would be at their destination “see if the lodgings secured by the consulate are ready”

Corporal black saluted “very good my lord” he said and galloped off

“sir Edward” Alfred rapped on the door, silence

“sir Edward” Alfred knocked again but there was still no response, Alfred frowned and opening the door called again “sir ed..” oh, his heart jumped, Edward was asleep, a paper still clutched in his hand. His skin was flushed pink from sleep and his dark eyelashes fluttered as he dreamed; Alfred watched as he snuffled gently and resettled himself before a gentle snore escaped his lips.

“oh Edward” whispered Alfred to himself looking at him “how will I be without you?”

Stealing himself he gently shook his arm

“sir Edward” he said “we have arrived at our next lodgings”

Edward’s eyes flickered open “Alfred” he said smiling sleepily

Alfred smiled back at him but said loudly

“we are just making sure the rooms are ready”

“oh yes the lodgings” Edward yawned, stretched and scratched his head “and food I hope”

“if you can wake up long enough” said Alfred with a grin “to eat it”

“have you ever known me not to eat?” Alfred said Edward with a laugh

“never” said Alfred smiling “but if you want anything to be left when we get inside, I suggest you hurry up”

The room they were shown to after a simple but hot dinner was small and basic but comfortable. There was a fire, wolf skin rugs on the floor and on the wooden bed, a single arm chair and a table which held a pitcher of water. The firelight flickered on the walls and candle light shuddered and guttered in the slight draft from the shuttered windows.

AS always, they put the table across the door, Russian lodgings as they learned had no locks and although it was highly unlikely, they would be interrupted, it was better not to take the risk. The room was warm, and they shed their outer clothes until they were just in the shirts, breeches and boots.

“Alfred” Edward seated himself in the arm chair and held out his arms “come here”

Alfred laughed “and there was I worrying we would have to take turns”

Edward laughed in return “I see no reason to do so you?” and he gathered Alfred to him “I think there is plenty of room for both of us” and he began to kiss him, gently at first and then faster and harder until Alfred squirmed round and sat astride his lap

“Edward” he murmured and then he began to unbutton his shirt while Edward gazed up at him, eyes
drunk with desire, as Alfred unfastened the last few buttons and pushed back the sleeves leaving Edwards chest fully exposed to his gaze

He stroked his hands down it and then pressed in for another lingering kiss

“I believe I am at a disadvantage here” panted Edward as Alfred finally pulled away biting softly on Edward’s bottom lip “your shirt sir, now please”

Smirking at him, Alfred leaned back and undid a few buttons before pulling it over his head and throwing it to one side

“now we are even Edward” he said

“indeed, we are” said Edward and enfolding Alfred in his arms, he stood up and Alfred wrapped his legs around him

“the bed I think is more comfortable” said Edward between kisses “and I feel we have a long night ahead of us”

Several l hours later

The firelight cast long shadows over the room, turning Edward’s skin rosy gold as Alfred leaned up on his elbow looking down at him

“you are so beautiful Edward” he said

Edward looked away bashfully and Alfred laughed

“all these years I have been telling you this and yet I am sure you do not believe me” he said

“how can I when I have you to compare with?” said Edward reaching up to stroke Alfred’s face “the angels up above could not look more heavenly”

They gazed at each other wordlessly

“you know the greatest happiness in my life comes from loving you Edward” said Alfred feeling that if he did not say something, he might weep at the feelings in his heart

“and mine too” said Edward softly “mine too, I do not know how I will breathe without you, let alone live Alfred”

Alfred buried his face into Edwards chest as Edward put his arms around him

“but we still have time my love” he reassured himself out loud softly stroking Alfred’s back “still time”

Alfred shook his head against his chest

“we do not” he said his voice muffled and Edward felt wetness against his skin

“Alfred” a sudden cold clutch of fear gripped Edward’s heart “what do you mean?”

Alfred raised his head, his cheeks damp with tears
“we will be in St Petersburg tomorrow” he said

tomorrow!!!” Edward’s body jerked and he stared at Alfred “but you said….”

“I know” said Alfred his voice breaking “I wanted you to have a happy night Edward, one last happy night”

“by god Alfred” Edward pushed him away and sat up “you lied to me!!” he pushed his hands through his hair, his body trembling

“I’m sorry Edward” said Alfred helplessly “I’m sorry”

“sorry”” said Edward his mind reeling “you tell me this is our last night together a few hours before dawn and you’re sorry”

He sprang up and began to pace around the room

“Edward please” said Alfred wretchedly “I wanted us to a few last peaceful hours together is that so wrong?” he went up to Edward who had stopped pacing and was leaning against the window, head bowed

Edward shuddered at Alfred’s tentative touch on his shoulder

“no” he said heaving a huge sigh “no it was not, I am sorry Alfred, I should not have shouted” and he put his arms around him “it is just, I am overwhelmed my dearest, in my head I have allowed myself to believe that perhaps this road was never ending, that we would travel but never arrive, does that make sense?”

Alfred nodded as he looked up at him “it does Edward, why would we want to arrive when it means an end to all this?”

“and now I find that not only does it have an end but that it is tomorrow” he bit his lip and tears came into his eyes “Alfred what are we to do?”

Alfred wanted to say ‘we will be strong Edward, we will survive this and be together again” but he could not, instead he broke down

“I do not know Edward” he wept “I do not know anymore”

“Alfred…” Edward was shocked, he was usually the one who was emotional, and Alfred the calmer and more rational but Alfred was sobbing like a child against him

“Alfred” Edward rocked him gently, stroking his hair, reminding him of when he would comfort Blair if she had fallen over “Alfred please do not distress yourself so”

“I cannot help it Edward” Alfred cried against him “it is not fair, we have overcome so much and to be separated after everything because of a letter, it is too much”

Edward kissed the blonde head beneath his chin and rested his cheek against the soft hair as Alfred cried, he didn’t have words to comfort him, what could he say? Oddly he who usually found tears came so easily, could not cry. Seeing Alfred like this, thinking of what was to come seemed a misery to deep for tears and so he held Alfred close and felt his heart splinter with every sob wrenched from Alfred’s throat

Eventually Alfred’s sobs were reduced to heaving breaths and then silence
“I am sorry Edward” he said at last, his voice hoarse with tears “to forget myself so”

“oh, my love” said Edward sadly “you have nothing to be sorry for’

Through gaps in the rude wooden shutters he could see dawn starting to glimmer palely in the sky; soon they would be expected to be up and about, presenting a normal face to the world. Edward rubbed his face, he was exhausted, they had barely slept

“Alfred” he said “sleep with me one last time”

“Edward, I do…. I do not feel I am in the right mind for that” said Alfred hesitantly

“no, my love _sleep_ with me” said Edward “in my arms, one last time”

Alfred smiled at him with tear dampened lashes

“yes, my love” he said “but not for one last time, it is until the next time”

They made their way slowly to the bed. Edward got in and lay on his back, his arms around Alfred who curled into his side resting his arm across his stomach, his head resting on Edwards shoulder and so they slept for one last time.
New arrivals

Chapter Summary

Edward and Florence share some time with their children and the twins birth is recalled

Chapter Notes

Historical notes

The Tsarina in 1850 was Alexandra Feodorovna formerly Charlotte of Prussia. She married Nicholas I and they had a happy marriage that produced seven surviving children. She was not interested in politics and suffered from poor health confining her interests to her children, balls, dancing (when her health permitted) and jewellery.

The Tenant of Wildfell Hall is often described as one of the first feminist novels as its heroine Helen shuts her husband out of the bedroom because of his infidelities.

Edward made his way back to his apartment in the Palace unable to keep the smile off his face. Of course, it hurt to know that Alfred was as sad as he was but far better that than his deepest fear, that Alfred would grow tired of waiting for him and simply give up.

“is her ladyship returned?” he asked the maid handing her his coat

“No sir” she bobbed a curtsey “but the twins are awake if you would like to see them” she knew how much Edward, unlike other fathers she had known, enjoyed spending time with them

“They are?” Edward beamed, he did not get as much time with the twins as he would like as they were often asleep by the time he returned from the embassy “and what about Miss Blair?”

“She is in the nursery with them sir, shall I fetch them?”

“Yes please” Edward paused “no wait, I shall go in myself”

“Very good sir”

Edward advanced towards the nursery and peered around the door

Blair was sat on the floor with the twins playing with the tiny china tea set that had been a present from the tsarina on her second birthday. She was wearing a sailor suit and her hair was in bunches. The twins were sat in front of her each with a thumb in their mouth watching her round eyed

“Charlie do you want sugar?” said Blair picking up the exquisite pink and yellow delicate sugar bowl and tongs

Charlie gazed at her out of big blue eyes and nodded
“and you Harry?”

Harry looked at Charlie and then nodded too; they always silently checked one with the other thought Edward; he found them fascinating and could happily play with them for hours watching their funny twin world which no one else could ever truly be part of.

“is there room for me?” called Edward from the door

“papa!”

Blair stood up and ran to him while Charlie and Harry beamed and rolled over on all fours to crawl over

“ooof you are getting heavy” said Edward as he picked her up pretending to stagger under the weight

Blair laughed and curled her arms round his neck “I’m a big girl papa, mama said so”

Edward felt tiny hands clutch at his trousers as a twin attached themselves to each leg clinging on and wavering as they tried to stand

Edward sighed with happiness, his darlings, he loved them all so much! He heard Florence’s voice in the vestibule and then she came in

“oh Edward” she laughed “you seem to be drowning in daughters”

“So, it would seem” said Edward with a grin

Charlie hiccupped with happiness at her mama’s voice and then promptly fell backwards onto her bottom and began to wail

“Oh dear” Florence swept her up in her arms “hush now Charlie you’ll set off Harry” but it was too late as Harry had already began to join in

“Blair darling, I need to put you down” said Edward setting her down on the floor so he could pick up the wailing Henrietta. He picked her up and smiled ruefully at Florence

“I fear we do not have enough arms at times”

“No” she said with a smile jiggling Charlotte in her arms to quieten her down “shhhhh now darling you’re not hurt”

“How was the salon?” asked Edward stroking Henrietta’s head who closed her eyes and popped her thumb into her mouth, closely followed by Charlotte who had been watching her

Florence shrugged “it was one of her highnesses better days; we admired her new jewels and discussed the children. You know she takes no interest in politics Edward”

Edward nodded “I know” he said “it is more to meet the other wives that you go”

“indeed” said Florence “it is good to see Eleanor; she and the Duc have invited us to dinner next Thursday”

“excellent” said Edward “I am glad you have another English woman to talk to Florence, I hope it helps you miss England less”
Florence’s eyes turned shadowy “I will never stop missing England” she said ‘or Septimus’ said her heart

London April 1849

Florence dragged her unwieldy body out of the chair at the sound of people coming up the stairs. How she longed for this pregnancy to be over. Although she had gone to the Palace to see Edward knighted, even she dared not flout convention by going out in public so heavily pregnant and without her husband. She had also not seen Septimus for several weeks; it would attract far too much gossip for him to visit her regularly with Edward away and there were only so many excuses she could make for his presence. Equally she could not go out to visit him and so they had to content themselves with circumspect notes although they had worked out a little code; “tea with mama” meant I miss you and “with papa at the club” meant I love you.

The footsteps got closer and then Wilhelmina Stanhope and Lady Gwendolyn entered the room to see Florence standing and leaning against the fire place

“Florence” exclaimed Gwendolyn “what on earth are you doing out of bed?”

Florence grimaced, “I am tired of laying down” she said

“nevertheless, you must” said Gwendolyn bossily “think of the baby”

“I am” said Florence has she clambered back into the bed “I think of nothing else”

Wilhelmina came and sat by the bed

“would it help if I read to you?” she asked in her gentle voice

Florence nodded, that was one of the things she missed about Edward, his reading to her

“What would you like me to read?” she asked

“the tenant of Wildfell hall” said Florence

“are you certain Florence?” said Wilhelmina a little anxiously “the book is somewhat shocking, or so I have heard, John would not let me read it”

Florence smiled “Edward does not forbid me to read anything Wilhelmina dear, please read it to me”

Wilhelmina glanced at Gwendolyn and began to read

“Without another word I left the room and locked myself up in my own chamber. In about half an hour he came to the door, and first he tried the handle, then he knocked.

‘Won’t you let me in, Helen?’ said he.

‘No; you have displeased me,’ I replied, ‘and I don’t want to see your face or hear your voice again till the morning.’

“my goodness” said Wilhelmina almost dropping the book “Florence you really wish me to continue? She has locked the door against her own husband, I am not at all sure this is a suitable
book to be reading especially in your condition”

Florence shifted in the bed “you have never wished to shut the door on john?” she asked

“no” exclaimed Wilhelmina in a horrified tone “Florence really this is most improper”

Florence laughed mirthlessly “perhaps you are right and…. ow” she suddenly clutched at her stomach

“Florence?!” Gwendolyn rose from where she had been sitting “are you well?”

“I’m not sure…” said Florence “I…”and then she gasped at another pain “I think my pains have started” she said

“oh” Wilhelmina started up “but is it not to early Florence? what shall we do?”

“send for the doctor” said Florence wincing “and tell Edith I shall be moving to the delivery bed”

Wilhelmina rang the bell and a young housemaid immediately appeared

“her ladyship’s pains have begun” said Gwendolyn “send for the doctor”

The main nodded and bobbed a curtsey

“now let us help you to the delivery bed” said Wilhelmina

Florence nodded “it is through the chamber there” she said nodding

“come then” said Gwendolyn and they took an arm each

“just think Florence” she said “soon you’ll have another adorable brother or sister for Blair”

Florence nodded again “please god” she said “let it all go well”

“It has been 12 hours” said Wilhelmina anxiously to Gwendolyn as they waited outside while the doctor examined Florence again. Through the door they could hear Florence’s moans and they looked at each other wincing in sympathy

“I wish Edward were here” said Gwendolyn “she should not be alone”

“indeed” said Wilhelmina “and her parents are in Scotland, I can stay a little longer but not all night”

“I cannot stay much longer either” said Gwendolyn “but I hate to leave her, is there no one who could come?”

“Well” Wilhelmina paused “there is Lady Anglesey, Florence has often spoken of how good she is to her and she is of course the mother of many, perhaps she would come?”

Gwendolyn shrugged and then bit her lip as Florence’s moan became a scream “let us ask her Wilhelmina and quickly”

“What on earth is that?” grumbled Henry “confounded knocking at this hour”
“I do not know” said Charlotte “something must have happened” she called out “yes what is it”

“madam, I am sorry to wake you” said the footman “there is an urgent message for you”

Charlotte sat up and took the note “light the candle please” she said as she opened the envelope

“Dear Lady Anglesey

Forgive me intruding on you at this late hour but Lady Drummond’s pains have begun, in fact they began these past 12 hours, but the baby seems no nearer, and I cannot stay with her much longer. Could I trespass on your ladyships’ indulgence and ask you to come to Lansdowne house, I am sure it would bring great comfort to Lady Drummond

With greatest respect

Wilhelmina Stanhope”

“Henry” Charlotte jumped out of bed “Henry rouse yourself, Florence Drummond is in labour”

“is it not to early?” said Henry moving more slowly, it ready did take him longer to get going these days he reflected sadly

Charlotte shrugged “you know as well as I Henry that babies come when they come”

“true” said Henry struggling into his shirt “dammit light another candle, I cannot see in this dark”

“mama papa what is going on?” Septimus burst in, like all the Paget children it never occurred to him it was not the done thing for children to go into the parent’s room without permission. They had always done so from when they were small.

Charlotte and Henry glanced at each other

“Florence Drummond has gone into labour” said Charlotte “I have been asked to attend her as her friends cannot stay any longer”

“then I am coming too” said Septimus

“no, you are not” said Henry angrily “really Septimus this is not the time”

“you cannot stop me papa” said Septimus “unless you lock me in my room and even then, I will climb out of the window”

“oh, let him come Henry” said Charlotte “we do not have time to quarrel, now leave me both of you, Millie needs to help me dress”

“very well” said Henry with a glare at Septimus as Millie entered the room, really was it too much to ask one’s children occasionally did as one asked?

Once outside Henry rounded on Septimus “you know you risk discovery by insisting on accompanying us?”

Septimus set his jaw determinedly “I do not care papa, I must be there”

Henry shook his head “on your head be it then” he said “I do not have time to argue, go and finish dressing”
As they entered the house, Wilhelmina jumped up

“oh, lady Anglesey thank goodness, your lordship and lord Septimus” Wilhelmina bobbed a mere excuse for curtsey “I am most concerned for poor Florence, it has been hours and hours”

Just then a cry echoed down the stairs and Septimus started forward, but Henry put out a hand

“you should go home my dear” he said to Wilhelmina “you look exhausted. Septimus see Lady Stanhope to her carriage”

“But” began Septimus

“at once please” said Henry with a stern look

Septimus nodded aware suddenly of where he was “of course” he said offering Wilhelmina his arm “Lady Stanhope”

“please let me know as soon as there is any news” said Wilhelmina “I’m afraid lady Gwendolyn has had to leave already”

“We will send word as soon as there is my dear” said Charlotte “and now I will go up to see Florence, is the doctor with her?”

“He hasn’t left the room for several hours” said Wilhelmina “but there is still no sign”

Charlotte nodded “it is not unknown for pains to last two or three days” she said gently “I will go up and see what I can do”

Charlotte ran up the stairs hearing Florence’s groan getting louder and knocked at the door briefly before going in

On the delivery bed Florence was on her side, her shift pulled up with the doctor behind her. Her face and body were gleaming with sweat and her eyes were dark pits in her exhausted face

“Oh, my dear” said Charlotte

“Lady Anglesey” Florence reached out a hand and Charlotte took it “please…. help me, the pain will not stop and the baby will not come”

Charlotte stroked her hair from her face “I am here now” she said “it will be over soon”

Florence closed her eyes as another contraction swept through her “please” she whimpered

“are you a relative?” asked the doctor

“No” said Charlotte “though we are god parents to lady Drummond’s first child. As you may know sir Edward is in Russia and lady Drummond’s parents cannot be present”

The doctor scratched his head “may I have a word madam”

“of course”

They went to the corner of the room
“I think the baby has turned madam, but it’s not come as fast as I would hope. It is a shame her husband is not here, I am sure he would calm her”

“alas he is now” said Charlotte “but I will stay with her”

The doctor looked relieved “I think that would help her greatly”

Charlotte nodded relieved and went back to the bed

“Florence I will stay with you, Henry and Septimus are just downstairs, I need to tell them what is happening”

“Septimus is here?” whispered Florence

Charlotte nodded with an eye on the doctor “I believe he was most anxious about your welfare”

Florence smiled and closed her eyes “tell him thank you” she said quietly

“how much longer papa?” Septimus paced around the room nervously

“for the fifteenth time Septimus I do not know” said Henry wearily his eyes closed

“it has been hours” said Septimus “poor Florence, how does she endure it? Women are such frail creatures”

Henry opened his eyes “women are not frail creature Septimus, they are immensely strong, possibly in many ways stronger than us. I have seen men on the battlefield cry like babies over less pain than Lady Drummond is enduring up there. Never make the mistake of thinking the fairer sex means the weaker sex”

“hmmmm” Septimus collapsed down into a chair and then started up again at the sound of footsteps as Charlotte burst into the room

“well?” asked Septimus

Charlotte beamed at them “twins! Two girls, no wonder the poor girl was suffering so much”

“twins? Well well well” laughed Henry “now that is a surprise and no mistake”

“oh mama” Septimus suddenly felt overwhelmed with tears, his dear Florence giving birth to twins “may we see her?”

“not yet Septimus” said Charlotte “she is already asleep, we will come back later”

“the girls, they are healthy?” asked Henry

“on the small side” said Charlotte “which is to be expected but yes as far as I can tell perfectly healthy”

“do they have names?” asked Septimus

Charlotte beamed “they do indeed, Charlotte and Henrietta”
Parting

Chapter Summary

Edward and Alfred try Russian customs before Alfred has to leave to return to London

Chapter Notes

I'm sorry in advance but you knew it was coming :( time for the boys to part.....and argh it hurts! For the reason I've kept it fairly short, a bit like ripping off a plaster....

historical notes

Banya's were a huge part of Russian male life and they existed even in small villages

Russian court etiquette was famously extremely formal and many serfs did indeed regard their Tsar as divine

St Petersburg May 1849

They called St Petersburg the Venice of the North, Edward had not been to Venice but having seen paintings of the city he was prepared to accept the description, it really was the most beautiful city.

The mix of baroque and neo classical architecture mixed with the wide streets and open squares gave the city an air of space and sweeping grandeur that Edward had not expected. The broad River Neva rolled through the centre of the city much as the Thames did in London and gave Edward a reminder of home.

The enormous Winter Palace dominated the river front; its green and white façade had quite taken Edward’s breath away when they had ridden into the city. He had been told it contained over 1500 rooms and 150 stair cases and he could well believe it. Buckingham Palace was like a country house in comparison.

He was also intrigued by Russian customs and practises. For instance, he had been surprised to learn just how fond the Russian were of baths. Only the previous week, he and Alfred had been allowed the supreme privilege of access to the imperial Banya and had spent a most invigorating morning. Once they had divested themselves of their clothes and wrapped themselves in towels, it had been explained to them that they should use birch branches to open the pores and that this was best done by the other person hitting them gently. Alfred had glanced sideways at Edward and Edward had known without looking that Alfred would be smirking at him. Once the attendant had left them in private, Alfred had grinned at him and said that if he liked, he would go first. He had laid down on the bench and Edward had taken up the birch branch, but he could barely bring himself to strike Alfred with it while Alfred giggled at his attempts

“Edward I am not going to break, you may do it harder”
“I do not want to hurt you”

“I know but Edward you do actually have to touch me with it”

When they had changed places, Alfred had expertly wielded the branches in such a way that Edward wondered if he’d done it before. He also found he enjoyed the feeling of warmth as the blood tingled and rushed to the surface.

Next, they went into a wood lined room with a brazier burning in the corner; the temperature was such that they began to sweat almost immediately.

“Goodness Alfred” said Edward half laughing “I have not felt heat like this before”

Alfred was laying back, his eyes closed “no but isn’t it wonderful?” he said

It was rather wonderful supposed Edward but that might be because he was enjoying the sheen on Alfred’s skin as he perspired. He edged over to him and ran a tentative finger down his arm feeling the slippery skin beneath his fingers. Alfred opened his eyes and smiled at him

“why Edward” he murmured “I believe you like this heat too”

Edward grinned at him and then cupped Alfred’s head to pull him towards him so he could kiss him while his fingers continued their unhurried exploration of Alfred’s chest.

Alfred hummed happily into Edward’s kiss. Really, he thought if Edward could just see himself, hard muscular chest glowing with sweat and his hair tousled and gleaming. He would make the angel Gabriel forget himself. When they’d emerged, both flushed from the heat and more, the ice-cold water they tipped over their heads had them both laughing and grimacing at the same time.

The baths had been just one of several new experiences; although Alexi had spent time talking with him about life at the Russian court, it was still difficult to get used to the idea that the peasantry regarded the Tsar as a divinity and even at court he was treated as demi god. The etiquette was extremely strict and Edward found himself struggling into formal court dress far more than he would have wished but the splendour of the court made him giddy. Everything the Tsar and Tsarina did was conducted with the utmost solemnity and with unbreakable rules, for example even for a Minor Entrance where the imperial couple would pass through the inner chambers on their way to church involved and to which only personal invitations were issued, involved a procession of the entire court in ceremonial dress or military uniform. The court balls were enormous affairs with even the smallest most intimate for the highest ranks only numbering 200 people while up to 3000 people were invited to the first ball of the season.

At any other time, he would have been thrilled to be in such an alien environment with so many new things to learn and observe but he could not because tomorrow Alfred would be leaving, and he did not know how he could bear it.

He lay in his bed staring at the ceiling waiting for Alfred to come to him. As Alfred had predicted they would, as soon as they had arrived in St Petersburg, they had become swallowed up in court formality. Edward had been given rooms in the palace along with Alfred and fortunately they were adjacent meaning they could as long as they were careful go into each other’s rooms without too much risk but it was not the same, not remotely the same, as the wonderful carefree sea voyage or even the less private but equally thrilling journey in the vozok.

Edward had been formally presented to the Tsar and Tsarina by the Ambassador and they had had a sumptuous dinner to which all the English community residing in St Petersburg had been invited.
Edward had known it was quite large but even he was surprised by the sheer number of people who gathered in the St Nicholas Hall. He had had a surprisingly enjoyable time partly because he found it a relief just to speak English all night rather than his still less than perfect French as was the custom at court, and partly because Alfred had brought along his Windsor Uniform for the formal presentation. He found it hard to keep his eyes off him as Alfred slipped smoothly into his courtier persona, conversing and dancing with many rather wide eyed looking young ladies. Edward had grinned to himself, any prospecting mamas were going to be sorely disappointed! He found amusingly, he was now only to dance with married women, clearly the ambitious parents of the St Petersburg community did not see the point on wasting time on him if he already had a wife. he did think occasionally of Florence; he had written to her on his arrival to say he was there safely, and he hoped that she was well, the pregnancy continued without difficulty and sending love to Blair urging her to write soon with news. However, she seemed somewhat unreal to him as if belonging to another life, one which he now couldn’t imagine living now that he had spent so much time with Alfred.

He heard a light tap on the door and he propped himself up on his elbows as Alfred crept in.

“Edward” whispered Alfred a smile softening his face as he watched the candle light play across Edward’s cheekbones; he really was the handsomest man he had ever seen, though adorably Edward really had no idea of just how head turningly beautiful he was. It always amused Alfred to watch Edward walk through a crowded room and watch women’s heads snap round to follow him as if pulled on a piece of string.

“Alfred”

Edward held out his arms and, in a moment, Alfred was in them clinging to him. Edward had sworn he would be strong but as Alfred burrowed into him, his tears already wetting his chest, he found he could not be. For a long while they clung together trying to muffle their sobs.

Eventually Alfred pulled away wiping his cheeks with his hands and attempting a smile

“I am sorry Edward, this is not helping you is it?”

“nothing will help Alfred” said Edward hopelessly “only knowing that you were staying with me would help” he clutched at Alfred “stay with me, please please Alfred, stay”

“I cannot Edward” said Alfred using his thumbs to try and wipe away Edwards tears, every word killing him “you know that I cannot”

“you could you could” babbled Edward “I could say I needed you, that it is not safe, that...”

“Edward Edward” said Alfred tenderly “and how would you explain my presence to your wife? Or my absence to Her Majesty?”

“Her Majesty does not need you Alfred! She has all the court to cater to her whims and she has the Prince, I have only you, and you are being taken from me”

“only temporarily” said Alfred “only until we have put the marques and his scheming back where it belongs”

Edward seized Alfred and flipping him, pinned him to the bed by his wrists “I will not let you go” he said angrily “you will stay, Alfred I forbid you to leave”

“you cannot forbid it Edward” said Alfred staring at him with sad liquid blue eyes “Edward, you cannot change this no matter how much you will it”
Abruptly Edward let go of him and clambered off the bed

“you want to go, don’t you?” he said in a low voice leaning against the bed post “you want to leave me”

“Edward Drummond stop this at once!” said Alfred sternly climbing off the bed and coming to face him “I do not want to go; how can you say that to me? Edward how can you say that?”

“I am sorry Alfred, I feel I am being driven insane” Edward looked at him wildly, “this is making me mad”

“I know Edward I know” said Alfred pity for them both wrenching his heart, he took a breath “I do not think you should watch me leave”

“not watch? Not take my last glimpse of you? Alfred now you are the one who is mad”

“but think Edward, how will it help?”

“it will help me” said Edward “I do not know when I will see you again, at last allow me to watch you leave”

Alfred shook his head inwardly, it must decidedly would not help, but how could he refuse him?

“perhaps just watch from the window then”

“from the window? But I don’t want….”

Alfred rounded on him fiercely “Edward for god sake! You want us to have our last farewell, our last embrace in public? in front of people? when it will take all my willpower to hold myself together as a man?”

Edward stared at him for a moment and then nodded brokenly “you are right Alfred” he put his hands over his face “you are right”

Alfred rested his head against Edward’s shoulder “I am” he said feeling suddenly exhausted “Edward make love to me”

Edward cradled Alfred against him and then lifting him up put him gently on the bed

“my love, my only love” he whispered as bent down to kiss him

From the window of the Palace, Edward watched as the horses clattered and reared in the courtyard. He felt hollow and wrung out, too exhausted to cry anymore. His eyes were red and sunken from weeping, and his skin felt sore and rough. He couldn’t bring himself to think of the moment when Alfred had left his bed, his room and his life as the dawn lightened the sky, he didn’t think the feeling of utter hopelessness as the door shut would ever leave him.

Below he saw Alfred emerge from the door and shake the hand of the Ambassador before putting his hat on. He looked dreadful though Edward tenderly, his face chalk white with dark hollows under his eyes. He saw him take a deep breath and swing himself into the saddle before almost unwillingly it seemed to Edward looking up at the window where he knew Edward would be watching. He bowed slightly and almost imperceptibly touched his heart and then he turned his horse deliberately to face away from the window, and dug his heels into its flanks to urge it forward.
Edward clung to the window ledge his knuckles white as the soldiers feel in behind Alfred and the procession moved towards the gate, the other hand fumbled his handkerchief from his pocket and into his mouth to stop him for crying out, *screaming* out, to Alfred not to go.

The column moved further and further away, and Edward sank to his knees, feeling winded. He kept watching his head against the window his breath coming in little gasps, straining his eyes until he could see it no more. He stayed where he was on his knees until eventually numb and shivering, he rose and staggered over to the basin to wash his face. His movements were clumsy, and his fingers felt as though they belonged to someone else. He watched almost dispassionately as he dropped the pitcher and it smashed, cutting his finger, the bright red blood staining the blue and white of the basin. His heart was similarly smashed, and the warmth was leeching away from him already, turning him cold as stone. All he could do now was wait and trust in Alfred.
troubles

Chapter Summary

The Marques hears of the twins birth whilst in London Florence frets that she will have to leave England; meanwhile in Russia both Edward and Alfred struggle with the separation

Chapter Notes

yes its one of those 'everyone is unhappy' chapters yaaaaay

Scotland May 1849

The Marques sat at his desk, a pile of increasingly curt letters from creditors in front of him. This was entirely not what he had planned when Florence had married Edward. He had meant to use the Drummond money to bring the Lothian estate back into profit but instead of investing in machinery to increase efficiency in the coal mines to the north of the estate or employing new workers for the farms, he had speculated on the stock market. He had thought that he could take the Drummond finance and increase it so he would have even more money to invest, after all how hard could it be? The Drummond’s were after all not quite out of the top drawer and they seemed to make money without any trouble. Unfortunately, as he was learning, it was harder than he had realised. At first his investments had made money and, enthused with his progress, he had speculated on more risky stock and that was where things had started to go awry. Unable to believe he’d been wrong, he’d thrown more money after them only to see that vanish too. Very quickly he found the far from increasing the money he had, he had lost it and more besides. At first creditors had sent polite notes gently asking if his Lordship was able to make good his debts but as time went on the letters were becoming less courteous. He could ask Charles Drummond for more money, but he hated to go cap in hand to him, having to explain that his own foolishness had been the cause.

“William” there was a knock on the door, his wife was outside

“enter” he said testily “well?”

he added as Caroline approached his desk; he could feel the letters accusing him even though he knew it wouldn’t have entered her head to look at them

“it is a letter from Florence” she said “she has been safely brought to bed”

“ah” William smiled, at last here would be the heir he wanted “a boy?”

“no” said Caroline “twins, two girls”

“for god sake” the Marques kicked his chair back and stood up “TWO girls? More girls? What use are they?”
“at least she is well” said Caroline timidly “and I am sure there will be more babies in due course”

The Marques scowled “well then the sooner she goes to Russia to be with that husband of hers and gets on with it the better”

London

Florence lay listlessly in bed; her strength had still not properly returned a week after the birth. The delivery had been very hard, far harder than Blair’s and to her sadness she had not been able to nurse the twins herself. Charlotte had engaged a wet nurse, one that the Paget family had used before and she had been a godsend, understanding that while Florence couldn’t feed her babies, she still wanted them with her as much as possible.

Blair was fascinated by them and had to be restrained from going into the nursery and poking them to wake them up. Although Florence told her firmly that she must not wake them, Florence could understand Blair’s fascination with them, she too found them captivating. They slept facing each other, would wake within seconds of each other and if for some reason they could not see the other would begin to wail but would quiet the moment the other came into view. They were very alike, and she knew most people couldn’t tell them apart, but she could; Charlotte had longer eyelashes while Henrietta had an angel kiss on the side of her forehead.

She had written to Edward as soon as she could to tell him of the birth but as yet had had no reply which she put down to the time it took for letters to get between St Petersburg and London, but it added to her feeling of disconnection from him. Already he seemed faded to her and her apprehension about leaving London and all she knew, and of course Septimus, to go to Russia where she and Edward would be forced to rely on each other and be in each other’s company with little chance of respite was growing by the day.

It was not the done thing for a woman who had recently given birth to see any men who were not her husband or father and Florence could make no justifiable excuse for Septimus to come to her. She had written to him and he her, but it did not make up for seeing his face and hearing his voice. She missed him so much and with a feeling of dread she knew that however much she missed him now, it was nothing compared to what it would be once she left.

St Petersburg

“go away”

Shouted Edward at whoever was knocking insistently at his door

He was laying sprawled on the bed clutching a bottle of vodka clad only in his shirt and trousers, unshaven and bleary-eyed. He had barely left his room since Alfred had gone. He had very little appetite and couldn’t bear company. Part of him knew Alfred would be horrified to see him like this and part of him didn’t care. He wouldn’t see Alfred for months and months and all he wanted to do was hide away and drink.

The rapping continued making his head ache

“Sir Edward are you indisposed?” said the voice

Edward lay back against the pillows and closed his eyes, his head pounding
“yes” he shouted again

The knocking continued

“then forgive me for disturbing you but I have a letter for you from London”

“from London?”

Edward rolled off the bed and swayed unsteadily on his feet. A letter from London? It could be from Alfred!

He stumbled over to the mirror, he did not look well; his hair which had not seen a brush for several days haloed around his head and the beginnings of a beard covered his usually smooth jaw. His shirt was stained and had several buttons undone, his trousers were rumpled, and his feet were bare. He looked a sorry state.

“just a moment” he called as the knocking which had ceased at the sound of his footsteps began again

He tipped some water into the basin and rubbed his hands over his face, attempting to flatten his curls down which immediately sprang back up. He rolled his eyes, that would have to do, he needed his letter. Pulling himself as upright as he could, he went to the door and opened it

The Embassy messenger gaped at him and then quickly controlled his features, handing over the letter and inclining his head

“would you like me to wait to see if there is a reply?” he asked

Edward shook his head and then wished he hadn’t as everything seemed to rattle from side to side

“no” he said trying to sound normal though he could hear his voice sounded raspy even to his own ears “I will ring if there is a need to reply”

“very good sir” said the messenger and bowing turned and left as Edward shut the door behind him; he turned the letter over and his heart sank, it was not Alfred’s writing, it was Florence’s

He sighed and rubbed his face, he had been stupid he thought, as if Alfred would be back in London already. He sat down on the bed and opened the letter

“Dear Edward

I wish you joy of your new daughters who came into the world yesterday at just gone 4am in the morning. I have named them Charlotte and Henrietta. I am well though much fatigued and indebted to Lady Anglesey who came to help with the birth. I know that you will be most anxious to see them, but I hope you understand that I will need some time to regain my strength and be well enough to travel.

Blair is thriving though she misses you greatly (she has taken to wearing one of your old top hats which she will only relinquish at bed time!) and I know you will be missing her too.

I hope that you are finding life in Russia has much to occupy you and do not feel too lonely without us there

With deepest care

Florence
The letter slid out of Edward’s hand and onto the floor; twins! He could not help a huge smile breaking across his face. Twin daughters, how absurdly wonderful! Almost unconsciously he straightened his back, he was a father of three now. He wondered what they were like, his twins. Would they be dark like Blair or fair like Florence? Two babies – how did one manage two at once? Blair had been difficult enough and there had been just one of her. He was deeply thankful that Charlotte and Henry Paget were there with her and helping.

He looked at the ¾ empty vodka bottle on the side of the bed, the bed clothes stained from several days use and his belongings strewn around. He sighed and passed a hand over his eyes, this was no good he told himself sternly, he had to pull himself together. Florence and his children would arrive at some point and they could not see him like this, sunk in despair and loneliness. It would not help him or them. He stood up and went over to one of the trunks that had been dumped on the floor and rummaged around, pulling out his razor and shaving brush. Going over to the basin he methodically began to soap his face and then after sharpening his razor on the leather strap, began to carefully scrape off the accumulated stubble. It was time that he started to behave like a human being again.

The road to Tallinn

Corporal Black galloped up to where Alfred was riding some 100 feet away from the men

“my Lord, the men ask if we can take some rest”

Lord Alfred looked at him as if he didn’t know who he was

“rest?” he said “not until Tallinn”

“my Lord we have been in the saddle 15 hours already, the men are tired and so are the horses”

Alfred stared at him unfocused and then suddenly slipped sideways, only Corporal Black’s deft arm stopping him sliding to the ground

“And you need rest too my Lord” said the Corporal quietly “you are exhausted”; in fact, exhaustion didn’t quite do it justice, Lord Alfred looked like a man who had not slept in days. They had set off from St Petersburg 4 days ago and had already covered more than twice the ground than would be normally expected. The snows had melted so there was no need for a sleigh and Alfred had kept the men in the saddle for so long each day that all they could do when they reached a village was eat and collapse. Corporal Black had noted though that whenever had had wakened, he could see lord Alfred was sat up awake. Unlike the journey there, he had just bedded down with the men, seemingly not fussed about his comfort, barely eating, rising before them all, urging them on.

“I can manage” said Alfred trying to take the reins again “let me be”

“I am sorry my lord, but you cannot” said the Corporal firmly and then he lent in to say quietly “my lord I understand, your friend, sir Edward you miss him but if you do not rest soon, I fear you will become gravely ill. Do you think sir Edward would wish that?”

Alfred looked at him with red rimmed dazed eyes

And the Corporal pressed home his advantage

“believe me sir as I said I do understand. You are as” he hesitated “in a sense as brothers; you will see him again but to do so you need to look after your health”
Alfred looked at him closely and then nodded suddenly feeling unutterably weary

“very well then” he said “we shall rest”

“very good sir” corporal back sat back upright in the saddle and saluted

Alfred watched him turn and gallop away; he was right, how could he hope to extract Edward, extract both of them, from this predicament if he allowed himself to fall prey to misery and hopelessness. He needed all his strength and guile to ensure the marques was never able to trouble them again. Only then could he and Edward be safe and happy together.
Tea with Florence

Chapter Summary

Alfred is back in London and is invited to tea with Florence

Chapter Notes

arghh and now its the hard bit because i have to keep them apart for now so apologies
for the lack of the boys being together

June 1849
London

“we are greatly relieved to see you have returned safely lord Alfred” said the Queen

“ma’am” Alfred bowed

“and sir Edward was well when you left him?”

Alfred nodded, “he was” he could hardly say ‘no ma’am he was exhausted from crying and begging
me not to leave him’

“and of course, I hear his wife has recently given birth to twins!”

Alfred bit the inside of his cheek; his mother had broken that news to him when he had arrived home
almost collapsed with exhaustion and sadness 3 days earlier. Even worse, Florence had asked that he
come and take tea with her to in her words “give me news of how dear Edward is and tell me of St
Petersburg”.

He recalled the conversation with his mother

“Alfred, now you have rested I have some news for you” his mother had said, the pity in her face
already giving away what it was

“she has had the baby, hasn’t she?” Alfred had replied flatly

“yes” Charlotte had paused “in fact two babies, two girls; Charlotte and Henrietta”

“two?” in spite of himself Alfred could not stop a small smile passing his lips “Edward will be
thrilled, twins!”

Charlotte had nodded “he will but Alfred there is more. Florence has asked that you have tea with
her, she is of course most anxious for news of Edward, now Alfred…” because she could see Alfred
was already vehemently shaking his head “think! It will be most odd if you do not see her, she is the
wife of your closest…friend”
“I do not want to mama” said Alfred petulantly sounding as if he were five years old and didn’t want to put on his breeches that morning

“I know you do not” said Charlotte gently “but you must, Edward would want you to, he would want to know how Blair is, how his new daughters are, I know you do not want to see Florence but think of Edward”

Alfred turned wounded eyes on her “that is not fair mama”

“perhaps” said Charlotte “but it is right”

Alfred looked away angrily, he knew Edward would want him to go, just to see his children were well

“very well” he said “I will go mama, but you must come with me”

“I have already told Florence I would chaperone her” said Charlotte and she came and rested her hand on his arm

“did you really think I would make you go alone?” she said softly

“Lord Alfred?” Alfred realised Victoria was looking at him

“forgive me ma’am” said Alfred “the fatigue of the journey has not completely worn off, yes Lady Drummond has had twins, my mother and I are taking tea with her later today”

“do pass on our best wishes lord Alfred” said Victoria

“ma’am” Alfred bowed again

“Blair please do not keep staring at Charlotte and Henrietta, you will wake them”

Florence sighed wearily, she knew she had little chance of success; Blair was poised over the basinet, her little upturned nose almost touching Charlotte’s lace cap. Edward’s hat which she still wore was tipped perilously close to falling off her head

“but I want them to wake” said Blair imperiously “why are they still asleep? They have been asleep since this morning”

“babies need a lot of sleep dear” said Florence “now go and put your new dress on, Aunt Charlotte and Uncle Alfred are coming for tea”

“Uncle Alfred’” Blair jumped up and down “does he have papa with him?”

“no darling, papa is in Russia, remember we looked at the map?”

Blair wrinkled her nose “stupid Russia” she said “I don’t like it”

Florence rang the bell and one of the maids appeared

“please take miss Blair to the nursery and see that she gets changed into her new dress” said Florence
The girl bobbed a curtsey “very good your ladyship”

Once Blair had skipped out, Florence sank bank in her chair. She was still absurdly tired all the time, and she missed Septimus so much she could barely breathe. She had half thought of asking Charlotte to bring him for tea as well, but that would perhaps be more painful then helpful. To sit in the room with him making polite conversation alongside Charlotte and Lord Alfred with whom Florence never felt quite comfortable for all his charm would be too much to cope with. If she was going to see Septimus, she wanted to see him properly not sat in her drawing room sipping tea and asking after her health.

In the carriage, Alfred stared out of the window, the anger that he had initially felt on having to have tea with Florence already dissipated into bleakness. He had had no idea it was possible to miss someone this much. Every single waking second, he mourned the loss of Edward. Of course, he was not dead, but he was far away, so far far away, and he had nothing to remember him by, other than a few rough sketches and his own memories. Stupidly this morning, he had thought he saw him in a crowd of people leaving Parliament and he had hurried across the road ready to ask him how he had got back from Russia so quickly, but then the man had turned and of course it was not Edward; his disappointment had been so acute he thought he might weep. He found he was constantly cold, shivering in layers of clothes even though it was summer, and he had no appetite, pushing his food around his plate until the servants came to remove it. What he most wanted was to be left alone, to crawl under his blankets and shut out the world until Edward came back, but that of course was impossible; without him Edward would not be returning any time soon. He had to find a way to regain his spirits and not become sunk in despair.

He thought about what he would say to Florence when she asked him how Edward was. Part of him wanted to drag her into his own misery, tell her how distraught Edward was, how lonely, how scared. He wanted to rage at her that this was all her fault, if Edward had not married her and had the Marques for a father in law, he’d be safe in London with him, not half away across Europe in Russia. Equally he knew, and he was not proud of it, that he’d like to punish her with Edward’s indifference to leaving her behind, make her realise that Edward was far less bothered about her absence than his or Blair’s. He also recognised that wanting to do either of those things did not exactly cover himself in glory

Soon, far too soon, for Alfred’s liking the carriage drew up outside Lansdowne house. Alfred got out and handed his mother down the carriage step.

When she reached the ground, she squeezed his hand

“we will only stay an hour” she said quietly

Alfred nodded and set his jaw, he just needed to get through 60 interminable minutes.

“Florence”

Charlotte kissed her on both cheeks

“Lady Drummond. Congratulations on the birth of your daughters”

Alfred bowed over her hand, his manners as faultless as ever

“Lord Alfred” Florence curtseyed “thank you. it is a shame that Edward is not here to see them”
Alfred nodded knowing that Edward dearly wanted to have been seen them safely born before he went

“please follow me” Florence continued “I have had tea set in the orangery”

Alfred followed the two ladies as they walked arm in arm thinking that Florence did not look well, she too clearly missed Edward, and he resolved to try and be a little kinder to her, just a little.

Once they had seated themselves, Florence poured him some tea and passed the cup to him

“so please tell me lord Alfred, how was the journey and how was Edward when you left?”

Alfred took a sip of his tea, somehow now seeing Florence in front of him, wan and with dark circles under her eyes, he found he couldn’t quite bring himself to say the things he had thought about in the carriage on the way over.

“the journey was more difficult than we anticipated” he said “the ship Ed…Drum…Sir Edward and I were on had to put into Tallinn because the Gulf of Finland was frozen over so we had to go across land”

“goodness” said Florence frowning “and how long did that take? I know Edward does not like to ride for too long”

Alfred shook his head, he couldn’t quite remember how long it had taken as all the days had merged into one after a while, just he and Edward mostly alone, relishing the time together knowing it was more precious than ever because it was short

“Sir Edward was actually conveyed in a vozok” said Alfred

“a Vozok?”

Charlotte and Florence looked at each other intrigued and Alfred laughed

“it is a kind of large sleigh” he said “the road was frozen and covered in snow. I could not allow Ed…Sir Edward to risk riding in such weather. It was most cosy inside, although I was on horseback”

“and when you reached St Petersburg?” asked Florence “what is the city like?”

“it is very beautiful Lady Drummond” said Alfred honestly because it really was “it far exceeded my expectations and the Winter Palace is beyond compare. The river Neva flows through the centre much like the Thames does through London and although it is surpassing cold in the winter, in the summer I have been assured it is most temperature with many delightful parks and gardens”

Florence smiled but it did not quite reach her eyes

“and the court?”

“considerably more formal than ours” said Alfred “rather a lot of standing and stern court officials but there is a large British community there, you will not be without friends” he continued gently seeing tears well up in Florence’s eyes

Charlotte had noticed them too

“it is a long way to go” she said “but of course Edward will be waiting, when you feel well enough to travel”
Florence nodded trying to summon enthusiasm, but she felt hopeless, she did not want to go and be with Edward, she wanted to stay in London with Septimus. Making an effort she said

“and was Edward well when you left him?”

Alfred moistened his lips

“he was somewhat upset as I’m sure you can imagine, after all he is there without family or close friends” he said after a pause waiting for Florence to enquire further but she did not

Charlotte glanced at Alfred who looked disconcerted by Florence’s gloomy demeanour. This was not the manner of a woman missing her husband and desperate to be reunited with him

“perhaps we may see Blair?” she asked “I think Alfred has something for her”

Alfred smiled politely trying to push away the idea that he was missing something

“I do indeed” he said “something from her papa, and I would like to see the twins also”

Florence smiled in return

“then let us go to the nursery”

They made their way upstairs, Alfred could already hear Blair imperiously insisting that it was baa baa blue ship because she did not like black

“Blair!”

Florence swept into the nursery with Charlotte and Alfred behind her

“mama”

Blair jumped up

“uncle Alfred”

She ran over to him heedless to Florence’s remonstrations that she should stop and curtsey

“uncle Alfred” she repeated “do you have papa with you?”

Alfred scooped her up, she seemed to be wearing one of Edward’s old hats and he looked at Florence questioningly and she looked at him ruefully

“she will not take it off” she said

“I’m sorry little princess I don’t” said Alfred gently as Blair’s head dropped and she wrapped her arms around his neck

“I miss papa” she said into his neck

“I know” said Alfred “he gave me something to give to you” he said, and he took a small package from inside his coat

“A present!” Blair rattled it “for me?”

Alfred nodded and put her down so she could open it
Blair tore off the wrapping, inside was a brightly painted wooden figure

“so pretty!” she said “look mama! A lady”

Alfred laughed and knelt down

“yes” he said, “but look” and he twisted the figure which came apart to reveal another figure

“ooh” Blair looked at it with round eyes

“now you do it” he said

Blair twisted the figure and laughed delightedly as it came apart to reveal another

“how charming it is” said Florence as Blair undid each of the figures as they decreased in size

They are called Matryoshka’s” said Alfred kneeling back “Russian dolls”

“enchanting” said Charlotte smiling “and perhaps we can see the twins also”

Florence nodded and putting a finger to her lips, led them through to the next room where the twins lay asleep facing each other in a large cradle

“oh” Alfred breathed, reaching down to very gently stroke their downy cheeks. He could never quite get over that his wonderful Edward had created new life in this world even if it was with Florence. It pleased him to think that part of Edward would live on and he pushed aside his own regrets that he would never be a father. He could never marry a woman just to have a child, that would only bring deep unhappiness to all concerned.

He straightened up

“they are beautiful” he said “they have your colouring I think Lady Drummond”

“And ours” laughed Charlotte “so blonde, they could almost be Septimus’”

Alfred looked at his mother in astonishment, such a comment was in very poor taste, what must Florence think?

Florence herself had gone very red, proof thought Alfred crossly that his mother had over stepped the boundaries of good manners

“perhaps their hair will darken later” said Alfred “mama I believe that we are due at Apsley House soon” obviously he needed to bring the visit to a close before his mama made any more unguarded remarks

His mother had also gone red obviously realising how such a statement must have sounded

“indeed” she said in a subdued voice “Florence we must depart, I shall return tomorrow if I may”

Of course, said Florence faintly “thank you for coming”

Alfred nodded and stood back allowing his mother and Florence to leave the room ahead of him

What a very strange afternoon it had been.
parenthood isnt easy

Chapter Summary

In Russia, Edward is finding his feet in his new role though he misses Alfred desperately. In London Florence faces up to the reality that she cant stay in England forever and Charlotte offers to help her spend time with Septimus before she goes

Chapter Notes

the moral dilemmas continue on all sides.....

Diplomatic corps - this refers to the ambassadors & consuls from all countries who had a formal role at court.

St Petersburg July 1849

Dear Edward

I hope that you are well and your duties at court not too onerous. I know that you would like myself and the children to come to you as soon as possible but I am still not fully recovered from the birth and the twins are still very young; I am anxious about taking them on such a long journey.

Blair misses you a great deal and is very find of the Russian doll that you sent her. Lady Anglesey continues to be most kind to me as does her whole family including Lord Alfred whose friendship, I am sure you must miss.

Please do write soon

With fondest wishes

Florence

Edward folded up the letter and frowned, he was most displeased. The weeks since Alfred had left, could it be only six? had been very difficult. He was working feverishly hard, trying to keep his mind occupied, attending every social function to which he was invited to try and quell the sadness in his soul. Luckily or perhaps not depending on how one viewed it, he was invited to many parties, balls, luncheons and dinners. He knew that the diplomatic corps was sizing him up, deciding whether he was a man they could work with or not. He was politely interrogated about his views on everything everywhere he went. Fortunately, his years working with Sir Robert in particular, made him a master of saying everything and nothing which he knew was exactly the quality people would want; he needed people to trust him in order to tell him their secrets. He also found much to his chagrin that he was the focus of much female attention. Many ladies expressed their sympathy that his wife was still in England

“so far away Sir Edward, you must get very lonely”
“I do my best to occupy my time madam”

“I would be more than happy to do what I can to help alleviate your loneliness”

And so, and so forth with little notes passed behind fans and invitations to social engagements that turned out to be almost entirely female.

His graciousness in rebuffing these advances only made the court women sigh over him even more

“so handsome and so constant in his fidelity to his wife, what a lucky woman she is”

However, every night he went to bed alone with only thoughts of Alfred for company. Sometimes, to his shame he resorted to self-pleasure when he couldn’t bear the loneliness any longer and thought he would weep with frustration from the lack of Alfred’s touch. However, even as his hand worked and he gasped out Alfred’s name with his shirt gaping open over his chest and the buttons on his trousers pulled roughly apart, he knew such relief was momentary.

Only the prospect of at least seeing Blair, meeting his new daughters and at least having the familiarity and care of Florence was keeping him from taking to his bed and staying there. He was therefore not at all happy and somewhat disconcerted that Florence sounded like she did not miss him at all and was making every excuse not to come. In addition, he found the reference to Alfred unsettling, he’d had cause in the past to ask him to try and mask his feelings and now here he was being kind?

Going over to his desk, his pulled a piece of paper towards him

Dear Florence

Thank you for your letter. I confess I am somewhat surprised that you wish to delay coming to me. I understand about your health but if you do not leave by the end of august then the weather will turn cold and the journey will be more difficult. Under the circumstances I feel I must insist you leave England by that time.

He paused, he was aware that he was sounding like the Pater Familia he swore he never would be and tried to soften his tone

I miss Blair very much and am all impatience to meet my new daughters, St Petersburg is a lonely place without you all

Fondly

Edward

London July 1849

Florence’s heart sank as she read the letter. Edward was usually the kindest and most patient of men, never ordering, never insisting but she saw now her prevaricating had to come to an end. She could no longer put off leaving, in a few weeks she would have to go.

She sent a note to Charlotte asking her to call. Since the faux pas in front of Alfred for which charlotte had apologised most profusely

“I really did not mean anything by it Florence, I am so sorry to have embarrassed you like that”
And what could Florence do but accept her apology?

Possibly in a fit of remorse, Charlotte had arranged for Florence to spend a few hours with Septimus at Uxbridge house which had in the end been more frustrating than helpful. They could not of course be properly alone even though Charlotte had removed herself as far away as possible, going out onto the terrace so they could talk alone but they could not kiss or hold each other, merely able to clasp hands behind Florence’s fan while they talked in whispers

“when can I see you properly?” asked Septimus his eyes burning with longing

“I do not know” said Florence “where can we be alone?” she dropped her head “we are never alone”

“we have to find a way” said Septimus urgently “Florence I miss you, I can hardly bear it”

“I know” she pressed his hand “I miss you too”

He caught her hand and squeezed it hard “Florence” he murmured “I am aching for you” and he brought her hand to his lips

Florence shivered, how was it the slightest touch of his lips could send such sensations around her body that Edward had never done?

“you must not say that” she said faintly

“why not when it’s the truth?” he said

“because I feel my legs will not hold me up” and she clenched the handle of her fan

“I will find a way, I swear it” said Septimus

And they had had to be content with that

“Florence”

Charlotte greeted her

“I came as soon as I could, your note sounded most urgent”

Florence nodded and handed her Edward’s letter, charlotte scanned in quickly and her face fell

“it seems Edward is growing impatient”

Florence sighed “it was inevitable”

“it was”

“what will you do?” asked Charlotte

“do?” said Florence “I will take the girls, and go to Russia as Edward bids”

“and…. Septimus?” asked charlotte cautiously

Florence shrugged “it is foolish to dream of him” she said wearily “perhaps Lady Anglesey I need to grow up” she smiled sadly “Edward is a good husband, kind and generous, so what if he does not love me or d..desire me?” she looked down “There are many women far worse off than I. At least
Edward is faithful to me, or at least if he is not, does not flaunt a mistress under my nose”

Charlotte felt the anger surge within her. This entire situation was becoming out of control. Alfred hopelessly in love with Edward, risking gaol or worse for him and Septimus hopelessly in love with Edward’s wife. Both her sons were unhappy, and Edward and Florence were unhappy too. She was almost certain that Edward would not stand in the way of Florence and Septimus but of course her father was a different matter altogether. Plus, men were odd creatures, Edward may not want Florence for himself in that way, but she was the mother of his children and he may well baulk at the idea of another man bringing them up. As for Alfred, she could not imagine he would react particularly well to Florence’s preferring any man to Edward even if it were his own brother. He simply would not understand how Florence could fall out of love with Edward; perversely he wanted her to love Edward because everyone should love Edward though of course if Edward were to suddenly fall in love with Florence, Alfred’s grief would know no bounds.

“I wonder” she began tentatively

“yes” said Florence, something in Charlotte’s voice making her prick up her ears

“the journey to Russia will be a long one and you are still a little wan. Perhaps sometime at Plas Newydd might restore you to complete health before you leave”

The two women looked at each other and then Charlotte took Florence’s hand “you must not give up my dear” she said “when I met Lord Anglesey I was married to my first husband but I knew as soon as I saw him that I could not live without him, and so I left my husband and my children, I had no choice, I was not allowed to take them with me. It was a horrible time; the court case, we were talked about everywhere, scurrilous cartoons published and for a long time I was literally unable to show my face in public, I had to wear a veil when I went out. But now, here I am! Lady Anglesey, mother to 10 children, a grandmother though I can scarce believe it and so I say to you Florence my dear, do not give up hope, circumstances can change”

Florence gripped Charlotte’s hand tightly “perhaps” she said, her voice sounding shaky “some of your family will accompany me there?”

Charlotte smiled at her “I think most certainly they will”

“Alfred won’t like it Charlotte” said Henry frowning

“I was not in fact planning to tell him Henry” said Charlotte spiritedly “do you not think I feel conflicted enough about this as it is? I will ask Septimus to accompany us to Plas Newydd, our plans to travel will be hit by a last minute difficulty and we will not in fact be able to go. We will not withdraw the offer to Florence Drummond and of course it will be far too dangerous for her and the children to travel alone, and so Septimus will have to accompany her”

“Alfred will know that Florence is not in Town though” said Henry impatiently “think Charlotte! He will want to see Blair again, he will know she’s gone away and where to”

Charlotte snapped her fan open in irritation and fluttered it crossly, why did everything have to be so complicated?

Henry picked up the paper and sat down, he knew better than to say anything further when Charlotte was like this. Flicking through the Court Circular listings his eyes alighted on a notice

‘Her Majesty the Queen, His Royal Highness the Prince Consort, their Royal Highness Prince
Edward, Princess Victoria, Princess Alice, Prince Alfred, Princess Louise, and Prince Helena accompanied by members of the court will leave for Osbourne house on the 10th July for a two-week holiday.

“Charlotte” Henry called her “look at this” and he showed her the notice “it seems Alfred will be absent for two weeks on the isle of Wight, if you insist on going through with this plan, that seems the ideal time to do it.”

Charlotte sat down with a sudden thump next to Henry

“am I a terrible mother?” she asked, “to contrive one of my sons to cuckold the lover of another?”

Henry put down the newspaper and put his arm around her shoulders

“Charlotte” he said “I doubt any parent in history has had to confront a dilemma such as we have. It would be easier if we were not so fond of Florence Drummond, but lord knows her own parents seem not to care, they have not even been to visit the twins yet. She is a sweet and loving girl and we both know that Edward, fine man though he is, does not love her, in fact is incapable of doing so. Instead he loves Alfred with a love so strong I believe it could move mountains, just as ours did” and he squeezed her to him “and finally Septimus after all the years of taking after me rather to much has finally fallen in love, and Florence loves him too. It is a tangled web that a Greek tragedy would find hard to match! We will help Alfred get Edward back because that is what he wants, and we will help Septimus with Florence because that is what he wants. We can do no more or no less, because they are our sons charlotte. No one ever said parenthood was easy.”
plans are set in motion

Chapter Summary

The Marques embarks on some dangerous activity, William and Alexi have a plan and Alfred and Septimus talk

Chapter Notes

sorry this is one of those chapters which is a little bitty as i need to position everyone before things hot up next chapter...

£1,000 pounds is equivalent of £125,000 in today’s money

Jedburgh is the main town within the Lothian estate

London 1849

The clerk looked down at the slip in his hand

"you wish to cash this my lord?"

"yes" said the marques confidently “at once please”

The clerk hesitated, £1000 was a large sum of money

“I should check…” he began

But the Marques interrupted him

“you do know who I am?” he barked at the young clerk

“indeed, your lordship” said the clerk beginning to sweat faintly

And who my son in law is? Young Mr Drummond?”

The clerk nodded again

“well then stop with this nonsense and hand over the money as instructed”

The clerk took one last look at the paper and then mentally shrugged; it was countersigned by Mr Drummond senior and although he would usually expect to have been sent a note that he was expected to pay out such a sum in advance, it was obviously just an oversight

“of course, your lordship” he said politely “if you would like to wait here, I shall go to the vault”

As the clerk left, the marques gave a sigh of relief; the clerk hadn’t noticed he’d forged Charles signature.
He had taken a big risk, he knew that, but that if it paid off, and he was sensible about the amounts he took out, he would soon be able to recoup his losses. It was not as if the Drummond bank could not afford it; it was the second wealthiest private bank in the country. It was the main reason he had been happy Florence wished to marry him, though what a mistake that had turned out to be he thought with a shudder. Little did he know then he thought, that he was welcoming a man of perverse tastes, a sodomite no less, into his family.

The clerk returned with the money

“your lordship” he handed over the money in a leather wallet with a bow

The Marques snatched it up and marched out of the room, that had been easier than he had expected

“Alexi, William”

Alfred embraced his friends

“I am so glad to see you!”

“and we you” said William hugging him closely “Alexi and I have been most concerned for you and Edward, and what you are going through, haven’t we?”

Alexi nodded “indeed we have”

“thank you” said Alfred gratefully “it helps to know I can talk with you, in fact compared to poor Edward I am much the better off” he sighed “he’s all alone there”

“but he will not be out there for a long eh Alfred?” said William firmly “we will get him back for you soon”

The three friends sat down

“so, Alfred” said Alexi “how did you find St Petersburg? oh forgive me for asking but Russia is still my home and I miss it even though I have the most exquisite compensation here” and he smiled at William

“I found it to be the most beautiful city Alexi” said Alfred honestly “I have never seen anything like it! The colours, London seems very drab in comparison”

“And Edward? How was he when you left?” asked William

Unlike with Florence, Alfred felt no need to hide the truth from his friends, and so he told them in unvarnished detail about how Edward had been when he left and his own feelings too.

“oh Alfred, I am so sorry” said William when he’d finished, reaching over and squeezing his hand sympathetically “truly it must have been unbearable for you both”

“It was very hard” Alfred choked back the tears; it was no use crying again

“then we must do all we can to work out a way to bring the marques down and return Edward here where he belongs” said Alexi firmly
“indeed, and Alexi and I have had some ideas” beamed William “we need to unearth something about him, something he will not want made public. We propose taking a trip to Jedburgh, there is excellent fishing there you know and while we are there, we will find out what we can about the Marques; local people will know far more than anyone here in London. Perhaps you would like to accompany us?”

“it is an excellent idea” said Alfred warmly “but alas I have to accompany the Queen to the Isle of Wight. The Prince has a fancy to go sailing I believe”

“such a pity!” said Alexi

“yes” said Alfred thinking that perhaps it was not such a pity, he really did not think he could stand to be around Alexi and William enjoying being together in a way that he could not with Edward. He just hoped they would be luckier than he and Edward.

“it is such a bore you have to go off to the isle of Wight” said Septimus to Alfred thinking how pale and sad he looked. He could not deny that he felt guilty about Florence every time he looked at Alfred. The Septimus Paget of two years ago would have laughed at the very idea he would be in such a predicament. God only knew how he would ever break the news to Alfred, if indeed he ever did have to break the news to Alfred.

Alfred shrugged “I have no choice, where Her Majesty goes, I go too, and after being away for so long to accompany Edward to Russia, I simply cannot refuse”

“I suppose not” said Septimus “and how are you feeling now that you are back?” he asked tentatively

Alfred gave a half-choked laugh “what do you want me to say Septimus? That I am well? That I do not miss Edward every minute of every day? I cannot tell you that”

“he will be back before you know it” said Septimus kindly

Alfred sighed “perhaps…. perhaps not…who knows Septimus? I do not”

Septimus sat down beside him “Alfred, when Edward does return, what will you do?”

“do?” asked Alfred “what do you mean ‘do’?”

“well” said Septimus hesitantly “how long can you continue to live like this? Hiding, lying, deceiving Flo…Edward’s wife”

Alfred looked at him angrily “we do not do it by choice Septimus” he spat “as you well know”

“I know that” said Septimus quietly “but do you think you can live your whole lives like this? You and Edward? Has he ever thought of divorce?”

“of course, he’s thought of it Septimus” said Alfred exasperatedly “but this is Edward! He does not…. love her, but she is the mother of his children. He knows that divorce would bring a great deal of attention on them both and risks exposing us. If it were like mama and papa it would be different, they at least divorced to marry each other but Edward would not be doing that would he?, questions would be asked especially as I know he would not take the children from her, ‘What can a wife have done to merit being divorced but allowed to keep the children?’ he dropped his head into his hands “I wish I had never convinced him to marry her”
“you convinced him” said Septimus astonished “was he then not going to?”

Alfred nodded wearily “he was going to break off the engagement, but I had overheard the Marques in the Reform Club making plans to sue him if he did so, he’d already postponed the wedding once. I knew Edward would be ruined….so I persuaded him to go through with it” he laughed bleakly “I thought then that it would not be too much to cope with, how wrong I was!”

“you dislike her so much?” asked Septimus

Alfred sighed “it is not her personally Septimus, on the contrary she is an eminently suitable wife for him, it is what she represents! She has him in a way I can never have; his name, his children, she lives with him, sees him every day, all the things I can never have or do. You know all this! The journey to Russia was the longest time we had ever spent together, and it was bliss Septimus, it was as if we were married. And besides if he wasn’t married to her, he would not have the Marques for a father in law and we would not be in this situation. I find it very very hard not to blame her”

Septimus sat quietly his heart pounding, he was desperate not to give away his feelings for Florence “would she….?” He tried again “how do you think she would feel if she knew of you and Edward?, no no of course I am not planning to reveal it what do you take me for?” he added as Alfred half rose to his feet “I just wondered if you had ever considered whether she would divorce Edward?”

“on what grounds Septimus?” said Alfred bitterly “being the most perfect man in the world?”

“no one is perfect Alfred” said Septimus trying to bring some levity to the conversation “he must have some bad habits”

Alfred smiled despite himself “he does tend to steal the blankets”

That wasn’t quite what I had in mind thought Septimus as an entirely unwanted image of Edward in bed first with Alfred and then worse with Florence came to mind, but he had started this he reminded himself “well then” he said trying to sound jovial “even Edward is not completely perfect”

“it is not exactly grounds for divorce though I think you’ll agree” said Alfred, he sighed, “come on Septimus let us get out of the house, perhaps a ride in the park would do us both good”

Septimus smiled in relief, he didn’t want to continue the conversation either “a splendid idea Alfred” he said.

“Septimus I wondered if you would care to accompany your father and I to Plas Newydd?” asked Charlotte casually over breakfast

Septimus looked up frowning “I do not think so mama” he said “I have much work to keep me in Town” thinking he had no intention of going anywhere that took him far from Florence “oh that is a shame” said Charlotte with an eye to the servants “only I have invited Lady Drummond to spend some time there before she leaves for Russia, to restore her strength you know. goodness
Septimus you are clumsy this morning” she added as Septimus dropped his knife and fork with a clatter

“I…. well…. of course, it would also be nice to escape the heat of London” said Septimus “and Parliament is in recess at the moment”

“it is” said Charlotte deliberately keeping her voice careless “and it would be nice for Lady Drummond to have some younger company while she is there, I have already invited Adelaide”

“a family reunion of sorts then” said Septimus lightly

“indeed” said Charlotte “so I may take it you will come?”

“of course,” said Septimus his heart thumping in his chest “I would be delighted”
She should not be here thought Florence as she gazed out of the windows of Plas Newydd down onto the Menai Straits. The moment she knew that Charlotte would be inviting Septimus she should have been sensible and declined the invitation. Even though they had exchanged kisses and light caresses, Florence had been able to tell herself that she had not been unfaithful to Edward, not really, not completely but she knew that if she stayed, she would not be able to tell herself that for much longer. Oh, it was fine to dream of Septimus, to imagine would it would be like to hold him in her arms instead of Edward but that was very different from the reality of going to bed with him. She could lose everything; her children, her home, her marriage. Although Edward did not desire her, and was to her at least the kindest of men, she could not imagine how he would react if he ever found out. His wife and the brother of his best friend, he would see it as a double betrayal, happening whilst he was far away in Russia having not even seen his new daughters.

Of course, there was a simple answer, she could leave, should leave, or simply tell Septimus that what was between them had to end. Septimus loved her, if she asked him to leave her alone, he would.

But she did not want that.

Even though all her intellect and reasons screamed at her to go, she knew she would not. For her this last act with Septimus would mark the end of their relationship, she would give herself to him once and then go to Russia and that would be an end to it.

“What do you think of Plas Newydd Lady Drummond?” asked Adelaide eagerly as they gathered in the drawing room awaiting dinner “is it not the most wonderful place?”

Charlotte laughed “Adelaide dear I think you are meant to wait for Lady Drummond to answer before telling her what she should think”

Adelaide blushed and Florence smiled at her “I have to say I fully agree with lady Adelaide it is the most charming place”. Like all the Pagets, Adelaide was charming and fun and Florence was glad
that she was here.

“I am delighted that you find it so pleasing” said Charlotte “ah Henry, Septimius, you have finished your game of billiards” she added as the two men entered the room

Florence felt herself immediately grow hot and began to flutter her fan conscious of Septimius standing just behind where she was sat

“Septimius” said Adelaide excitedly “will you take me riding tomorrow?”

Septimius laughed “of course Addie though I have promised Lady Drummond I would show her the summer house”

“I can show her that” said Adelaide eagerly “can’t I Lady Drummond?”

“if you wish” said Florence smiling

“see!” she said to Septimius “I…”

And then she got no further as the gong sounded for dinner

“thank goodness” said Henry “I feel rather famished” and he held out his arm to Charlotte “my dear” Charlotte took it and Septimius came around the sofa to stand in front of Florence

“lady Drummond” he murmured extending his arm “if I may”

Florence put her arm through his, feeling herself grow even warmer as she looked at him

“come on” said Adelaide impatiently “I am hungry” and she put her arm through Septimius other one “let us go into dinner”

Florence found she could barely eat; she did not know if Septimius would expect to come to her tonight but just the thought of it was enough to tear her appetite away. She could barely bring herself to look at Septimius, just one glance at his face, those warm brown eyes contrasting so beautifully with the gold of his hair set her heart bounding in her chest.

“are you not hungry Lady Drummond?” asked Adelaide

“alas no” said Florence “I find it often the case after travelling, I am sure my appetite will return soon enough”

“perhaps you should retire early” said Charlotte kindly “it has been a long journey”

“perhaps I shall” said Florence rising; Henry and Septimius also rose to their feet also

“I do hope you feel better soon lady Drummond” said Henry

Florence nodded “I am sure a little rest is all I need” and she curtseyed to him and left the room wondering how the heart beats that sounded so loud in her own ears were not audible in the room.

Florence sat in her room, a lavender pelisse over her night gown. The maid had brushed out her hair
and ensured the fire was well stoked before asking Florence if she needed anything.

"no thank you Millie" Florence had replied, and Millie had curtseyed and left Florence alone with her thoughts. Would Septimius come to her tonight or not?

Downstairs Septimius was finding it hard to swallow his food. The look Florence had given him before retiring, both tremulous and hopeful had sent his pulse racing in his throat. He had intended to give Florence a few days, allow her to settle in, give them both time but seeing her tonight, he knew he could not. After months and months of looks and kisses and gentle touches, the moment was now upon them.

Thankfully Adelaide chattered away enough through dinner for all of them for which Septimius was extremely grateful. When the ladies retired to the drawing room for coffee and he was left with his father, Septimius fully expected an interrogation from his papa but it did not come. Instead his father opined about the performance of Prime Minister Russell and lord Palmerston, and about the happenings in the lives of Septimius’ half brothers and sisters. It was not until Henry rose to suggest they joined the ladies that he grasped Septimius arm

"be sure before you go to her my boy, you cannot take it back once it has happened"

"I am sure" Septimius whispered "it’s just.... she has so much to lose, papa should I do this?"

"I would not presume to answer that on Lady Drummond’s behalf Septimius” said Henry "only she can tell you that"

Septimius nodded "then I am sure you will understand if I do not join you for coffee” he said his voice shaking

Henry nodded and Septimius bowed to him and turned went to leave the room

"Septimius” said henry as he reached the door

“yes papa?” Septimius stopped and looked back

"be gentle my boy" said henry "she.” he stopped and gave a little shrug "just be kind"

Septimius smiled at him "I promise to be papa” he said

"Florence?"

Florence heard the gentle tap on the door and her heart jumped into her throat, she knew who it was

She sat there for a few moments before rising and going to the door and opening it

Outside was a nervous looking Septimius Paget

He bowed to her

May I come in?” he asked

Florence found suddenly that she couldn’t speak and so merely nodded, stepping back from the door. Septimius entered, shut the door and then instead of taking her into his arms as she expected, stood there with his back against it. Florence found she was trembling as he looked at her
“Florence” he said, his voice soft “you know why I am here?”

She nodded again; her mouth dry

“my love” he said continuing in the same soft voice “I want to be sure before continuing that you want this, that you want to be fully mine” he looked at her, his expression both hopeful but also compassionate “and also for you to know that the choice here is yours. If you feel that it is a step to far or that you do not desire me, then I will leave now”

Florence stared at him, feeling tears come into her eyes unexpectedly at his regard for her. She held out her hands to him

“Septimius” she whispered and the look on her face was all it took.

“Florence” Septimius was over to her in a few strides, taking her up in his arms and carrying her over to the bed. He laid her down on it as gently as if she were made of porcelain

“I love you” he said simply “I love you Florence” and he bent down and kissed her. Florence slid her arms around him, exalting in the feeling of his solid body against hers. She could not help but compare how he felt in her arms with Edward. Edward was much broader, but he did not press against her like this, kiss her like this nor groan her name against her lips. Neither did Edward trail kisses across her neck like this; she shivered as she felt Septimus tongue against the sensitive skin

“Florence?” Septimus stopped as he felt her tremble “is this pleasing to you?”

Florence nodded “it is…I have not….before…”

Her voice trailed off and Septimius understood, of course Edward would not have done this. He continued to nuzzle and lick gently and Florence could not help but start to wriggle beneath him as her skin felt turned to fire.

“Septimius I am sorry” she mumbled her face red, what must he think of her?

“sorry?” Septimus stopped again “Florence should I stop?”

“no, but you must think me terribly wanton”

“wanton?” Septimus looked at her puzzled

She bit her lip

“I cannot keep still”

Oh! Septimus restrained himself from banging his head against the pillow, that husband of hers! Dear god she had so much to learn

“that is quite usual Florence” he said keeping his voice gentle

“oh” it was a quiet little noise

“in fact, it is pleasing to me when you move” he said with a smile “if you are, I assume that you are finding it pleasurable”

Florence digested this; Edward had never mentioned anything about her pleasure and seemed unbothered whether she was moving or still as a corpse
“I only want to please you” he murmured

Florence couldn’t imagine he could do anything else that would make her feel better than this and then she felt his hand move down and gently cup her breast. She felt her body arch in response as he gently stroked them.

“Septimius…” this time it came out almost as a moan, Edward had certainly never touched her there. She herself had never thought of them as anything other than necessary for nursing babies and yet Septimius light caresses of them were causing her whole body to flood with sensation. She clutched at him and he kissed her more deeply, his touches on her breast becoming firmer.

Looking down at her, her eyes closed, her teeth snagged on her lower lip, little gasps escaping her, Septimius was filled with tenderness. The thought that she might have lived her whole life never experiencing this because of that husband of hers filled him with sadness and anger,

“Florence” he said pulling away from her slightly “do you permit me?” and he gestured to her nightdress.

Florence nodded and Septimius raised her shift; Florence obediently fell back waiting for him to do as Edward did but he did not, he continued to raise it up.

“Lift your arms” he whispered as he pulled it over her head and threw it on the floor. Now at last he could see her he thought. He turned back to look at her, but Florence pulled the pillow over herself and turned away

Septimus put his head on one side with a soft smile and then tugged at the pillow gently

“Let me see you” he whispered but Florence shook her head

“It is not right” she said

“Not right? Do you wish me to go?” said Septimus “I will if you wish it”

“No, I mean you should not look at me” said Florence “Edward does not…I mean…”

Ah realisation flooded Septimus, of course that husband of her wouldn’t have wanted to see her naked body

“Florence, he said reaching up to cup her face in his hands and kiss her “If you would prefer, I will cover you up, blow out the candles and continue in the darkness but first let me tell you that you are the most beautiful woman on this earth to me. Your body should be seen, it should be worshipped”

Florence stared up at him, her eyes flooded with tears. Edward had never said such things to her, in fact she could not even imagine him saying them. She reached up to stroke his face

“I am sorry” she said “to be so foolish”

Septimus bit back the angry retort he wanted to make

“you are not foolish at all” he said gently “I know all of this is new to you. I would like to undress myself now” he paused “would you like me to blow out the candles?”

Florence looked at him wide eyed, no she realised, she did not want that, she wanted to see him

“no” she shook her head “please, let me see you to”
Septimus nodded and retreating to the end of the bed, undressed carefully watching Florence’s face changed as he revealed himself piece by piece. When he got to his shirt, he unbuttoned it slowly before sliding it off his arms. He knelt up so Florence could look at him properly.

“see” he said with a smile “soon I shall be as naked as you”

Florence smiled tremulously, his chest was sprinkled with hair, nothing like Edward’s smooth body and she wondered how it would feel against her. Lastly Septimius slid off his breeches, laying them over the end of the bed and then turned to face her properly.

Florence found herself staring, she had not ever seen a man naked before and she was fascinated. That was what she’d had inside her?

“is this perhaps the first time you have seen a man fully uncovered?” asked Septimus delicately.

Florence nodded.

“would you like to touch?” asked Septimius his voice slightly hoarse.

Florence shook her head instinctively but then “perhaps just a little” she whispered.

Septimus nodded and lay down next to her.

Florence gingerly touched the hair on his chest, it felt softer than she expected, and he was warm beneath her fingers. She glanced at him; he was watching her and when he met her eyes he smiled reassuringly and stroked her hair.

“do not be afraid” he said.

Florence nodded and moved her hand tentatively lower, lingering on the flat plane of his stomach before moving down to where his erection was lying against his navel. She stared at it, it was difficult to believe this fitted inside her, though she thought suddenly with a wry smile, a baby did come out of there! She very quickly touched it with the tip of her finger before withdrawing it; it felt hot which she had not really expected. She touched again, this time a quick gentle stroke and she heard Septimius breath hitch.

“I am sorry” she begun but Septimius shushed her with a smile.

“you are not hurting me” he said.

Florence nodded her curiosity getting the better of her. She began to stroke it with more lingering caresses, noting how it would sometimes jump beneath her fingers, ‘how strange’ she thought. Growing bolder she encircled the shaft with her fingers, surprised at how heavy it felt.

“How is this possible?” Septimius groaned her name, her very lack of familiarity with his body was more erotic than anything else he’d experienced.

She looked at him alarmed.

“am I hurting you?”

“No” he said “but I must ask you to cease at least for now. It is my turn to please you some more”.

Oh, Florence felt warm spread throughout her body at the thought.
Septimus flipped her onto her back

“let me pleasure you properly Florence” he said and began to trail kisses down her body. She half thought about stopping him, but then his tongue began to tease her nipple and her ability to think properly began to slide away. His other hand caressed her breast and he went from one to the other as she dug her fingers into his hair and pressed against him gasping.

The she felt his lips move away from her breasts and trail further down her body, she was puzzled would could he be doing? she could feel his fingers on her moving lower and lower until they stroked through the soft curls between her legs.

“Septimius” she gasped “what are you?” and then she felt his finger push into, and she moaned and arched her back as he slid his finger all the way in kissing her frantically as he worked it slowly in and out.

She was heaving huge breaths; she had never imagined anything like this would be part of this night and then he moved his mouth away and she felt his weight shift as he wriggled lower.

She raised her head, what was he doing? And then she cried out in surprise as she felt his tongue against her.

“you must not” she panted “you must not”

“Florence” Septimius looked up at her “do you trust me?”

“I…” she nodded

“then please let me do this, I promise it will give you more pleasure than you have ever known”

Florence’s head spun; she could experience more pleasure? She could not imagine how

Septimus dipped his head between her thighs again and she felt him lapping gently at part of her that felt particularly sensitive, as if all the never endings in her body were concentrated on it. His fingers were working faster, and she clenched the sheets in her fists as the pleasure rose and rose; it was impossible to keep quiet and she could hear shamefully loud moans escaping her lips as she clutched at his hair. She began to push against him, not even knowing why but only knowing that she needed more and then she felt his tongue stop flicking and he began to suck gently and persistently

“oh oh oh oh” Florence did not know what was happening to her “Septimius…. oh god” and then a huge wave swept over her and she found herself bucking against him crying out his name incoherently as he moved with her as she twisted and squirmed

Eventually she quieted down, but her body was shaking; Septimius moved up and held her against him, kissing her and stroking her hair

“what happened to me?” whispered Florence half laughing half afraid “what did you do?”

“you know that in order to have children, a man must spend inside a woman” said Septimius gently

Florence nodded

“what happened to you is the equivalent for women, you do not climax in the same way men do but you still climax”

Florence looked at him and then a huge smile spread over her face
“I liked it” she whispered

Septimius laughed

“I am glad that you did”

He sighed and kissed her gently

“may I make love to you?” he whispered

Florence nodded “yes” she said

Septimus settled himself between her legs desperate to be gentle. She was not a virgin, but she might just as well have been for all the experience she had with her husband.

He rubbed himself against her gently a few times to allow her to get used to him and then very gently he pushed inside her

“oh” Florence moaned, and he stilled

“am I hurting you?” he asked his breath ragged

“no” Florence shook her head, indeed this felt less painful than with Edward where it could take some time for her to feel wet enough to allow it to be comfortable

Septimus nodded and continued to press inside her gently until he was fully in her. He took a breath keeping himself still even though he yearned to thrust madly, his desire for her almost threatening to spill over, allowing her time to adjust and then he began to move. Slowly at first and then faster

Florence’s head was spinning; Edward just thrust metronomically in and out, eyes tightly shut, barely acknowledging she was even there but Septimius was murmuring endearments into her hair, kissing her and staring into her eyes. She found herself running her hands up and down his back, pulling him against her, her panting breaths matching his.

“Florence…” Septimus was biting his lip, his forehead wrinkled on concentration as he tried to hold off his orgasm

“Septimius” Florence moved beneath him, his nails digging into his back “Septimius my darling, I love you, I love you”

“oh god” Septimius groaned he could not hold off anymore and he tried to pull away from her recognizing the danger of spilling inside her, but Florence clasped him determinedly kissing him

“Florence…”

and then Septimius was climaxing uncontrollably unable to stop himself but dimly registering that Florence seemed to want him too as he slumped down over her his breath coming in gasps as he gathered her to him, feeling her tears against his chest.
Two letters

Chapter Summary

Florence and Alexi both receive letters, Alfred meets with William and Alexi

Chapter Notes

and so after a brief happy interlude with septimus and florence we are back to the drama!!

St Petersburg Summer 1849

Edward sighed quietly to himself and shifted his weight to the other foot, the Tsars audience chamber went on for hours and of course no one was permitted to sit in His Imperial Majesty’s presence without permission.

As each new person arrived, the man who had been conversing with the Tsar on a small hard wooden chair without arms set some 2ft from him rose, walked backwards bowing three times and then the new person was dropped into the chair by the Equerry whose job it was to conduct the diplomatic corps around the various functions relating to their role.

Edward’s mind began to wonder, as it so often did, onto Alfred. He wondered what his beloved was doing. He pictured him walking with the Queen and her entourage in the sunny gardens, clad in the becoming blues and greys he always wore or even better in his uniform. On his horse in his uniform…. He felt himself start to get warm as he remembered one particular time when he’d persuaded Alfred to keep his uniform on, something which had resulted in a frantic rather sweaty (at least for Alfred) bout of love making. He shifted again, now a situation was developing in his court dress, which as it included rather tight breeches could not be allowed to continue. Trying desperately to think of something else, he wondered if Florence had received his latest letter asking for the date she and the children were leaving; if she had she had not yet responded. He knew the post took time from England, but it frustrated him that he did not know when she was coming. The fact that she might not come at all never even crossed his mind.

Plas Newydd

“Florence….” Septimus groaned into her neck, his thrusts speeding up

Florence gasped in response; her skirts hitched up around her waist as she sat astride his lap. She had sworn that she would spend just the one night with Septimus but how could she after that? She had never experienced anything like it, not just his love making but the intimacy. After that first time, he’d taken her into his arms, holding her tight against him. She had waited for him to move away after a few moments, but he had not, he continued to hold her and then had rolled onto his back, his arm around her shoulders and she had snuggled up to his chest. He’d sighed contentedly and kissed
her hair, whispering endearments. Edward by contrast seemed to vibrate with tension when he held her afterwards even though it was just for a few moments and then swiftly headed for the bathroom.

“Florence…” Septimus moaned “I have to…” and then he was lifting her off just in time as he climaxed.

Florence lay on her side panting and frustrated. She hated that he could not finish inside her but after that first time, he’d spoken to her gently but seriously.

“we cannot risk a baby my love” he said, “not yet, it could not be passed off as your husband’s and then what would happen to you?”

Florence knew he was right, but she found it very frustrating. Even though Septimius always ensured she climaxed first, it still felt the act was incomplete when he had to orgasm outside her.

Septimus rolled on his side and spooned up behind her, wrapping his arms around her, nuzzling her hair

“it will not always be like this” he said

Florence sighed

“how can it be otherwise whilst I am married to Edward?” she asked

“ask him for a divorce” whispered Septimus

“we have been through this Septimius” said Florence wearily “even if Edward would consent to a divorce and I do not believe that he would, my father would not countenance it”

Septimus hugged her tighter, there had to be a way out of their predicament, his mother and father had found one, he would too.

Later downstairs, Charlotte took Florence aside. She looked so well, her eyes and skin glowing, it was what love did to you reflected Charlotte, it made the plainest of people look beautiful. Sadly, she was about to dampen Florence’s glow

“a letter has come from Russia” said Charlotte; she had persuaded Florence she should have letters forwarded onto Plas Newydd; it wouldn’t do to be out of contact.

The light in Florence’s eyes dimmed as she took the envelope

“thank you” she said distantly “I will read it in the library”

Charlotte nodded as Florence left and crossed back into the drawing room intercepting Septimus on the way

“did I see Florence?” he asked

“a letter has come from Russia Septimus” said Charlotte and she saw his face flush and his jaw set defiantly

“she does not have to leave yet” he said determinedly

“Septimius”
his mother touched his arm compassionately thinking that with hindsight it may not have been wise to allow them this time together; they were now clearly more deeply in love which meant the separation would be far more painful.

Florence took a breath and hesitantly opened the envelope addressed in Edward’s familiar handwriting

“Dear Florence

I hope that you do not think me the overbearing husband, but I must insist you tell me when you are leaving. I need to make arrangements for you to be met and escorted to St Petersburg, the road is not safe, and I would not be able to forgive myself if something happened to you and our girls.

Please write to me soonest to inform me of the date

Fondest regards

Edward”

Florence slumped back onto the sofa. It was inevitable, she could no longer put it off. She had to stop living this fantasy life with Septimus and return to reality

“Florence?”

She heard Septimus voice at the door, he gestured at the letter

“was it from?” he left the question hanging in the air

“Edward? Yes, it was he wants me to tell him the date I am leaving England”

“tell him not for a month” said Septimus, his mouth set in a frown

Florence laughed “do not be ridiculous Septimus, I cannot wait a month”

“why not?” said Septimus belligerently “It is not as if he craves your company”

Florence rose from the sofa on which she was sitting “Edward and I get on perfectly amicably Septimius” she said tightly

“amicably” Septimus sneered; he crossed the room to her and seized her hand bringing it to his lips “does he love you? want you? need you like I do?”

“Septimus stop it” said Florence “this is not helping”

“I do not want you to go” said Septimus drawing her into his arms “please Florence tell him you need to stay another month”

“I cannot” Florence wriggled out of his embrace “be reasonable Septimus please! You knew that I would have to go to him, you knew it, do not make this harder than it already is”

“but…”

“NO” said Florence her angrily “do you not think I would prefer to stay here? Of course, I would but I cannot! I am his wife, his property, as are our children and though Edward has never, would never
treat me in such a way, I cannot stay”

They stood staring at each other and then Septimius’ face crumpled

“I am sorry” he said tears falling down his cheeks “it is just, I love you Florence, I love you so much and the thought of being without you is killing me. What if he desires more children and wishes you to return to his bed?”

the thought of his darling Florence back in the bed of Edward was too much to countenance

“If he does then there is nothing I can do” said Florence resignedly “but somehow Septimus I do not think he will”

Septimus dropped onto the sofa and she sat next to him pulling his head into her lap and stroking his hair

“do not grieve yet my love” she said “not while we are still together. Save your tears for when we are parted”

Alexi unlaced his fingers from William’s as the carriage turned into Mayfair, their holiday was now most definitely at an end. They had had an ecstatically wonderful time together. William had taught him to play golf though Alexi still maintained that in the words of Samuel Johnson ‘it was a good walk spoiled’ and they had fished, swam in lochs, enjoyed trying many different types of whiskey and best of all, had managed to spend a week at a remote boothy where they could be together every night. They had also visited the Lothian estate and they had information for Alfred.

“I wish we could turn back the clock to 3 weeks ago” sighed William

“as do I” said Alexi sadly “William, I have had the most wonderful time with you”

“and I with you” he paused “we will do it again Alexi” he said trying to put a brave face on things. Having spent this time together, he couldn’t imagine how he would manage tomorrow waking up and realising he would not be breakfasting with Alexi.

The carriage drew up outside the Russian embassy and Alexi gave Williams hand one last squeeze before he climbed out

“goodbye William” he said, his eyes telegraphing everything he could not say out loud

“goodbye Alexi” William clamped his mouth shut to stop his lip trembling and banged on the roof of the carriage to signal it should leave

Alexi’s shoulders drooped as the carriage turned the corner and then taking a breath, he assumed a pleasant expression and went into the embassy.

“Your Highness” the embassy secretary bowed to him “I trust you enjoyed your sojourn in Scotland”

“very much so” said Alexi

“there are messages in your apartments sir”

Alexi nodded, he was tired and just wanted to go to his rooms and rest. Going up the stairs he went into his apartments; they seemed echoingly empty without William beside him laughing and twining his arm around him.
He picked up his letters and flipped through them, stiffening when he saw the handwriting on one of them. He thought about opening all the others first but then seizing his letter opener, he tore through the envelope, better to give it over with

“My dear Alexi

Your father is very ill and would like to be reconciled with you as he believes he has not much longer left to live. I know that you parted on very bad terms and understand that you may reluctant to come home, but he is deeply sorry for what happened. Please my son, come home and forgive him before he dies

With all love

Mama”

Alexi dropped the letter, his eyes narrowing. His father who had been so anxious to pack him off to England, so ashamed of him, so fearful that word of his ‘indiscretion’ would get out, he’d barely looked at him as he’d scrawled a note to Count Brunnov asking him to include Alexi in his entourage leaving for London in two days’ time.

And now he was dying and wanted to be reconciled after all that had happened. Alexi rubbed his face; he was not at all sure how he felt and indeed whether he could do as his mother asked

3 days later

“Alfred”

William and then Alexi clasped him in a hug

“how are you?”

Alfred smiled sadly

“as you see gentlemen”

Truth was he did not look well. Although some of that could be down to the stress of spending several weeks on the isle of Wight with the queen and her ever growing brood of children, they both knew it was the loss of Edward that had caused the sparkle to vanish from his eyes and his face to have that sad pinched look

Their sympathetic faces told him they understood

“but enough of my melancholy, I weary myself with it” continued Alfred “how was your time away?”

“it was very agreeable” said William and he smiled glancing at Alexi who glanced back, and they exchanged a look that made Alfred’s heart clench with missing Edward

“and we did find out some information” said Alexi excitedly

“oh?” Alfred leaned forward with excitement “what did you find?”

“The Lothian estate has been in financial difficulty for years; it was one of the reasons that the Marquis was so amenable to his daughter marrying Mr Drummond. However, now it seems he is
flush with money, spending far more than the estate brings in or so that is the rumour amongst the locals”

Alfred sighed and sat back

“it is well known that the Drummond family have given him financial support in return for the title he brings to the family” he felt irrationally annoyed; this was public knowledge he thought why were they telling him that which he already knew?

“no alfred you do not understand” said William earnestly “he is spending far more than the money given to him by the Drummonds. Where is it coming from?”

Alfred frowned

“investments?”

Alexi shook his head

“surely they would not have matured in time and besides the marquis was well known locally for making very poor investments”

Alfred rubbed his nose; it did indeed seem as if there were something amiss, but it was not exactly scandal of the century

“no other misdeeds?” he asked hopefully “illegitimate children? Adulterous relationships?”

They both shook their head regretfully

“sadly no” said William “I mean he does visit a brothel in Jedburgh regularly but these days no one would find that particularly scandalous”

“no” said Alfred “sadly they would not. it seems this financial angle is the one we must pursue to have the best chance of putting an end to his blackmail of Edward”
Edward meets his twins

Chapter Summary

Edward is reunited with Florence and meets his new daughters

St Petersburg early September 1849

Florence took several breaths to compose herself as the carriage neared St Petersburg. Beside her Blair was bouncing with excitement asking if they were nearly there. The twins were in the carriage behind with the nursemaid she had engaged for the journey. Next to the carriage rode the tall figure of Prince Alexi who she had come to rely on completely over the last few weeks. She tried hard not to think of Septimus and their final parting, it was too painful.

They had made love with a painful intensity, Septimus’ fingers leaving marks where he had clutched her so tightly.

“stay” he had moaned into her neck “please please Florence, stay with me”

“I cannot Septimus” she said her voice breaking “you know I cannot, please stop asking it of me”

And he had nodded and then wept in her arms

“I do not want this” he cried “if this is love I do not want it; it is too much hurt to be expected to bear”

Florence held him tightly, it seemed these last weeks, their roles had been reversed. Septimus for all his adventures, which he had at her prompting, somewhat shamefacedly confessed a little of, seemed so much younger and more naïve than her. He believed love solved everything, but she knew it did not. She had believed she loved Edward once although now she knew she had not, not as she loved Septimus, but Edward had never loved her, although he cared for her, she did believe that. However, it did not matter that she loved Septimus, he was not her husband, Edward was and that was that. She had said to Septimus he should try to forget her once she went to Russia

“when I am gone, you should find yourself a wife”

“a wife??!!” Septimius had sat up in bed furiously “what nonsense are you talking?”

“I will be far away Septimus” she had said gently “and I am married, do not waste your life waiting for me”

“do you not love me Florence?” he asked looked at her with pain in his eyes

“you know I do” she said touching his face

“then why would you say such a thing?”

“because I do not want you to be unhappy” she said patiently “you should be married and have children of your own, do not be like Lord Alfred, pining away for a woman you cannot have”
Septimus stared at her “Alfred pining for a woman?”

“yes” said Florence “Lady Stanhope told me, he is love with Her Majesty which is why he refuses to marry or even look at another woman”

Septimus had to turn away to hide his face, so that was what she believed, no wonder she had never once suspected Alfred and Edward of anything! But then, how many would? It would not occur to anyone that two men would be having an affair.

He turned back to her

“I promise you I am not like Alfred” he said “I am like my father. You know how much he wanted my mother, how he fell in love with her and she with him and nothing would keep them apart. It will be the same for us Florence. Would you want to marry me if you could?” he said the last part half fearful she may say no

“In a heartbeat my love” she said throwing her arms around him

“then promise me that you will at least try to ascertain Edward’s feelings on divorce”

“I will” she said “I will”

Edward was in his study working when the messenger arrived

“Sir Edward, Lady Drummond’s carriage is approaching the city”

Edward jumped up, against all his expectations he realised he was happy Florence was going to be here with him. He missed Alfred almost unbearably and had felt deeply alone the last few months. He also missed Blair and was almost frantic to see his new twin daughters; he had not realised how much becoming a father had meant to him and he would always be profoundly and deeply grateful to Florence for giving him his children. If only there had been another way to create them that had not involved those night-time activities, he was sure they could have been happier. As it was, his distaste for them and his inability to pretend he loved her, had driven a rift between them. Perhaps some of that rift could now be repaired.

He ran downstairs and out into the courtyard and began to pace impatiently waiting for the sound of the carriage on the cobbles. At length he heard the familiar rattle of wheels and clip clop of horses and saw two carriages begin their progression up through the grounds to the large open gate that was the entrance to the inner courtyard. Edward could feel the smile begin to light up his face and he began to rock on his feet. His family! Here at last. If he could not have his beloved Alfred, at least he would have Florence’s soothing care and attention to his welfare.

He could see Blair’s face pressed against the glass and he hastened over, but before he could get there, Blair had evidently worked out how to open the door and she tumbled out and ran towards him

“papa papa” she shouted “PAPA”

He scooped her up and held her tightly against him

“my darling girl”

She slid her arms around his neck and just lay against him as inhaled her fresh clean baby smell; he
could feel the tears flowing down his cheeks

“papa?” Blair pulled back “why are you sad? I am here now and look, I have brought you your hat”

Edward had wondered why she seemed to have one of his old hats now looking considerably the worse for wear on her head, but he assumed it was some childish phase

“Thank you” he said hastily rubbing at his cheeks “and I am not sad my darling, I am very very happy you are”

“Put it on then” she said taking it off “I brought it for you”

The hat was somewhat battered to say the least and had one or two mysterious marks on it, nevertheless Edward gravely removed his current hat and put it on

“Edward”

Florence had come to stand quietly next to him;

“let me greet mama” said Edward to Blair as he put her down

They looked at each other for a few moments and then Edward pulled her into her arms, embracing her with a strength Florence had never felt before, his body shaking with sobs

“why Edward” said Florence shocked at his reaction “whatever is the matter?”

“I have been so lonely” he said, his voice thick with tears “I have missed everyone so much”

“Poor Edward” said Florence tenderly, and she did mean it, he looked dreadful. Thin and wan, barely shaven and his hair longer with curls falling untamed around his collar “perhaps you would like to meet you new daughters?”

He pulled back, fumbling for a handkerchief to mop his eyes and nodded

“Very much”

The nurse maid came forward with a large travel cot, that was fastened against the sun. Florence unlaced the cover and folded it back. There inside sleeping facing each other were his twins

“Oh……” breathed Edward entranced, he’d forgotten how tiny babies were in their first few months. He reached in and gently stroked first one blonde head then the other

“Which is which?” he asked

“This is Charlotte” said Florence indicating the one on the right “and Henrietta”

Edward frowned

“but they look identical Florence, how do you tell which is which?”

“I am their mother Edward” she said laughing “I can always tell. Charlotte has a little strawberry mark here and is a little bigger”

Edward looked from one to the other, even with the tiny strawberry mark, they looked impossibly alike
“may I?” he asked

“of course, Edward” said Florence “they are your children too”

Edward smiled and reached in to pick up Henrietta, she blinked and yawned and then curved herself into Edward’s shoulder.

Edward laughed with happiness

“I had forgotten how this felt” he said to Florence “to feel them like this when they are so tiny”

“papa” Blair was tugging at his leg “what about me?”

“your papa cannot hold all of you Blair” said Florence mildly

“then he should be carrying me because I got here first. I am the oldest”

“how would it be if you held my hand?” asked Edward

Blair put her head on one side considering

“that would do” she said

Standing watching, Alexi felt pleased for Edward in his happiness but deeply melancholy for himself. Although he would only be away for a few weeks, enough time to see his father and return to London, he missed Will so much already, plus the journey had reawakened all the horrible memories of Grigori. The best part of the undertaking had been getting to know Florence Drummond better. He had only ever known her though Edward and particularly Alfred’s eyes. He understood completely that she was hardly likely to be Alfred’s most favoured person and he had found her to be most enjoyable company although somewhat sad which surprised him, he had thought she would be happy to be reunited with Edward

He had delicately broached the subject with her over dinner one night, usually she ate in her room with the children but this particular night, she had come downstairs asking if she might join him

She looked weary “I find I need a break from them all”

“Of course, Lady Drummond, I would be delighted”

She had asked him to tell her more of Russia and St Petersburg and had listened intently to what he said. At length he had asked her if he might ask her a question

“You may” she said, “although I may of course not answer it” and she smiled

“of course,” said Alexi gravely “I hope I do not seem impertinent madam, but you seem somewhat sad and I wondered if there was anything troubling you?”

“you are surprised that a woman leaving her country and all her friends and family is sad your highness?” replied Florence

“No….” said Alexi “but forgive me are you certain that is all it is?”

“Quite certain” said Florence firmly “and now Your Highness I must return to my children, good night” and Alexi had no choice but to stand and bow as she left
He had not been convinced though, and he still was not. Her greeting of Edward was affectionate but not overly so, while Edward’s had surprised him with its emotion.

Edward returned Henrietta to the bassinet and turned his gaze towards Alexi, coming over to shake his hand while Blair firmly held his other one

“Your Highness” he said “thank you for escorting my wife, it a such a stroke of luck you had to return though I am sorry for the circumstances”

Alexi returned the handshake firmly

“It as a pleasure Sir Edward” he said “and I am delighted to see you. I have news from England which perhaps we can discuss, important news” and his expression left no doubt that it was about Alfred

“Of course,” said Edward his heart thumping at the thought of news from his love I must spend time with my family first but tomorrow?”

“Tomorrow” said Alexi

“Papa” Blair tugged at his hand “I want to see inside the castle, mama said the saw lived here, can I see him?”

Edward and Alexi both laughed

“the Tsar lives here yes but I don’t think you can see him just now my darling” said Edward fondly

“why?”

“because he’s very busy” said Edward

“Why?”

“Because he has a country to run”

“Why?”

“because he’s the king”

“Why?”

“Why don’t we all go inside” said Edward “out of the sun”

He could see Blair was about to open her mouth to ask why again

“you can see your new bedroom”

“yes! I would like that papa” she said excitedly

“Come then, let us get mama and your sisters”

Blair nodded and ran off tugging Edward behind her

“mama mama” she shouted “come along, I have a new bedroom”
“Do not shout Blair dear” said Florence “you will wake your sisters”

Blair nodded and then whispered very loudly

“I have a new bedroom mama”

Edward and Florence laughed, and Edward offered Florence his arm

“Come along my dear” he said “come and see your new home”
important letters

Chapter Summary

Alfred receives letters from Edward and Alexi, in St Petersburg Florence is trying her best to deal with missing Septimus

“Good morning my lord”

“Good morning Jones”

Alfred smiled at his butler, but Jones saw that as usual since Sir Edward was gone, it did not quite reach his eyes. Rather it was the polite smile Alfred had perfected as a courtier.

“did you sleep well sir?”

“tolerably” replied alfred sitting down at the table

“I will fetch your breakfast” said Jones and left, clattering down to the kitchen to talk to his wife

“How is he?” asked Phyllis as she ladled eggs and kidneys onto a plate while Jones warmed the coffee pot.

Dafydd sighed

“the same. He misses Sir Edward so much. He was such a merry little boy and to see him like this now is very hard”

Phyllis put down her pan and took her husband’s hand

“it is Dafydd, but at least he has us”

Dafydd smiled at her

“he does”

He took the plate from and carried it upstairs

“your breakfast my lord”

He said wondering if Alfred would eat it this time; his appetite had been somewhat diminished since he had returned, and he was starting to look troublingly thin. He fussed about with the coffee pot and then heard the doorbell clang

“Post” he said almost to himself as Alfred seemed sunk in melancholy

He went to the door and took several envelopes from the boy standing there, quickly riffling through them; he need not trouble alfred with anything that looked to be a bill. There was one large envelope addressed to Lord Alfred, cream coloured and embossed with a Russian stamp

He hurried back to the breakfast room
“my lord” he said handing over the envelope “from Russia” he said with a smile

Alfred seized the envelope eagerly

“thank you, Jones,” he said

Jones bowed and smiled, withdrawing to let Alfred read the letter in peace.

Alfred tore open the envelope, the writing was not Edward’s so was presumably from Alexi, but he would have news of Edward surely? He shook out several sheets of folded up paper

My Dear friend

I am writing to let you know I along with Lady Drummond and the misses Drummond have arrived safely in St Petersburg. You will be glad to know Sir Edward is well and I have enclosed a letter from him.

Alas I cannot report such good news on behalf of myself. I visited my father who was much more ill than I expected. It was hard to see him looking so frail, I have long felt anger towards him for his failure to understand my grief over Grigori or to attempt any justice for him. Instead he could not wait to send me away. I had hoped that that he would have come to some understanding of what he did and how it affected me, but he has not. Instead, and I can scare believe I have to write this, he has arranged for me to be married. Worse, on his death which I do not believe will be long delayed, I will have to return to Russia. My mother and sisters cannot run the family estate. My dear Alfred, you will understand better than anyone when I say I do not know how to break the news to William.

Please say nothing of this to William. I have hopes, forlorn I think but some, of persuading my father to change his mind about the marriage. Whatever happens I will return to England to settle my affairs there.

Your friend

Alexi

Alfred read Alexi’s words with growing horror and pity for his friend. Poor Alexi indeed, and poor Will. What would he do? What could he say? At least some day Edward would come back to him but from the sound of it, Alexi would be lost to Will forever.

It was with a sadder than expected heart, he unfolded the letter from Edward. The first thing he noticed was that Edward, dear Edward, had drawn a tiny heart at the top with their initials in it. He smiled and shook his head gently, even now Edward was impulsive. He clearly had not stopped to think someone else might read the letter.

“My dearest Alfred

It is so hard to write to you; I talk to you all the time in my head and yet when it comes to putting quill to paper, it’s as if my thoughts become too much. How do I convey how much I miss you? how much I miss us?

Florence has now arrived and although I know you do not wish me to speak of her, I feel I must because she is changed Alfred and I am both puzzled and relieved. I assured you that I would not share her bed again and I will not, but I must say that Florence shows no sign of wanting me to return to her bed. She occupies her own room; I occupy mine and she locks her door every night.
She is friendly and polite but distant. Perhaps she misses England more than she expected.

My twins though Alfred! I know you have seen them, are they not beautiful? though I confess I cannot tell them apart yet, and Blair; I know I speak as a proud papa Alfred, but everyone is delighted by her. None of this makes up for the loss of you though.

You will no doubt also have read Alexi’s letter that I am smuggling this inside. I am so sad for our friend; I am doing my best to comfort him, but it is hard for what can one say?

But enough of others

I know you may not be able to write back soon but when you do write me of what you are doing. I look back my dearest on our first meeting; how you shone like a very angel and I foolish boy that I was then, thought that I had become ill. But perhaps not so foolish? For I am ill Alfred, I have an incurable sickness which is my love for you, and I pray I never got well again

All my love

Edward

Alfred found the tears were running down his cheeks and he wiped them hastily as he heard Jones approaching.

“is all well my lord?” he asked gently

Alfred nodded

“yes” he said, his voice slightly cracked “it is Jones, and thank you” he looked up at his butler and smiled “for everything”

Jones smiled back and laid his hand on Alfred’s shoulder and squeezed it momentarily before he collected up the plates and left.

St Petersburg

Florence sat quietly as her maid finished undoing her hair and brushed it out ready for bed. No one looking at the calmness of her face would have realised the turmoil beneath. She had been surprised when she arrived at just how much Edward seemed to have need of her, she had never known Edward to seem so lost. Not sexually of course, he’d never had need of her in that way she realised now, but he clung to her side almost like a child. Sadly, such was the change in her feelings towards him that she found it irksome in the way she did when Blair asked her 6 times and then 6 times more why the sky was blue, or the grass was green. She had prevailed on him when she arrived to arrange his hair correctly and shave and had taken it in hand to see his clothes were properly washed and pressed and he had gone along with every request she had made of him docilely. It was in this spirit that she had requested her own room. The first night she had arrived she had lain in the large bed rigid with tension that Edward may think the way to show her she was welcome was to put both of them through one of their passionless couplings, but he hadn’t. He had merely reached for her hand, squeezed it and said in a sad tired voice

“I am so glad you are here Florence”
And then he had fallen immediately asleep.

The next day she had requested her own room so she could be with the twins in the night without disturbing him. Edward had smiled at her and said of course, and that had been that. She now had a beautiful lavender and grey boudoir where she could withdraw and shut out the world.

She already knew that she was the envy of most of the women at court. Edward’s pride in his children, his very uncourtly habit of playing with Blair in public and of course his handsomeness had the other court ladies green with jealousy. They were at great pains to stress to Florence just how ‘some’ women, never themselves of course, had set their cap at Sir Edward, but he had not so much as even looked at another woman in her absence.

She was lucky she supposed that with all her court duties, the children and Edward she was kept so busy during the day but at night, at night all she could do was think of Septimus. There were times she ached for him so much, she thought she might scream. She had heard of how some women diagnosed with hysteria tore at their hair and rent their clothes and she now understood why. The worst thing was that she could not talk about him to anyone nor could she write to him, and he could not write to her. As the brother of Edward’s friend Lord Alfred, and an unmarried brother at that, he was supposed to be no more than an acquaintance. The one person who did know him, Edward, was the one person she absolutely could not talk too about him.

She had decided therefore that the only way to manage her feelings and to stop them spilling out was to keep a journal. She kept it in a secret drawer in her desk and in it she confided all her thoughts and feelings about Edward, the children and most of all Septimus. It was her refuge and her sanity, and she wrote in it every night.

The maid finished brushing her hair, curtseyed and left the room. Florence sighed with relief, took out the key to the drawer she kept hidden in her jewellery case and retrieved her journal. She sat and thought for a few moments and then she began to write.

London

Alfred frowned at Septimus over the dinner table. He had taken to coming to Uxbridge House more and more as the Palace was fast becoming a nursery and school room combined. It wasn’t that he didn’t like children; he had after all so many nieces and nephews but the quarrels between the Queen and the Prince were becoming more embarrassingly public by the day and what they mostly fought over was the children.

He noted that Septimus did not look well, in fact he had not done so for some weeks. Alfred had been sunk in his own melancholy for some time but even he realised Septimus was not himself and after his letter from Edward, he was determined to try and cheer his brother

“Septimus” he ventured “you seem not yourself”

Septimus looked at him, eyes ringed with exhaustion; he found he could barely sleep or eat.

“I am not” he said but gave no further information

Alfred was puzzled

“What ails you?” he asked, “is it something I could help with?”

“You?” Septimus gave a mirthless laugh “no you cannot help”
Alfred recoiled as though he’d been struck and Septimus immediately felt guilty. This was not after all Alfred’s fault; no, it was all down to that Edward. It was Edward who had married Florence when he had no business to, Edward who was ruining Alfred’s life, Edward who had been so careless as to let his father in law find that letter, Edward who was destroying Septimus’ chances of happiness. All of this was Edward’s fault

“I am sorry alfred” he said wearily “it is just that no one can help me”

“are you sure Septimius?” persisted alfred, perhaps if he could solve Septimius’ problem, it would take his mind off his own

‘Should I tell him?’ Septimus wondered, ‘should I tell him I am in love with Edward’s wife and she with me? Would it help?’ If anyone would understand how he felt it would be alfred

“alfred” he began but just at that moment their mother came in and Septimus sunk back into his chair. It would have to wait.
Chapter Summary

Alexi returns to Russia and Florence considers her relationship with Edward and hears news of Septimus

Chapter Notes

Im so sorry it has taken me so long to update this! Ive been stuck on other fics and my muse went on holiday. Howeber she's back and raring to go. Thank you to everyone still reading my inane ramblings xxx

St Petersburg November 1848

“Alexi”

Edward waited until the servant who had shown Alexi in withdrew, and then went over to Alexi and hugged him tightly.

Alexi clung to him briefly and then pulled away, Edward looked at him sympathetically

“I am sorry that you are here my friend” he said

“as am I” said Alexi sadly

“was the parting very painful?” asked Edward as they sat

Alexi nodded

“more than I believed possible” he said sadly “well my dear friend, you know”

Edward nodded “I do”

“It was so hard Edward; he was so pleased to see me after we were apart for so long and then I had to tell him….“ Alexi broke off as he recalled the meeting with William

“Alexi” William started up and ran into his arms as Alexi entered the cottage. They’d arranged to meet in one of the cottages on the Peel estate

Alexi clasped him close burying his face in his hair

“I missed you so much William” he said

“I missed you too” said William “but now you’re back…. I am sorry about your father though, even though you did not get along with him, it is still hard to lose a parent”
“it is” Alexi took a breath “William, I need to talk to you”

“oh? This sounds serious my dearest” William frowned at him “what has happened?”

“please sit”

“Alexi, you are alarming me” said William in sudden fear

“I do not mean to my dearest, but it is indeed serious” he took William’s hands “my father’s death has changed everything. I have to” he broke off steeling himself “I have to go back to Russia”

“so soon?” asked William frowning

“no, I mean I have to go back” and he looked at William desperate for him to understand

“you mean…. forever?” William’s face went slack with shock

Alexi nodded “yes…. I am sorry William I am so so sorry”

“He did not take it well?” asked Edward delicately

Alexi shook his head tears glistening in his eyes

“that was the worst thing Edward, he was so brave about it, trying to spare my feelings, saying it could not be helped but I saw his lips trembling and the tears in his eyes”

Alexi put his hands over his face

“I cannot stop seeing his face as we said goodbye” he said his voice muffled “Edward how will I bear it?”

Edward went over to him and put an arm around his shoulders

“I will do all I can to help” he said “I do not forget how your advice after Alfred’s accident made me resolve not to give up on him, and you must promise me the same. No matter what happens Alexi, do not give up on William”

“I will try” whispered Alexi “but Edward what if he gives up on me?”

“He won’t” said Edward with more confidence than he necessarily felt “he won’t”

Several days later

Florence looked out of the window to see Blair shrieking with laughter as Edward pulled her around on a tiny sledge. Her little red coat and hat stood out like a poppy splash against the snow and her curls, so like Edward’s were yet again coming free of the ribbons she used to tie them with. Edward’s face was a picture of happiness as Blair shouted

“faster papa faster”

And jingled the little reins around the front which had bells attached to them. Edward seeing her in the window pointed and said something to Blair who turned and waved frantically to her. Florence
smiled and waved back, glad that neither Blair nor Edward could see the smile did not reach her eyes.

One of the maids entered and curtseyed “madam, it is time for the Tsarina’s salon”

Florence nodded, knowing she had to leave at once. Even though the Tsarina was always late, it would be an unforgiveable breach of etiquette for Florence not to be there waiting quietly with the other ladies of the diplomatic corps when the Tsarina arrived.

She took a last look in the mirror; she was much thinner than she used to be, even Edward had noticed asking if she was well. She’d replied she was and that it was down to the strenuousness of her new duties which was not entirely untrue; 21 year old Florence would never have thought she could tire of lunches and balls and entertainments and here she was 4 years later heartily wishing for nothing more than a quiet night in. As well as formal court functions which she attended with Edward which went on for an age, she was expected to call on the other ladies of the diplomatic corps, attend the Tsarina, participate in endless lunches, dinners, entertainments, picnics, hunting parties which she heartily disliked and now that the cold weather had set in, sledging and skating parties. However, the main reason for her weight loss was her deep unhappiness at being separated from Septimus. She had sworn that she would do her best not to dwell on him, but she yearned for news of him like a flower drooping in the desert. She had written a circumspect letter to Charlotte ostensibly full of news about her journey and life at court and asking almost casually at the end for news of him like a flower drooping in the desert. She had written a circumspect letter to Charlotte ostensibly full of news about her journey and life at court and asking almost casually at the end for news of her family, hoping that Charlotte would recognise it for what it was, a desperate plea for news of Septimus. Charlotte had and she had received a letter back

“Everyone is well although Septimus seems to have contracted a slight malady which has left him somewhat under the weather. Alfred is doing his best to cheer him, and they plan a trip to Scotland soon. Both send their best to you and Edward and of course the girls

Affectionately

Charlotte”

It was only a few words, but Florence knew it meant Septimus was as unhappy as she was. She wondered if Lord Alfred missed Edward, they were such good friends, it seemed impossible he would not.

She sighed and made her way to the Malachite Drawing room. There she was greeted with smiles and nods by Madame le Flo the French ambassadress, Duchess of Almodóvar the Spanish ambassadress, Princess Catherine von Lichtenstein the ambassadress from Austro Hungary and Princess Anna the Swedish ambassadress

“Lady Drummond” announced the footman

“Florence” Princess Anna smiled at her “how are you? how is your charming daughter?”

“she is well, I left her with sledging with Edward” replied Florence

At this a chorus of “oooohs” and “how sweet” broke out and Florence rolled her eyes internally. She knew Edward was held in very high regard by the court ladies. It amused her to watch them watching him at receptions and dinners. He was never allowed to sit out dances and there were times he begged her to make excuses on his behalf so he could have a few minutes rest. He was a most unusual man she though; most men would have welcomed so much female attention, but it only made Edward uncomfortable. His care for their daughters, his courtesy to her was faultless, and not once had he queried her decision to sleep apart from him; it was almost as if he was relieved not to
have to have relations with her. One would think he was having an affair except the more women were attentive to him, the more nervous he became. He was an enigma.

“have you seen that Prince Alexi has returned?” asked the Duchess “I understand his mother is arranging a marriage for him”

“yes” said Florence “he is a good friend of my husband’s”

“he is quite the catch” said Madame le flo “do you have any idea who the candidates might be?”

Florence shook her head “he has said nothing to me, mayhap he has said to Edward”

“do find out if you can” said the irrepressible Princess Catherine, the youngest of the ambassadresses married to a much older and very dull husband “we want to know who the lucky woman is”

“Her imperial highness, tsarina Alexandra Feodorovna”

intoned the butler and all the ladies shushed immediately, it was time for the Salon to begin

Later that night Florence spoke to Edward

“how is Prince Alexi since he arrived?” she asked

“he misses England” said Edward “he had grown very accustomed to it”

“and he is to be married?” asked Florence

“I believe his mother is listing potential brides as we speak” said Edward with a grimace

“does he get no say” asked Florence in surprise

Edward shrugged “I believe not” he said

“and….he has no love of his own he wishes to marry?” asked Florence, she had never seen Alexi with a woman in any of the times she had met him but she had always assumed he had a love waiting for him in Russia.

Edward shook his head “I understand they died” he said carefully

“oh Edward” Florence’s face creased in sympathy “poor Alexi”

“he does not like to speak of it” said Edward “I would not raise it with him, it would distress him”

“of course, not” said Florence “but Edward we must invite him to dinner and soon, he needs his friends around him”

Edward smiled at her “you are very kind my dear, I am sure he would be delighted”

“do you miss lord alfred?” asked Florence her mind on friendship

Edward frowned “why do you ask?”

“a man needs friends Edward and Alfred is your closest friend, it is only natural you must miss him”

Edward turned away and deliberately picked up a letter willing his hands not to shake
“yes” he said “I do miss him”
Revelations

Chapter Summary

Palmerston brings news from Russia which disturbs Septimius and Alfred And Septimius relationship comes under severe pressure

Chapter Notes

oh this hurt to write because i love alfred and septimus an see both their points of view

“Is your father in?”

Lord Palmerston strode into the Ordnance office as if he owned it

Septimus stood up

“He is my lord” he said with a smile and then held out his hand; the Anglesey family had been friends with the Palmerston’s for many years

“I hope you are well” he said “I have not seen you for some time”

Palmerston grinned at him

“I have been in Ireland” he said “vising my estate”

“ahhhhh” Septimus smiled back; everyone knew that Palmerston despite his adventures, was still utterly smitten by his wife Emily. It was a love that had survived many obstacles much like his parents had in fact. He sighed internally, if only he and Florence could find a way to be together, but she was in Russia was Edward.

“is that you Pam?” Septimus’ father called from the inner office

Septimus got and went to the door

“it is Lord Palmerston papa”

“show him in my boy” said Henry “and come in too”

Septimus nodded and gestured to the door

“Henry”

Lord Palmerston and Henry shook hands

“I have had a dispatch from Sir Edward Drummond, I think you should hear it”

Behind them Septimus stiffened at Edward’s name
Henry raised his eyebrows

“oh?”

“it seems the fears we discussed about the problems with the Ottoman Empire are well founded” said Palmerston

“what does sir Edward say?” asked Henry

Palmerston read from the dispatch in his hand

‘Russia expects a free hand in the Ottoman Empire after its intervention in Hungary. British commercial and strategic interests in the Middle East and India will be severely threatened by Russian pressure on Turkey’

Henry leaned back

“does he think he can encourage the Russians to change their minds on Turkey?”

Palmerston shrugged

“he’s doing his best to try; he goes on to say”

‘The French are of a mind with us on this, and both myself, and the French ambassador are doing our best to exert our influence over the Russians. My wife and I hosted a dinner for Count Karl Nesselrode the Russian foreign minister, and he listened to attentively to what I had to say about the potential damage to Anglo Russian relations should they pursue their policy in the East’

Palmerston folded up the letter

“I have met Lady Drummond several times, a most charming and beautiful woman and I would imagine a huge asset to her husband with his diplomatic endeavours”

Henry glanced at Septimus who had curled his hands into fists to stop them from trembling at the mention of Florence’s name

“Sir Edward is indeed fortunate in his marriage” he said “Lady Drummond is a very accomplished woman”

Palmerston laughed

“we all know that many a foreign secret has been whispered in the ear of a pretty woman with the right encouragement. I’m sure Lady Drummond is very skilled in the arts of persuasion” and he raised his eyebrows suggestively

“Lady Drummond is the finest of women” said Septimus in a strangled voice, how dare Palmerston make such implications?

“indeed” said henry stepping in frantically telegraphing with his eyes at Septimus to keep quiet “my son Alfred is a very dear friend of Sir Edward as you know, and we have met Lady Drummond many times”

Palmerston glanced at the clock

“I see I am already late for a meeting with the Prime Minister, let me have your thoughts on the eastern question Henry, and whether we should start considering war”
As soon as he left Septimus exploded in fury

“how dare he imply that Florence...that Lady Drummond that Florence would use her... her...” he broke off anger choking him

Henry shook his head at him

“Septimus that is just Palmerston’s way. He doesn’t mean anything by it’

“He insulted her” snapped Septimus “it is unacceptable! I have a good mind to…. to…” he faltered

“Call him out for a duel?” said Henry with a smile “Septimius, leave it be, this is 1849, we do not settle our issues over duels”

Septimus however was not to be mollified and he seethed all the way home. His jealousy was eating him alive; although Florence had assured him she and Edward would not resume marital relations, and he knew that Edward was not that way inclined. He also could not understand how any man could be in bed with Florence and not want to make love to her, even men that preferred his brother. And even if she and Edward were not sleeping together, what of the other men at the Russian court? Surely, they would pursue her? She was vulnerable; alone, lonely, isolated, what if she met someone else. It was intolerable! He would go to Russia, bring her home, it was the only way.

He was brooding over this plan when Alfred came into the library

“Septimus? Mama said you were in here. I thought we were dining together at Simpsons. I’ve been waiting this last half hour”

Septimus groaned “I am sorry alfred, I was distracted and forgot the time”

“indeed” said alfred eyeing Septimus who looked out of sorts to say the least “would it help to talk?”

Septimus closed his eyes, he felt the secret he kept from Alfred to be an unbearable burden which grew and grew on his conscience. However part of him also felt it was absurd to feel guilty about Alfred, if anything Alfred should be pleased that Florence and he were having relations but somehow, he knew he would not be.

“Septimus?”

“Palmerston came to the office today, he had news from Russia”

“from Russia” eagerness flooded alfred’s face “did it mention Edward at all?”

“the news was from Edward conveying the growing problem about Turkey”

Alfred smiled fondly “Edward is very astute”

“Palmerston was most disrespectful about lady Drummond” said Septimus trying and failing to keep his tone light

Alfred raised his eyebrow “really?”

“he implied she used her charms to obtain secrets from men”
Alfred laughed “I doubt that”

“why?” flared up Septimius at once “just because you do not find her attractive Alfred does not mean other men, real men, do not”

Alfred looked at him in astonishment hardly able to believe his ears “I meant that I doubt she would do such a thing because she is not that type of woman, and now Septimus you can explain to me what you meant just then by saying ‘real men’”

“I……” Septimus went bright red “I spoke out of turn Alfred forgive me”

Alfred looked at his brother who was flushed and trembling

“Septimus” he said quietly a dreadful thought burgeoning in his brain “what is Florence Drummond to you that Palmerston’s remarks disturb you so?”

Septimus took a breath “she……” He stopped; how could he say this?

“she?” prompted Alfred, the dread growing in his mind

Septimus closed his eyes “we are in love” he said “we…” and then he was cut off as Alfred’s fist smashed into his face

“you are in love with Florence Drummond??!!”

The blood roared in Alfred’s ears as he stood over his brother who was bent double

Septimus stood up

“yes” he said “I did not…”

But he could not continue as Alfred rushed at him and slammed him into the sideboard throwing the decanter and several glasses to the floor

“Alfred….”

And then he gasped as Alfred punched him into the stomach.

“she is Edward’s wife! How could you Septimus?” cried Alfred and he raised his fist again.

“I don’t want to fight you alfred”

“then stand there and let me hit you” spat Alfred as he punched him again

Septimus blocked it and retaliated with a punch of his own, knocking Alfred back several paces

“he doesn’t love her Alfred” said Septimus as Alfred came at him again

“that does not give you the right to make advances” shouted Alfred pushing Septimus back against the sideboard again knocking the last of the glasses to the floor

“he doesn’t even want her as a man does” Septimus shoulder charged Alfred who staggered and fell to the floor “he has no right to deny her that”

Septimus knelt over his brother who brought his knee up into his back causing Septimus to collapse forward. Quick as lightning Alfred rolled them over so Septimus was underneath
“and you have no right to take what is not yours”

“she is not a thing Alfred” yelled Septimus aiming a punch at his brother and missing knocking a lamp to the floor “she is a woman”

“she is Edward’s wife” alfred swore at him “she is Blair’s mother!!!”

“Alfred, Septimus!!!!”

Charlotte came running in followed by Henry more slowly leaning on his stick

“stop this” she shouted, “stop this at once!”

Henry grabbed alfred and dragged him off his brother

“What is going on here?” said henry as a panting alfred sat on the floor and Septimus attempted to sit up

“ask him” said alfred bitterly “ask him about Florence Drummond”

There was a long pause and Alfred got painfully to his feet, looking at his mother and father

“you know, don’t you?” he said slowly “you know about this”

Henry and charlotte looked at each other and then Henry nodded

Alfred laughed bitterly “of course you do” he said ironically “when did anything happen in this family that you did not know of it?”

“Alfred” said charlotte putting her hand on his arm but he shook it off

“I would have thought madam” he said “after what happened with my accident you would have learned to keep out of my affairs”

“Alfred that is not fair” said Septimus “mama and papa have done nothing wrong except to try and protect Florence and myself”

“is that so?” said alfred his heart shattered into a thousand shards “forgive me if I do not agree, no” he held up his hand as Henry went to speak “none of you have anything to say that I wish to hear”

He brushed down his coat with exaggerated care and smoothed his hair

“Mama, Papa, Septimius” he turned to them all and bowed “I do not expect that I will see you again”

And he walked out of the room with his head held high
a skating party

Chapter Summary

In St Petersburg, Florence, Edward and Blair attend a skating party but is it about to end in tragedy?

Chapter Notes

Im sorry for what Im about to do......

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

St Petersburg

It didn’t matter how long she lived here thought Florence, she would never get used to the freezing weather. The Palace fires roared in an attempt to keep out the cold but once away from them, the draughts stole through the windows and around her neck. Edward and Blair however seemed not to notice the temperature (the twins of course were bundled up happily in their perambulators under so many blankets she could only see their alert blue eyes turned as always towards each other) and were chattering happily to each other about the forthcoming skating party on the Neva. It was the Tsar’s youngest son Grand Duke Michael’s birthday and there had already been many days of celebrations. The skating party followed by a ball later that night would be the last for which Florence was heartily grateful. She felt if she had to have one more conversation about children or the weather over dinner she would scream. She had learned that she must not publicly express opinions on any of the political intrigues circulating the Court as anything she said would be taken to be the view of Edward and therefore of the British government. Not that she was asked her opinion that often anyway, she was after all just a woman. She had never particularly thought of herself as modern but the patronising chuckles of the older male ambassadors about the fact Britain had a Queen set her teeth on edge. She had once sweetly pointed out that Russia had had Catherine the Great but was told she had been a ruler in name only and had had men to help her make decisions.

She looked at Blair who was counting the books on the shelves by Edward’s desktop as he wound her scarf around her neck and felt an unaccountable anger that at some point Blair would be expected to be quiet, sit still and not to have any thoughts of her own just as she had been. She did not want that for her daughter; she would certainly ensure that Blair understood far more about life than she had done before she had made her debut in Society. She had already confided to her journal which she now kept under the mattress, that Blair would never go to the marriage bed as innocent as she had been.

Edward looked up and saw her watching them

“you look thoughtful” he said with a smile

“I was just thinking that life can be unfair on women” she said

Edward frowned
“life can be unfair on everyone” he said

“but more so on women” Florence persisted “what are your hopes for Blair’s future?”

“she is 3 years old Florence” said Edward bemusedly “I confess I had not thought of anything beyond her marrying well”

“marrying well” said Florence heatedly “and what does that mean?”

“a man who…who um…”

Too late Edward realised that the conversation was about to make a hypocrite of him; he had wanted to say ‘who loves her’ but how could he say that to Florence? Florence who knew he did not love her

“who can support her and cares for her” he finished somewhat lamely

Florence’s raised eyebrows and expression told him what she thought of that and he sighed, why must their relationship be so complicated? He did care for Florence, very much, and she and his daughters wanted for nothing but the longer they were in Russia, the more difficult Florence seemed to become.

“but why can’t I papa?” asked Blair for the tenth time

“because you did not know how to skate, and the ice is very slippery” said Edward patiently

Blair pouted “but mama is skating”

“mama knows how to skate” said Edward “you have to stay here and keep papa company”

Blair sighed and flopped dejectedly onto the stool next to Edward

“I am not allowed to do anything” she said and dropped her head onto the table

Edward’s mouth twitched into a smile which he tried to hide

Blair had decided recently that she was not allowed to do anything, anything encompassing not being allowed to go to bed when she liked to sliding down the bannisters of the palace stairs. To her, Edward and Florence were the most unreasonable parents in the world, and she sighed as if she carried the weight of the world on her shoulders every time she was refused what to her seemed quite reasonable requests.

Out on the ice, Edward could see Florence was the focus of much attention as she glided gracefully on her skates. Edward hoped that it would make her feel better; even he knew women liked to be admired. He did try and remember to compliment what she wore now and then but he had to be honest, he lacked Alfred’s savoir faire and easy charm with women.

Alfred…. 

His face swam into his mind, those beautiful heavy-lidded blue eyes that conveyed all his love with just a flicker of those absurdly long eyelashes, the milk white flawless skin, his lips soft and warm against his own as they kissed. Sometimes he felt he was living his life on one side of a window with
everyone else on the other, and none of what happened on the other side of the window was real to him nor could any of it reach him through the glass. He allowed himself to think of that evening in Scotland, how he thought his heart would burst if he did not kiss Alfred and how it would burst if he did and then when he had kissed him, how such a feeling of exhilaration had flooded him that he had scarcely known what to do.

Blair her face pillowed on her hands watched her papa out of the corner of her eye, he had that funny expression on his face again, the one where he did a little smile like he’d seen something funny that no one else could see. She turned her head and looked at her mama swooshing around on the ice and then turned her head again to see if her papa was watching her, but he was not. He was still staring into space with that funny look on his face. Very quietly she slid off the stool all the time watching Edward to see if he would say anything, but he seemed not to notice what she was doing. She stood for a few moments to see if he would see that she had moved but he did not and so very carefully she tiptoed away.

Blair slowly approached the icy river, peering around behind here every so often to see if anyone would say she should stop. She wanted to slide around on the ice like mama, it looked such fun, she was sure she could do it. She cautiously put one little button boot clad foot down onto the ice whilst holding onto the bank, it slipped away from her and she giggled, and then carefully turned around to lower the other one. She kept a tight grip on the bank as she got used to the slippery surface, it felt just like the tiles on the corridor floors mama and papa were always telling her not to slide on. She laughed again and let go of the side, teetering but remaining upright; she would show papa she was just as good as mama at skating.

Edward was roused from his reverie by voices from the river; it seemed that the skating was over. From the shouting, it seemed people had heard some cracks and they were clearing the ice for safety. He looked around expecting to see Blair sitting next to him but with a thrill of anxiety he realised she was not. His spine prickled with fear, where was she? He stood up, his gaze moving frantically through the crowd, where had she gone? How had he not noticed she had left his side? Why had he not been paying attention?

He began to make his way through people, his footsteps getting quicker

“Blair” he called “Blair” but there was no response”

“Princess Anna” he stopped the Swedish ambassadress as she went past him, a cap of white fur on her head “have you seen my daughter”

“why no” she said in surprise “is she missing?”

Edward nodded anxiously

“she was sat next to me at the picnic table, but she is gone”

“she cannot have gone far” said Anne gently, Sir Edward looked quite distraught, “are you certain she is not with her mama?”

“oh” Edward had momentarily forgotten about Florence “perhaps she is, I will look”

He hurried off while Anna and her friends began to hunt for Blair also
“Florence”

Florence was mid conversation with Count Nesselrode but turned immediately at the tone in Edwards voice

“Edward what??” she began

But Edward spoke across her “is Blair with you?”

Worry immediately creased Florence’s face

“why no Edward I thought she was with you”

“she was but” he bit his lip “I got distracted and now I cannot find her”

Florence stared at him, “distracted?”

“if I may” cut in the Count “I think we should not waste time in looking for her, I am sure she has not gone far” he smiled reassuringly at the Drummonds “my own little ones loved to hide when they were small, come I will organise a search”

“thank you, sir,” said Edward gratefully

The Count nodded and patted his arm before beckoning people over and issuing instructions

“how were you distracted Edward”?” asked Florence in bewilderment, how could this have happened? Edward was the most devoted of fathers, what had come over him

“I was just thinking” said Edward wretchedly

About politics no doubt thought Florence not trusting herself to say anything

“Sir Edward, Lady Drummond”

Princess Anna hurried over to where Florence and Edward were waiting. She was surprised to notice fleetingly that Sir Edward did not have his arms around his wife, instead Florence was sat in a chair and Edward stood behind her, his hand on her shoulder and his head bowed. Florence was twisting her handkerchief in her hands, her face set and eyes red

“she is found”

Oh, Florence jumped up

“where?” she looked around expecting to see Blair running towards her

Anna looked at them anxiously

“she is…. that is….“

“she is on the river” said madame le flo arriving behind her “come”

“oh god”
The words feel in a moan from Edward’s lips and then he was off running towards the bank

“Blair” he shouted “Blair”

Behind him Florence followed cursing her cumbersome skirts and heeled boots. Ordinarily Edward would have waited to escort her safely but he was already far ahead.

When Edward arrived he thrust people aside in his haste to get to the edge, his face a picture of fear.

Out on the ice flow sat with her knees drawn up was Blair, her little burgundy velvet hat and coat standing out like a vivid splash of life amid the whiteness. At the sight of Edward, she called

“papa papa I am stuck and cold”

“do not worry my darling” said Edward trying to control the tremor in his voice “papa will get you”

“I do not think so Sir Edward” said count Nesselrode softly “the ice....”

He gestured to the frozen river and Edward could see a network of cracks had begun to spider web across it

“Do you think I am concerned for my own safety?” said Edward angrily and he made to stride to the bank

“Sir Edward, the ice will not hold your weight” the Count held his arms firmly “please, you risk your life and your daughter’s too, we will get a rope and pull her in”

“Papa” called Blair “come and get me”

Florence arrived out of breath from hurrying in her tight corset

“Edward what is happening? Where is she?”

“mama” called Blair “mama” her lip began to tremble “mama come and get me”

Florence looked at the ice and her hand flew to a mouth and then she rounded on Edward

“what are you doing standing here sir? Get out there and rescue our daughter”

Edward looked at her helplessly

“he is too heavy Lady Drummond” said the Count “the ice will not bear his weight and hers”

“they are getting a rope” said Edward his face bloodless

“a rope?”

Florence began to take off her hat and coat

“Florence what are doing?” asked Edward in astonishment

“it may not take your weight Edward, but it should take mine” said Florence with grim determination

“will it not?” she turned to the count ferociously

“I do not know” said the Count quailed by the look in Florence’s eyes

Out on the ice Blair began to cry, she was cold and hungry, and her mama and papa were just
standing there, why were they not coming to fetch her?

The sound of her daughter’s sobs decided Florence

“Edward?” said Florence with steel in her voice, and they shared a look of deep understanding, whatever else they were, they were Blair’s parents

Edward gripped her hand and nodded wordlessly

A servant hurried up

“here is rope sir”

“tie it around my waist” said Florence

Edward nodded and hastily tied it whilst calling to Blair

“mama is coming my darling just stay still”

And then took the other end over his shoulder, bracing himself against the bank

“if you will permit me to advise you Lady Drummond” said the Count “if you lay down and spread your weight it will be safer”

Florence nodded

“Edward are you ready”

Edward nodded and took the strain on the rope as the count handed Florence down onto the ice. Immediately she lay down wincing at the cold penetrating her clothes and began to edge forward towards Blair

“mama mama” Blair held out her arms

“mama is coming” called Florence “can you do as mama is doing and lay down?”

“is it a game?” asked Blair

“yes” she Florence “It is a game isn’t it papa? Oh” she couldn’t stop a gasp escaping her as she heard a splintering sound which seemed to come from very close bu

“yes” called Edward clamping his teeth on his lip to stop it from trembling as he heard the ice crack too “it is a game like mama says”

Blair nodded and lay down

“now” said Florence “can you crawl like mama is doing?”

Blair nodded

“you can probably do it better than mama can” said Florence as she inched forward

On the bank Edward let out the rope, his heart pounding; Florence and Blair were only a few feet apart now

“mama” said Blair reaching out her hand “I do not want to play this game” she was wet through and shivering
“only a little longer” said Florence “mama is nearly there, do long arms my darling as long as you can”

Blair obediently stretched out her arms until finally to everyone’s relief their fingers touched and a small cheer arose from the crowd on the riverbank

Florence grasped Blair’s hand and pulled her across the ice towards her

“mama has you” she said, “you are safe now!”

“oh thank god” said Edward and he began to tug the rope rapidly, pulling them both quickly across the ice as ominous cracks began to appear

Behind him the Count pulled as well adding his strength, it was imperative to get them to safety as soon as possible

Finally, both Blair and Florence were within reach of the bank; the count took the rope as Edward scrambled down to take Blair from Florence

“oh thank god” he said holding Blair close to him and kissing her fiercely “thank god thank god” before handing Blair to Princess Anna

“Edward” Florence held up her hand and Edward reached down… and then suddenly he was grabbing at thin air as the ice beneath Florence gave way and she disappeared below the surface into the icy river.

Chapter End Notes

Is Florence OK? I promise to let you know in the very next chapter
Honesty

Chapter Summary

Edward remembers his and Florence's relationship while in London the fall out from Septimus' and Alfred's fight begins

Chapter Notes

so sorry to have taken so long to update this - holidays and what not! Thank you so much to everyone still reading my inane and ever more convoluted ramblings xx I love you all xx

3 days later

Edward rubbed his knuckles exhaustedly into his eyes as he sat in the armchair opposite Florence’s bed where she lay in a high fever.

He didn’t think he’d ever forget his horror as his hand closed on empty air and Florence disappeared into the river. He’d dived forward plunging his arm down into the river and had managed to grab her, hauling her up with all his strength and dragging her unceremoniously onto the riverbank. She had been immediately surrounded by people wrapping her in furs and blankets and quickly conveyed back to the palace. By the time they had reached their apartments and she was stripped of her wet clothes, she already had a temperature and begun to cough. Since then she had grown steadily worse with the doctor’s faces growing ever more anxious and the word ‘pneumonia’ being mentioned frequently. Pneumonia Edward knew could be, and often was, fatal and was also contagious. He refused however to leave Florence’s room; he felt that he owed it to her to stay. After all, if he had been paying more attention to Blair, none of this would have happened. Blair however was barred from the sickroom along with the twins, he could not risk infection in his darling girls.

Looking at her flushed face against the pillow, Edward thought back over their time together and that first meeting at her parents Ball. If only he’d known then what he knew now, he’d never have mistaken enjoying her unwillingness to pretend an interest in politics and pleasant company as a basis for love to grow. If he had his time again, he would have remained unmarried no matter how it might have damaged his career prospects. As it was, he had dragged an innocent woman into the turmoil his life had become. How naive he’d been back then, so unaware of the terrible power that love had before he met Alfred, and everything had changed. Poor Florence, he had done badly by her he thought, thinking with shame of their physical relationship. How he’d had to steel himself that first time, how he had hated himself afterwards, and how he had grimly done his duty never really thinking too much about how it had been for her. Of course, those uncomfortable couplings had resulted in their 3 children and he would always be grateful to her for that, but he knew there would be no more children for them now. Something had changed for her and he knew if Florence did get better, they would not share a bed again. It was a huge relief to him, but he was saddened for her. He knew such passion with Alfred, such love and tenderness and Florence knew none of that with him. How tragic that she would live her life never knowing those feelings.
He realised with clarity that despite not wanting to be married to Florence, he did not want to be released by her death. He would, he understood with some astonishment, miss her. If she recovered, they would need to have an honest conversation about their life together, he just prayed that she would get well. He slid to his knees by her bed a little self-consciously and took her hand.

“Please don’t die” he whispered as he knelt there “please get well, don’t leave me alone with the children, please Florence I cannot manage without you”

Florence moaned slightly and then began to cough; Edward reached for the water jug and tilting her head up, helped her to drink. Florence drank a few sips and then relapsed back into unconsciousness, Edward sighed and tried to replace the water jug on the bedside table cursing as he knocked it over. Water spilled onto the floor and he thought of ringing for the maid but that might disturb Florence and he decided to deal with the mess himself. He pulled open the drawer of the bedside cabinet hoping there would be some handkerchiefs he could mop up the spillage with. There were indeed handkerchiefs and he pulled them out eagerly and then stopped as he saw the edge of a book. Wondering if it was something Florence had been reading, he took it out, perhaps if he read to her that might help her get better and would also give him something to do. He turned it over and stopped; it was a book but a journal, Florence’s journal to be precise. His first instinct was to put it right back where he had found it, it was clearly private, but something stopped him. He looked at Florence’s face on the pillow, so familiar to him and yet he knew now they were strangers in so many ways; he lived with her, talked to her, they had children together and yet he could count on the fingers of one hand the number of real conversations they had had about their marriage. The one that had had the most impact had been the one when they had been away on the South Downs and he had confessed to her as gently as possible that he did not love her. Looking back on it, he realised that that had been with everything had changed.

At first Florence had been determined to behave as if she had never asked the question “do you love me?”, and received the reply that he cared for her deeply, and he, consumed with guilt, had simply been relieved that she did not want to discuss it further. However, such an enormous elephant in the room could not be ignored and so little by little she had distanced herself from him, he assumed for self-preservation, but he did not know why for certain. He knew he realised very little about his wife’s thoughts and feelings. What if she were to die before he even really knew her? How could he tell their children about what their mama was like when he did not even know herself? He looked down at the journal in his hands; he knew he should not read it but he also knew that he would read it, to find out answers about his wife so that if she recovered, they could have a better more honest life together. Perhaps one day he thought he might even be able to tell her about Alfred. He rubbed his nose and opening the journal, began to read.

London

“Lord Alfred?” William looked at his servant in astonishment “at this hour?”

The butler nodded “yes sir”

William rubbed his eyes “show him into the library, I shall be down presently”

“very good sir” the butler departed while William blinked, yawned and then looked at the clock again, it was 2am, what on earth was Alfred doing here? Unless…perhaps he had bad news about Alexi! William scrambled into some clothes and then wrapping his dressing gown around him hurried down to the library.

Alfred, clearly the worse for wear was slumped in a chair by the fire, a glass of brandy in his hand
“Alfred?” asked William “what brings you here at this hour?”

“William….“ Alfred stood up swaying on his feet

“is it Alexi?” asked William in alarm at the look on Alfred’s face “Alfred has something happened to Alexi?”

“Alexi?” Alfred laughed “no he isssh shafe in Russia with Edward….“

“well then what is it?” asked William “and please sit down before you fall down”

Alfred collapsed back into his chair

“you think you can trussst people” he muttered “trusht your family but you CAN’T” the last word was a shout and William reeled back

“you can trust your family Alfred, my god I would trust them over mine any day”

“ha” laughed Alfred mirthlessly “you think William?” and he downed more alcohol “my brother….“

He laughed again “you will find thish funny William, my brother ish in love with her”

“with her? With whom Alfred?” William’s brow creased in confusion

“Her!! Lady Drummond, Edward’s wife” he laughed again “my brother, my BROTHER lovesh her”

William gaped at him

“you mean Septimus?”

“yesh! That… that…” Alfred swore “he lovesh her, and, and” he stood up again waving his glass “my mother and father knew, they knew all along”

William sat down with a thump hardly able to believe his ears, Septimius Paget and Florence Drummond? and with the knowledge of Alfred’s mother and father? surely that could not be

“are you certain Alfred?” he asked “you have not perhaps” he eyed the brandy glass “become overly paranoid”

“he told me!” Alfred glared at him “he admitted it, we fought, and my parents caught us, when I told them what he had done, I could see it was no shock to them”

William ran his hands through his hair as he tried to make sense of what alfred was telling him.

“but Alfred” he said somewhat timidly “could it not be perhaps a blessing that your brother is in love with Lady Drummond? Could it not be a way for them to divorce?”

“you forget her father” said alfred wearily “even if Edward would divorce her, her father would stand in the way and besides William, how dare she? How dare she cuckold Edward? Does he not give her everything? What more could she want?”

William refrained from commenting that Alfred scarcely had the moral high ground

“well tell me” said Alfred belligerently “what more?”

“oh Alfred” William sighed “Alfred how do you not see that the one thing she needs is love and
Edward can never give her that”

“you are on her side too I see” alfred flared at him “all of you are against me”

“It is not a question of sides Alfred” said William “it is a question of what is best. Would you prefer she stays married to Edward just so you can feel better and that” he glanced at him “you have one over on her because Edward loves you not her”

“how dare…” began alfred but William continued “or would you prefer that they divorce, and you and Edward could have an easier life?”

“but” began alfred

“no buts” said William firmly “I know you feel angry with your family especially Septimus and I know that it hurts that he has fallen in love with the woman you regard as your enemy, yes you do Alfred” William carried on as alfred opened his mouth to disagree “but it could turn out to be the best thing for everyone”

**Uxbridge House**

Septimus, Henry and Charlotte sat in silence in the drawing room; Henry’s face was grim while Charlotte’s was stained with tears

“I am sorry mama” said Septimus for the thousandth time “really, I will find him and apologise”

“I think you should leave him be for now” said Henry his voice flat

“This is my fault” said Charlotte, her voice thick with sadness “Alfred was right, I should have stopped you”

“it is not your fault Charlotte” said Henry reaching over to take her hand “it is mine, I should have ordered you not to see her Septimus”

“Papa” Septimus shook his head “do you think I would have listened? This is my fault, not either of yours. I knew Florence was married and I knew Alfred would feel betrayed and yet I could not stop myself, in fact I did not even try”

“You must make this up to him Septimus” said Charlotte “you must, and you must swear not to see Florence Drummond again”

“I will make it up to Alfred” said Septimus “but I cannot promise not to see Florence again”

“but you must” said Charlotte “you must! You will break this family apart if you do not”

“I am sorry mama” said Septimus sadly “but I cannot. Did you stop seeing papa when you were told? No, you did not, because you loved him, do you think I love Florence any the less”

“but…..” And then Charlotte subsided

“how do you propose to make this up to Alfred?” asked Henry “he is not in a forgiving mood”

“I shall simply do the one thing that will give Edward back to Alfred” said Septimus “I will steal that damned letter back from the Marquis of Lothian”
A conversation with Alexi

Chapter Summary

Edward has read Florence’s journal and does not know what to do with his new found knowledge of her and Septimus.

Chapter Notes

Im sorry its taking longer to update than I hoped, life is getting in the way but I promise I have not given up on this fic and I hope you have not either if you're still reading :)

When Edward put Florence’s journal down it was nearly dawn and he was red eyed from lack of sleep and crying.

How little he knew the woman lying in the bed, his wife and mother of his children and how little she knew him too.

His mind was a whirl; he hardly knew what to think. He wished with all his heart he could talk to Alfred, but Alfred was far away from him in England. He needed to get out of Florence’s bedroom, he understood completely now of course, why she’d wanted a room of her own, out into the open air and think about what to do.

He went out of the bedroom closing the door quietly and made his way silently down the passageway to his room. As he passed the nursery, he heard a snuffle and he stopped to look in. The twin’s cot was closest to the door and as usual they were lying facing each other, their chubby little legs entangled. As always Edward felt his heart overflow with love as he gently dropped a kiss on each of their downy heads. One of the things that angered him the most about the Marques’ actions was that he had not been there when Charlotte and Henry had been born and it filled him with cold hard rage that he had been deprived of that. Over on the other side of the room Blair was asleep in her little four poster bed which she completely adored

“it is just like mamas! Papa I am a big girl now”

She was on her back, her face turned away, dark curls fanned out across the pillow. Edward went over to her and looked down. She was so like him, everyone said so and every time he thought of what could have happened that day on the river, he became quite faint with terror. If only he had been paying more attention to her, she would not have gone out onto the ice, Florence would not have had to rescue her, and he would not know what he now knew. He kissed her hair and she turned and snuggled down under the counterpane.

What was he to do thought Edward, what was to become of his marriage? Should he tell Florence what he knew or simply keep quiet? Could he even pretend he did not know of her and Septimus? Was it fair to her to live the same way he did, hiding and lying? He did not know what to think anymore.
Going into his own room he put on his coat and muffled himself up in a scarf. A walk would help, the cold and fresh air would make him feel more awake. Putting on his hat, he went down the stairs and out into the courtyard.

Alexi blearily rubbed the sleep from his eyes. He found that lately he went for days without sleeping and then eventually exhausted, would then sleep for 18 hours. He missed William constantly and even though his head said he had to put him behind him now, his heart could not. Even worse was that his mother had found a suitable bride for him; Princess Sophie from some obscure German duchy and in a month’s time he was to be married. Sighing he got out of bed and went over to the basin to splash water on the face, drying it off he looked out of the window and there to his astonishment was Edward pacing around the courtyard in the snow, shoulders down, looking quite defeated.

Alexi frowned; although of course Edward missed alfred, he had not seen him looking like this in some time. Could it be that Florence was not getting any better? Alexi knew that although Edward did not want to be married to Florence, he had come to depend on her presence a great deal in Russia. He decided to go down and talk to him, perhaps by talking to Edward he could distract himself from his own problems

“Edward?”

Edward stopped pacing at the sound of Alexi’s voice

“Your highness” he said automatically

Alexi shook his head at him

“there is no one here Edward, Alexi will do”

Edward smiled at him, but it had nothing like its normal warmth

“What is troubling you Edward?” asked Alexi

“why do you think I am troubled?” asked Edward evasively

Alexi looked at him

“I have known you a long while now Edward, I can see in your demeanour and your face that you are struggling. Tell me, is it Florence? Is she worse?”

“no…” said Edward “she is no worse, but she is no better either. The doctors are worried, I can tell”

“and you? are you worried?”

“of course, I am. What will I do if she does not get-well Alexi? How am I to bring up my 3 little girls on my own? But it is more than that”

“more?”

Edward sighed heavily

“I have done something I very much regret but now it is too late”
“what? What have you done?”

And Edward told him

When he’d finished Alexi looked at him in shook

“You read her private journal?”

“That is hardly the most important point Alexi” said Edward frowning

“I am sorry Edward, but I think it is exactly the point! You now have knowledge of….” Alexi sought for words “your wife’s behaviour, knowledge you could only have come by by invading her privacy, information you cannot unknow, Edward what possessed you to read it?”

“Alexi I must confess this is not the reaction I expected” said Edward in angry surprise “I had thought you would be on my side”

“I am on your side Edward in that I know you married your wife because you had no choice and I know you make the best of it because what else can you do but…”

“She has been unfaithful repeatedly” snapped Edward “and with Alfred’s brother of all people, of ALL people Alexi! I do not feel I am being unreasonable in being hurt and angry”

Alexi shook his head in disbelief “I still cannot believe it” he said, “you are certain Edward? there is no way you could have misconstrued what you read?”

“It is true” said Edward “it is all there in her diary, would you believe she first began to have feelings for him when we were on the south downs?” he laughed bitterly “there I was trying to do my duty and my wife had her eyes on another man”

Alexi kept silent, he sensed that Edward needed to give vent to his feelings

“She has lain with him repeatedly Alexi even whilst pregnant with my children, it seems” his face twisted “he gives her what I cannot”

“Edward” said Alexi gently “you do not love Florence not do you want her as men usually want women, it is not your fault so you must ask yourself what is it that makes you so angry? Is it her infidelity? Is it who it is with? Because my dear friend I must say to you, you have been unfaithful to Florence constantly and no let me finish” he held up his hand “and I know why, god knows I do, but you cannot claim any moral high ground here”

“It is not the same Alexi” said Edward almost in tears

“Forgive me my friend but it is the same; you love Alfred and want to be with him, she is in love with Septimus Paget and” he paused “does she want to leave?”

“I do not know” said Edward “she does not say but Alexi if she leaves than she takes my children too, my babies, I cannot allow that”

“So, you would force her to stay and be miserable? or, Edward” he paused wondering whether to say it “you know you have the right to keep the children if you divorce her for infidelity?”

“I would never take them from their mother” said Edward wiping angrily at tears that had formed in his eyes
“you know that you cannot pretend you did not see this Edward” said Alexi “you will have to talk to her”

Edward slumped “I know”

Alexi clasped his arm “Edward, you need to consider; what is it that you want?”

Edward laughed bitterly

“I cannot have what I want, to live with Alfred in love and peace, I cannot have that, ever”

“your life would be easier of you divorced her” said Alexi slowly “and she married Septimus Paget, if of course he wants to marry her”

“he’s a Paget” said Edward grimly “who knows what he wants? My Alfred is the best of them”

Alexi let the slur against Charlotte and Henry who had been nothing but good friends to Edward go, he knew it was the anger talking

“give yourself time” said Alexi “Florence is still unwell and in no condition to have this conversation. Think about what you want to do, and then my dear friend, you will have to talk to her”

Edward stared at the ground

“do you think I should tell her about alfred and I?” he whispered

“you would risk a great deal by telling her” said Alexi soberly “possibly even your life, and not just yours but Alfred’s too. Would you willingly take that risk? Surely the whole point of you being here is that so you cannot be exposed by the marques. Does it not defeat the purpose of all this if you tell her?”

Edward frowned

“equally if I tell her it removes one of the holds the Marques has over Alfred and I; that Florence would find out plus of course the Marques does not know about Septimus” he rubbed his eyes “I cannot think properly Alexi, I am so very tired. Why can Alfred and I not just run away and be together? We harm no one. Why must everything be so difficult?”

“I do not know” said Alexi close to tears himself “I miss Will so much Edward. You know several times I have even got as far as booking a passage back to England only to cancel at the last hour. I smile at my mama and listen to the wedding plans, but I am crying inside Edward, crying all the time” and he began to sob

“my dear friend…”

Edward embraced him

“life is not easy for people like us” he said rubbing Alexi’s back in circles to comfort him as he did Blair’s when she cried “but at least we have each other here in our exile from those we love”

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